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**Devoid of color, Rembrandt's print THE BAPTISM OF
THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH helps viewers transcend the
ethnic boundaries that are etched so deeply into
this pivotal event.**

“What Is to Prevent Me from Being Baptized?”

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Luke’s brief, opening description of the man—“an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury” (Acts 8:27)—is more than enough for his first-century audience to vividly imagine this character. He was from a country widely believed—by authorities like Homer, Herodotus, and Strabo—to lie at the southernmost limit of the earth. Thus, in sharing the gospel with this man from the “ends of the earth” (cf. Luke 11:31), Philip confirms Jesus’ call to his followers to be “witnesses” to such distant lands (Acts 1:8).

Early readers would understand that this man was ostracized for several reasons. First, his skin color was dark. Ancient writers believed this was an Ethiopian’s most distinctive feature. Furthermore, he was a eunuch. This prevented him from entering into the assembly of the Lord; he would have been allowed to worship only in the outer chambers of the Temple.¹

Yet this God-fearing Gentile became the first Gentile to be received into the Body of Christ. He was baptized by “Philip the evangelist, one of the seven” chosen to serve the Hellenist widows in the church of Jerusalem (Acts 21:8; cf. Acts 6:5).

The great Dutch Baroque artist, Rembrandt, was a master in both the print and oil media. *The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch* is a study that he executed before his oil painting of the same name.² The print, being devoid of color, helps viewers transcend the ethnic boundaries that are etched so deeply into this pivotal event. Just as Philip could see past the stereotyping and prejudice of his own day to be a witness to this man, so the print medium allows us to bracket the boundaries of race and focus only on the faithfulness of this God-fearer who asked, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:37).

NOTES

1 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 118-124.

2 The oil painting is located today in the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, the Netherlands. See www.catharijneconvent.nl/index.cfm/site/Home/pageid/BC62177C-083C-2E23-F331563B02233B9E/index.cfm (accessed March 1, 2010).