

**Introduction:** St. Luke wrote the book of Acts as a sequel to his Gospel account, and he wrote down what the Church did in the time following our Lord's resurrection from the dead. It's often called "The Acts of the Apostles," but perhaps it would be better called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." For while Luke has recorded the history of the Apostles, and other Early-Church pastors, the Church cannot possibly continue without God's presence, delivered to them by the Holy Spirit. The Church must abide in God's death and in His rising from death; the Church must abide in Christ. The Vinedresser planted the True Vine for the Church, so that the Church would grow in the life that comes from the True Vine.

Take a look at Philip. He is a pastor. Look what he does: He reads the Word of God aloud (8:30) and teaches it (8:35), he baptizes (8:38), and he preaches (8:40). But more importantly, Philip really isn't doing any of this by himself; he only does this because the Holy Spirit has sent him to do it (8:26-29). What work Philip does, he does in-the-stead-of and by-the-command-of God, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit causes an angel to send Philip, and the Holy Spirit causes the Ethiopian eunuch to ask the right questions of Philip, like "How can I [understand], unless someone guides me?" and "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (8:31, 37).

And "then Philip," a branch of the True Vine, "opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told [the eunuch] the good news about Jesus" (8:35). Philip bore good fruit, for he preached Christ's substitutionary atonement. Isaiah's lamb led to slaughter is not Isaiah himself (8:34), but God's suffering servant, who did not open His mouth, but in true humility received injustice (8:32-33). For, if justice were done to Christ, then Christ would never see death. But justice demands that someone ought to die for the sin of the people. Every sin requires a just, appropriate, payment, and it calls for the high price of God's very life: for the eunuch's sin, and for yours.

This is what Philip explains to the eunuch, and afterward God the Holy Spirit prunes (15:2b) Philip so that he may bear more fruit, by baptizing the eunuch (8:38). The Vinedresser is thus glorified, for the True Vine has borne good fruit for the Church (15:8).

But the Vinedresser removes branches not bearing fruit (15:2a). He throws them away for not abiding in the True Vine: To wither and die in despair brought on themselves (15:6a). For when you ignore the spiritual nutrition that the Holy Spirit brings you at Church, you wither away in your self-pity, even enjoying depression.

What about those that cut themselves off from the Vine? The Vinedresser throws them into the fire (15:6b), for what good is a branch without its root? When you willingly reject everything good that the Holy Spirit places in your mouth, in your ear, you may as well be throwing yourself into the fire. Apart from the True Vine, you can do nothing (15:5).

But that's why the Holy Spirit sends ordinary men like Philip to preach. When the Holy Spirit told the prophet Isaiah what to speak, the Word of the Lord would come in the rushing

of wind, in the roaring of thunder, or in the burning of fire. When prophets speak of Christ's suffering and death, the Spirit is always nearby in their breath. And it's the same in the book of The Acts of the Holy Spirit; it's the same for the Church of the resurrection. The Holy Spirit acts at Pentecost, when the pastors of the early church hear the same great rushing wind, and are given fiery tongues to preach the Gospel to all nations. Pastors of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, teach all nations, like Philip teaches this Ethiopian.

It's the Office of the Holy Ministry! Every time the Holy Spirit acts, it's always to point to Jesus. The Holy Spirit guides pastors to deliver the goods to the Church, to give them Jesus. It's the pastoral office: It's the pastor's job to preach Christ's resurrection to the Church, to answer questions about Holy Scripture, to baptize and to forgive sins, or to withhold forgiveness, just as you learned in catechism class.

Certainly, the gift of forgiveness is given to the whole Church on earth, but God has given us the Office of the Holy Ministry (pastors) specifically to manage these things of God. It's a little like the idea that God has given all of humanity the gift of procreating children, but God has given the physical work of bearing children, specifically to women. Ultimately, it is God who gives life and takes it away, and it is God who gives forgiveness and withholds it.

Philip can't forgive sins or baptize by himself. The eunuch cannot understand Scripture without Philip. The Church relies on pastors, who cannot do anything at all without God, their source. It is exactly what Jesus says: *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches"* (15:4). You abide in Jesus by receiving fruits of the Spirit. And Christ is the root, the True Vine from which all good things grow (15:1). The True Vine was planted in the Garden of Eden, when the pre-incarnate Christ promised the devil's demise to the devil's face: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; [Jesus] shall crush your head, and you shall bruise His heel"* (Gen 3:15). The True Vine abides in everyone receiving life, which comes to them by branches. It's Christ's life as payment for yours.

And because of this substitution, *"Already you are clean because of the word that [Christ has] spoken to you"* (15:3). And when you pray the requests of the *"Our Father,"* the heavenly vinedresser hears Christ's words abiding in you, when you ask *"Thy Will Be Done"* whatever He wishes, *"and it will be done for you"* (15:7).

The eunuch cannot abide in the True Vine unless his questions are answered: *"How can I, unless someone guides me?"* (8:37). The Greek word for "guide" is ὁδηγέω, a verb meaning "show the way." The Holy Spirit points to Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, the Life, and the True Vine: No one comes to the Vinedresser except through Jesus (14:6). The eunuch asks the right question when he says *"See! Here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"* (8:36). And you ask the right question when you say: **"See! Here is bread and wine! What prevents me from abiding in the True Vine?" Amen.**