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Philip the Evangelist (or Philip the Deacon)

Philip the evangelist, although often confused with Philip the apostle (one of Jesus's twelve disciples), is a different but important church leader who appears only in the book of Acts.

According to Acts 6, the twelve apostles had become overwhelmed with pastoral duties in the Jerusalem church, preventing them from engaging in missionary activity. The solution was to choose seven men of good standing who were “full of the Spirit and wisdom” to take over some of these duties (6:2–6). Two of the seven men chosen would become famous in Christian history: Stephen became the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54–60) and Philip became a stellar evangelist (Acts 8:5–39).

The most important duty entrusted to the seven was to “wait on tables.” This probably means that they were in charge of the church's eucharistic services, which were held daily around a common meal. Therefore, the seven new leaders have often been called *deacons* to distinguish them from *apostles*. The word “deacon” literally means “table waiter,” while the word “apostle” means “one who is sent”—thus a missionary.

In any case, the categories seem to have become quickly confused because we never actually hear about Philip waiting on tables. Instead, we hear about him doing what the apostles claimed they

were called to do: going out into the world as a missionary, witnessing for Jesus, proclaiming the gospel, and converting people to Christ. The usual explanation for this is that the church had one plan for Philip, but God had something else in mind and directed his life accordingly.

So we discover that Philip is the first missionary to travel to Samaria and preach the good news of the Jewish Messiah to people who had traditionally been the Jews' worst enemies (8:4–8). Philip cast demons out of sick people and healed the lame and the paralyzed. Filled with joy, the Samaritans accepted the word of God in droves and were baptized by Philip (8:9–13). Even Simon Magus, a prominent leader of occult arts, was baptized.

As a curious footnote to this story, we read that the Holy Spirit did not come upon the Samaritans until two of the twelve apostles, Peter and James, came to the area to confirm what had taken place. Apparently, it was important for prominent apostles to see this happen with their own eyes, since it was the first time that non-Jews had come to faith in Jesus and received the Spirit.

Next, Philip is guided by an angel to go stand by a road where he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch who is reading the Scriptures and seeking someone who can interpret Isaiah 53:7–8 for him. Starting with this passage, Philip proclaims the good news about Jesus to the Ethiopian and then baptizes him (Acts 8:26–39).

The Spirit of the Lord then snatches Philip away and he finds himself at Azotus, from which he travels to Caesarea, proclaiming the gospel in all towns along the way (8:40).

A final New Testament reference to Philip is in Acts 21:8–9, where he and his four unmarried daughters are visited by Paul. The daughters are all said to have the gift of prophecy. In the Bible “prophecy” can mean “predicting the future,” but most of the time it simply means “speaking words given by God” and so is a synonym for “preaching.” Thus the most likely meaning of Acts 21:8–9 is that Philip’s daughters, like their father, were able to proclaim the word of God.