

Leading Churches into 21st Century Missions: 13 Lessons in Acts

Students Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

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A Leading Churches into 21st Century Missions: 13 Lessons in Acts
Leaders Guide is also available from Acacia Resources
(www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

Several years ago a concept began to seep into dialogue about Christian missions and quickly caught on, becoming modus operandi in at least some evangelical circles.

It sounds like a logical approach: discover where God is working and become involved. It properly acknowledges God and God's activity in the world. It challenges people to join God in the divine plan. Who could argue with it?

Perhaps the biggest argument is not so much where it begins, but where it ends and what it skips. It implies simultaneously that the ways of God are easily discernable and that the divine plan requires a secret decoder ring in order to figure out. Further, it seems to assume that there are places where God is not at work.

Our limited vision might lead us to believe that is the case. Many people throughout the world live in oppression, ignorance and poverty. Evil and violence prevail. Governments are hostile to Christians and the gospel of Christ. Professing Christianity is illegal in some countries. Even in places where it is not, people often pay a great price, sometimes with their lives, when they denounce the state- or culturally-imposed religion and convert to Christianity. Many people simply appear uninterested in the message of Christ; others view Christianity as one of several equally viable options in the cafeteria of spirituality.

But are these signs that God is silent, even absent? Are there places and people among whom God is not working out the divine plan?

Both scripture and history tell us otherwise. The tomb that stood closed, dark and silent only later to open and release

the resurrected Christ testifies to the fact that God does miraculous things we often cannot see in places we are afraid to go. Our lack of awareness neither limits nor denies God's activity, then and now.

Acts 1:8 has long been the missions rallying point, the flagpole around which evangelical Christians gather and then disperse with their missions marching orders. While we cannot overlook its importance, we can in our exuberance to live it fly past the lessons the first Christians learned as they formed the church and began to do what we now call missions.

The exciting missionary journeys of people like Barnabas, Timothy, Paul and Silas often lure us away from the first 15 chapters of Acts, though this portion of scripture offers a rich missions textbook straight from the lives of Jesus' earliest followers. We sometimes expect to duplicate the results they achieved without first establishing the foundation they built and developing the skills they acquired.

One of the most significant things we bypass is the Christian church's Jewish legacy. God's divine plan of salvation was first disclosed in Hebrew scripture, and the offer of salvation went first to the Jews. The early Christian church was originally comprised of Jews. Salvation was offered also to Gentiles not because Jews outright rejected it but because of God's saving work among Jews who chose to repent and follow Jesus. God intended salvation for everyone from the beginning.

The early Christian church described in Acts was concerned about keeping its Jewish heritage and integrated traditional Jewish practices into their corporate life, gathering regularly in believers' homes. Fellowship was important to them, so much that they became a community that held

"all things in common" (see Acts 2:44). As a gift of salvation, God gave this community the Holy Spirit that enabled them to act according to God's plan.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within the entire community equipped the people to understand what they were supposed to do and how they were supposed to live. Their loyalty and devotion to each other and to Jesus reordered their priorities, possessions and practices and caused them to live counter-culturally. Class distinctions and their resulting inequalities disappeared, fostering a unity unlike anything the people had ever experienced.

Early on they learned how to identify and resolve internal conflicts and compromise, realizing that their faith, friendships and witness would suffer if they did not. Because they did not become endlessly mired in disputes, they crossed barriers and built bridges to those with whom they could share a witness.

They had no roadmap, no guidebook for how to do "missions," a word Christian scripture does not even use. They had the Holy Spirit, whose direction led them to think and act in new ways about themselves and others and give testimony about the new life they experienced because of the resurrected Christ.

They learned the wisdom and value of setting apart certain individuals to work in places they all could not go. By hearing reports from these who represented them, they participated in their work by praying knowledgeably and effectively.

Among evangelical denominations, Baptists have a rich missions history and a reputation for doing many things well. Missionary-sending agencies have historically played

key roles in advancing the gospel message. But the changing world landscape demands constant assessment of mission strategies and priorities.

The regular influx of new believers and others with narrow or nonexistent missions foundations offers ongoing opportunities for the church to reexamine biblical principles and determine how to apply them to 21st century missions efforts. As it was in the first century, the center and primary agent of global missions in the 21st century must be the local church.

The first half of the book of Acts provides a valuable primer for this fresh look. The lesson writers represent significant global diversity within the broader Baptist family and provide insights from a variety of missions experiences and settings. Allow their perspectives to help shape your understandings of what it means to do missions today.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Speaking All Languages

Acts 2:1-12

Theme: The church must meet the joyous occasions and challenging dilemmas it encounters among different languages and cultures with flexibility and humility.

Introduction

I have worked in Africa for two different missions organizations. Both times my assignment involved teaching in English, so I began working full time within days of my arrival. I never had the opportunity to do extensive language study, so I spent those five years of my adult life not understanding much of what was going on around me.

Once I saw two groups of young men throwing rocks at each other on a street in Addis Ababa. I had no idea what they were shouting or why they were fighting. One of the groups was larger and more aggressive, and I was afraid that they were going to injure or kill the others. I could only stand and stare at them, hoping my presence would cause them to stop.

Another time I was riding in a car with some Ethiopian friends and co-workers, returning home from an evening of teaching at our seminary's extension program. We were laughing and joking when we stopped at a traffic light. A young man standing in a group on the sidewalk looked into the vehicle, saw me and yelled some of the few English

words he may have known, “_____ you, white guy!” My companions in the car went silent, and nobody spoke the rest of the way home. We never did talk about this incident.

Pain and frustration often result both from understanding language and from not understanding it.

I will never forget standing in my yard with a maintenance worker. We watched a snake dive into a puddle of water from a recent rain storm and come up with a frog in its mouth. It was not just the “Animal Planet” nature of the event that caused the moment to stick in my head. Rather, it was that I was able to ask the worker, in a simple Amharic sentence, how to say the word “snake” in his language, and he was able to understand and answer my question.

The book of Acts portrays the church’s encounter with language and culture as both joy and predicament.

The Biblical Witness

Acts 2:1 All in One Place

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

The beginning of Acts 2 finds the apostles gathered together, having just selected a new 12th member in the dice-rolling story at the end of Chapter 1. It is difficult to understand why the writer indicated that the day was Pentecost. Did he want to associate the coming events with the Jewish festival also called the Feast of Weeks, or was this simply a way of marking the passage of time? Had the apostles gathered because of the festival, or were they holding regular meetings?

Acts 2:2-4 Wind and Fire

²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

If the Book of Acts is written in such a way that it is parallel to the Gospel of Luke, then the episode in Acts 2:1-12 matches the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the spirit upon him in Luke 3:22. This event directly reflects John’s statement in Luke 3:16 that Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Significant tension exists between this section of the text and the next. Acts 2:2 indicates that the apostles were in a house when this event began. The word translated as “languages” in verse 4 is the same as the word that is twice translated as “tongue” in verse 3. The nature of this phenomenon and its purpose are unclear. Verse 6 tells us that the crowd gathered “at this sound,” but does that mean the sound of the wind from verse 2 or the sound of the speaking from verse 4?

How is it that this crowd could hear the apostles speaking when the apostles were gathered in a house? A private incident became public with no explanation. The initial incident indicates that the location of the miracle was in the mouth of the apostles as they spoke other languages. In the public incident that followed, however, the miracle seems to have taken place in the ears of the audience as “each one heard them speaking in the native language of each” (v 6).

Regardless of the location of the miracle, the focus here is on the power of communication. The Holy Spirit comes with the visual and auditory effects of the great Old Testament theophanies, and a community is forged. Those who observe this event are compelled to look and listen and join with this new community.

Acts 2:5-11 **God's Deeds of Power**

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

The list of nations and people groups in verses 9-11 is a tour of the known world, from Mesopotamia to North Africa. The writer of the book of Acts used geography to develop a picture much like the writer of Genesis did in Genesis 10. This link between Acts and Genesis also reveals important connections between the Pentecost event in Acts and the Tower of Babel event in Genesis 11.

The Babel story presents some significant theological problems, which are carried forward into Acts 2. Was God threatened by the cooperation among the gathered human beings at Babel? How is the development of differing

languages understood to be related to ethnicity? Are language and ethnicity viewed by the Babel story as a curse or a punishment?

A marvelous book called *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, edited by John R. Levison and Priscilla Pope-Levison, contains essays on selected biblical texts by interpreters from Asia, Latin America and Africa. The most valuable aspect of this book is the diversity of interpretation it reveals.

José Míguez Bonino reads the Babel story as a story of liberation from the forces of empire that the tower and a single language represent. Choan-Seng Song, on the other hand, views the divisions between languages and cultures as a deadly threat to human existence. Solomon Avotri finds in the Babel story confirmation that God is willing to bring suffering to human beings in order to protect God's self.

The question for Christians in the 21st century is the extent to which we will see cultural difference as a barrier to be overcome or a gift to be embraced.

The inclusion of "Cretans" in the list in 2:11 points forward in the Christian canon to one of the most difficult and troubling passages in all of the New Testament. The brief epistle to Titus presents itself as correspondence between the apostle Paul and a younger co-worker. In Titus 1:10-16 Paul included in his argument the quotation of an overheard saying, "Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons." He followed this quotation with the startling evaluation, "That testimony is true," then continued to build his argument on this bigoted foundation.

Even the great apostle is unable to eradicate cultural biases from his thinking. It is a reminder that we need to be

on guard constantly against the demon of bigotry which threatens to disrupt the Christian community.

The unified vision of Acts 2 is certainly more a dream than a reality for the church. In reality, our cultural biases will always become entangled with our proclamation of the gospel. If the church is to be truly incarnate, then it carries all of the frailties of our human existence. The power of the Holy Spirit lies in the way it puts all of these frail pieces together into a vibrant community.

That God's Spirit chose to communicate in the many and diverse languages of the people gathered on this day reminds us that God works with us as real people, different and imperfect as we are. God's Spirit and presence is something the Christian community shares, and the extraordinary occasion of its coming here demanded proclamation about "the wonders of God" (v 11).

Acts 2:12 What Does This Mean?

¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

The crowds responded with amazement, confusion and a question. Following the vast geographical list, this reaction brought the crowd together: "All were amazed and perplexed."

The work of the Spirit that brought together the apostles in the act of speaking also brought together the audience in the act of hearing. While they understood the language of the apostles' message, the meaning was not clear to them. This kind of experience is not an end unto itself.

The church that experienced Pentecost still had the task of education in front of it. Pyrotechnics and miraculous wonders create space for the church to perform what may be the more mundane parts of its mission. As the book of Acts progresses, it will be the persistent teaching, preaching and testimony of Peter, Paul and many others that provide the answers to the question, "What does this mean?"

Acts 2:13 stands out as an odd appendage: "But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" It is a transition between the major sections in 2:1-12 and 2:14-36. If "All were amazed and perplexed," then who can the "others" in verse 13 be?

This transitional verse is likely included because of the irony it expresses. In Luke 5:37-38, Jesus seems to liken the gospel in some way to "new wine." So, on this occasion, the apostles are "drunk with new wine."

21st Century Missions

Is this a missions text? I have worked for two very different missions organizations. One followed a paternalistic model in which American missionaries were organized into a mission that made all of its own policies, business decisions and personnel requests. The national church, which the mission had started, was a separate entity and was dependent upon the mission in most ways.

The other missions organization had made the transition away from paternalism and had established partnerships with churches in other countries. As a missionary in this system, I was sent to work for the partner church. They had requested the position that I had filled and, as a seminary

faculty member, I was supervised by the principal of the seminary, who was a member of the partner church.

Each of these organizational patterns had its strengths and weaknesses. The first was well structured and efficient, but it was focused on material resources and was detached from its host culture. The second was highly relational but logistically very messy.

In a letter to her parents from Ethiopia, my wife, Marie, told the following story:

“Yesterday, I gave Samson a ride home. Samson is the house worker of a friend of ours who is out of town. He wanted to take home a wooden cabinet he had built and some evergreen branches he had gathered for the Christmas holiday. I met his brothers, sister and mother. He proudly showed me the room he had built beside his mother’s house. It was about six feet by eight feet, but immaculate, even though it was a mud hut. He had built two chairs, a table and a bed for himself and his brother. The mud walls were lined with pages from old magazines I had given him months ago. He had used flour, water and sugar to concoct a paste that adhered the pages to the walls. As a result, his room was clean, dry and warm. He tried to give me the last two cookies from a box to say thanks for the ride, but I refused, feeling too guilty to take his last two cookies on Christmas Eve. I have been feeling guilty ever since for not taking them. I should have been humble enough to accept his gift and will need to apologize to him tomorrow.”

The modern missionary movement was born out of the era of Euro-American political imperialism. The natural impulse was to go out in the name of Jesus and take control of the world. We had the power and the resources to make a

significant impact, but the large, institutional mission structures we built are falling apart or fading away. The economic and technological imperialism of the 21st century offers a second wave of temptation to take over the world in the name of Jesus. Fitting the world into our plans can be a very rewarding experience. It produces measurable results and impressive statistics.

Fitting ourselves into the place the world offers us calls us to be flexible, even bent and broken. What the book of Acts shows us as we follow its story is that the church grows into the space that the world allows for it. The Spirit in Acts gives the gathered community the grace to rejoice in and endure the brokenness this encounter with culture requires.

Written by Mark McEntire, associate professor, School of Religion, Belmont University, Nashville, Tenn.

Forming Fellowship

Acts 2:41-47; 4:32-25

Theme: A healthy Christian community with core values of unity and sharing is essential for effective 21st century missions.

Introduction

What would you do with a million dollars?

Even those of us who don't play the lottery can't help but fantasize how our lives might change if we were to suddenly strike it rich.

Frank Gunsaulus, a minister of the Plymouth Church in Chicago, in 1890 delivered what became known as the "Million Dollar Sermon." Gunsaulus said if he had a million dollars he would build a school open to anyone desiring a technical education.

It was an era exploding with technology but when advanced schooling was reserved for society's elite.

A church member, Philip D. Armour, a wealthy meat packer and grain merchant, heard the sermon and shared his minister's vision. Armour pledged the funds—on the condition that his pastor would serve as the school's first president.

The Armour Institute, opened in 1893, today is known as Illinois Institute of Technology. It enrolls 6,000 students representing 89 countries in five campuses scattered across metropolitan Chicago.

This story shares similarities to that of the early church as told in the Book of Acts. It, too, describes a recipe of small beginnings, awe-inspiring unselfishness and sudden empowerment, resulting over time in greater impact than anyone would likely have dared imagine.

This church was not perfect. It included self-serving hypocrites like Ananias and Sapphira. It also was marred by grumbling about preferential treatment and neglect between Jewish and Greek widows. But overall it is a snapshot of a local body of believers worthy of emulation by any church in any age desiring to become all God wants it to be.

More relevant to this discussion, the Jerusalem church as described in Acts also functioned as launching pad for the first-century missionary movement, which in the course of 28 chapters multiplies from an uncertain band without a leader into a movement extending to the ends of the known world.

Many churches today emphasize the local church's role and responsibility in missions. Rather than viewing missions solely as channeling money to a denominational mission board that in turn sends missionaries to foreign countries, these congregations self-identify as "missional" churches. Church members view themselves as missionaries in a world that is increasingly non-Christian.

What many now describe as the future of missions has parallels to the situation the church in Acts faced.

The Biblical Witness

Acts 2:41-47 and Acts 4:32-35 are two in a series of passages scattered throughout the book that serve as transition between major sections. They summarize general qualities of the early church and set the stage for what comes next in the story. The first describes the results of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost.

Acts 2:41-43 They Devoted Themselves

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.

According to scripture, those who received Peter's word and were baptized "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." What, exactly, did the apostles teach?

The *Interpreter's Bible* says the apostles' teaching probably included their personal recollections of Jesus and his teaching. Acts 4:33 adds that the apostles "gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The apostles' teaching also likely featured reinterpretation of Old Testament passages, which believers took to be prophecies fulfilled in Christ. These teachings were at first transmitted orally and later written down and incorporated to the Gospels.

Paul speaks of the "form of teaching" in Romans 6:17 and "standard of sound teaching" in 2 Timothy 1:13 to describe the developing doctrine of the emerging church.

The Gospels as we know them today weren't written until decades later and may not have circulated as a unit before the second century.

Other ancient documents also exist that purport to reflect the apostles' teaching. While many Christians don't regard them as necessarily authoritative, they offer possible insight into the type of views passed on by the early generations of the church.

The Apostles' Creed, believed throughout the Middle Ages to have been written by the apostles on the day of Pentecost, probably in reality didn't exist in its final form until centuries later. It affirms historic church doctrines including the Virgin Birth, Crucifixion, Burial and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Christian churches today affirm and recite it; others, while affirming its doctrines, note its obvious omissions of the teachings of Jesus.

"The Didache," also called "Teaching of the Apostles," is a document that is dated by various scholars from earlier than A.D. 70 until as late as the second century. It sets forth moral instruction and gives guidance on liturgical matters such as baptism, fasting, prayer and the Lord's Supper. Latter chapters touch on church administration, such as how to treat traveling apostles and the election of deacons and bishops.

In addition to teaching, the early Christians also devoted themselves to the "breaking of bread," or fellowship around the table. This was a common practice of the time. A good example is the Last Supper (the designation obviously

implies it wasn't the first or only supper) shared by Jesus and the disciples. As the original disciples had shared a common life with Jesus, the church in Acts continued the practice.

Acts 2:46 adds the detail that the breaking of bread took place in homes and was in addition to attending the Temple together "day by day." The devoting of themselves to "prayers" in their homes gave them opportunity for specifically Christian teaching and worship in addition to Temple observance for believers, who at the time were viewed as a sect of Judaism rather than a new religion.

Controversy exists today over so-called "Messianic" congregations, where members declare Jesus as Messiah while retaining Jewish customs. They appeal to the early church as a model but avoid calling themselves "Christian," because of negative connotations of the term in the Jewish community.

Critics say two millennia of Christian anti-Semitism is a reality that cannot be glossed over or ignored. They call it deceptive to try to persuade Jews they can be Christian in everything but name.

The mention of "awe" in verse 43 ("fear," in some translations) isn't surprising in the context of "signs and wonders," a common Old Testament designation for miracles indicating the anticipated Day of the Lord. But the mood also was one of, according to verse 46, "glad and generous hearts" for the fledgling fellowship.

Acts 2:44-47 **All Things in Common**

⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods

and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The phrase "had all things in common" is a form of the Greek word "koinonia," which is translated as "fellowship," "communion" or "participation."

It was Paul's favorite word to describe the unity of believers in his letters. The apparent equivalent in Aramaic was a word used to describe a group of companions who shared a common life, and particularly those who united to celebrate a common Passover meal.

The sharing of possessions suggests some sort of communal experiment, perhaps along the lines of the Qumran community described in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Unlike Qumran, however, the Acts version was voluntary and not universal. Ananias in chapter 5 was punished not for holding back his possessions but for lying about the proceeds from their sale.

The verb tense of “sold” is imperfect, as in they “used to sell” their possessions. This could mean they sold property and pooled resources from time to time as need emerged, rather than all at once.

Laying the money at the apostles’ feet (4:35) may reflect an old legal tradition for transferring property by laying it at the feet of another. Distribution was “to each as any had need.” The emphasis seems to have been more on need than the possessions themselves. Acts 4:34 says no one among them lacked anything, because they all shared everything in common.

The practice was apparently short lived. Paul in Galatians urged Gentile churches to “remember the poor,” suggesting the saints in Jerusalem by this time were no longer in a position to adequately care for their own. He later brought a contribution from Gentile churches to Jerusalem (Rom 15:25ff; 2 Cor 8:1ff).

Christianity was at first more a way of life than a set of beliefs. For the Christians in the early chapters of Acts, the church was their primary commitment, in terms of both time and money.

Such an example might seem impractical to those living in a materialistic society and juggling commitments of church, work and lifestyle. In a sense, however, our church is itself a “common place,” where we share time, talent and charitable gifts because of a common commitment to Christ. At those times during the week when we gather for worship, prayer, study and fellowship, as church members we truly “share all things in common.”

In his book *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class*, David Matzko McCarthy observes that while

people often criticize our society as being too “worldly,” the opposite is true. Many aspects of middle-class life rather reflect a desire to detach from the world, he says.

He describes the church as our “first family,” a place to recover God’s gift of friendship and hospitality. “Such a claim does not mean that we must leave our homes and take up a common residence,” he writes. “It does mean, however, that our separate homes are not independent units or autonomous domains.”

Families solve problems not by striving to become self-sufficient, but by depending on and sharing a common life with the church, McCarthy says. “We have a responsibility, for instance, for providing the financial resources, our time and our hard work to sustain the church building and sanctuary. This common place is our home, and how we maintain our home ought to reflect our faith in God’s hospitality.”

21st Century Missions

For Baptists and many other evangelical Christians, that responsibility also extends beyond the local church.

On May 30, 1792, an English preacher and shoemaker named William Carey launched the modern missionary movement with his famous sermon including the motto, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.” This sermon led to the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society, which soon appointed Carey as a missionary to India.

The movement launched by Carey spread to the United States, including formation of the so-called Triennial Convention (because it met every three years) in 1814 and the later Southern Baptist Convention, which formed in 1845

for the purpose of “eliciting, combining and directing the energies of the denomination for the propagation of the gospel.”

This movement continues today, but experts called “missiologists” say it is undergoing dramatic change.

Philip Jenkins’ book *The Next Christendom* argues that the main locus of Christianity in the 21st century has moved from the West to the South.

Jenkins predicts a worldwide boon for Christianity in the 21st century, but he says the majority of believers won’t be white or European. Based on current trends, he says that by 2050 only about one-fifth of the world’s Christians will be non-Hispanic whites. A “white Christian,” he suggests, may one day be viewed as a “curious oxymoron,” similar to a “Swedish Buddhist.”

“Non-Western missionaries ministering cross-culturally may come to supersede Western missionaries,” adds Mark Elliott, director of the Global Center at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School. “No longer does it make sense to think of the missionary enterprise as a movement from a Western ‘center’ to a non-Western ‘periphery.’”

Along with moving away from the West, the starting point of missions is also shifting from centralized mission-sending agencies to the local church, according to missiologist Margaret Cupit.

“Missiologists have observed this paradigm shift in mission activity, in which local congregations in the developed world are entering into partnership with congregations in the developing world and channeling funds directly to those congregations,” she said in a paper for the Baptist World Alliance.

Until the 1950s, Cupit said, missions “usually referred to either the sending of missionaries and the activities they undertook in another part of the world or the agency that send them.”

She characterized the new missionary movement as two-way involvement between churches in developed and developing worlds, where mutuality and equality exist and each church enriches the other.

Cupit affirmed the shift toward greater local-church involvement as “an advance over positions held for many centuries and a return to the missionary position of the New Testament church.”

Written by Bob Allen, managing editor, EthicsDaily.com, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Giving Faithfully

Acts 4:36-5:11

Theme: Faithful giving begins by confronting the Ananias and Sapphira in each of us.

Introduction

While flying back from Europe on a missions trip I sat by a businessman from Nebraska. He read a copy of his hometown weekly paper that he'd brought along, and we chatted casually.

He was not a churchgoer but was fascinated with what churches were doing in missions internationally. He paused for a moment while reading and said, "You might find this story in the paper interesting."

He proceeded to share the story of a farmer who had built a barn 115 feet too close to the highway. The highway department told him it had to be moved or taken down. The farmer was distraught. He couldn't figure how to move it, and he had no money left to build a new barn.

Neighbors heard of his dilemma and told him they would help. He wasn't sure what they could do, but on a Saturday morning, 368 neighbors gathered at the barn. On queue, they lifted the barn, walked it 115 feet and placed it on a new foundation without causing any damage. The farmer calculated that because 368 people combined their

strength and resources and worked together, each person had to lift only 50 pounds.

The call to each Christian to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth can seem just as staggering. How can we do that?

We can do it when each of us gives and lifts our "50 pounds." We really can move this world for Christ if we each do our part. Missions efforts always begin with a pledge to integrity that each believer will be salt and light.

For generations, missions work has been radically decentralized, and church members have been institutionally displaced from the center of world outreach. It is exciting today to see a huge shift from agency-based missions work to church-based missions work. This is much more biblical.

The kingdom of God expands when every believer bears witness. God is changing the world from the inside out with ordinary Christians taking the grace of God to the world. Missions work today involves common people being transformed by their Lord to do uncommon deeds.

Missions work depends upon believers faithfully giving money, time and talents. The story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that giving lip service to this commitment without living it out destroys the church.

The Biblical Witness

What does it mean to be church, real church? The call to follow Christ means we pledge our personhood and possessions to this Christ. It means we choose to live in a community of big commitments.

Acts 4:36-37

Laying it All Down

³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Christians in the early church routinely gave big gifts, helped one another, sold property and gave all the proceeds to the apostles so the work of Christ could be done. One who did this was Joseph. We’ll call him Joe, just an average Joe. He gave so beautifully out of who he was and what he had that the apostles gave him another name, Barnabas, which meant “son of encouragement.” He gave so gladly, so freely, that to be near him was like being near a warm fire. The church was having fun.

Having seen Barnabas and others give beautiful gifts encouraged others to want to do the same. There is something contagious about people living out their beliefs and commitments. There is integrity in such giving and living that it authenticates the message we bear. There is a freedom in such living that attracts those enslaved to things and schedules. It is no wonder that the early church grew so fast. The early church had tremendous influence to change lives. People want to be a part of something that truly has purpose and value.

Unfortunately, in a community of big commitments, somebody is bound to tell a big lie. This story reminds us that there never was a church that didn’t have to confront falsehood. Behind Barnabas came a married couple. They appeared to have the same thing in mind. Having seen others give so generously they wanted to do the same.

Acts 5:1-2

Giving Only a Part

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of land and wanted to give the proceeds as gifts to the apostles. Only they held back part of the proceeds for themselves. Somehow, though, when Ananias took the money and gave it, he left the impression that he and his wife were giving all of the proceeds. In other words, he lied.

He may have actually told a boldfaced lie: “My wife and I have this piece of property and we want to give the money from its sale to the Lord. Here is the money.”

Or, maybe, as people sometimes are prone to do, he implied the lie. Maybe as he brought his gift and laid it at Peter’s feet, someone close by saw him and said, “Way to go! You gave everything!” And maybe with a catch in his voice, Ananias replied, “Well, what can I say?”

There are so many ways we pretend to be something we really aren’t.

The sin of deceit can destroy the church and kill community. Church, real church, is built on trust. We are a family of trust. We trust God to hold us. We trust Jesus to save us and sustain us. We trust the Spirit to guide and empower us. We trust each other to mean what we say and take the calling of Christ seriously. If we can’t trust, everything else falls apart.

A rule of faith is that anything we cannot do with one another we cannot do with God. If we don't love each other, we can't love God. If we don't trust each other, we can't trust God. If we do not tell the truth to each other, we cannot tell the truth to God.

Acts 5:3-11 **Lying to God**

³“Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back a part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. ⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

The Psalmist wrote, “No one who practices deceit shall remain in my house” (Ps 101:7).

As Ananias turned to go, Peter called his name. “Wasn't the land yours? Weren't you free to do with the money as

you wished? You were free to keep it all, but you have lied to God.”

When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. As was the custom, young men wrapped his body for burial. A short time later, Sapphira came on the scene, and Peter asked her about the sum of money. “Is this how much you got for the land?”

When she answered affirmatively, the same happened to Sapphira as happened to her husband. She fell and died. The text ends with this statement: “Great fear seized the whole church.”

It is fascinating that in this last statement we find the first use of the word “church” in the Book of Acts. Perhaps one reason Luke did not use the word earlier was because he was waiting for the church to confront its own falsehood. Until deceit drops dead, we won't become the church.

How do we deceive one another and ourselves? When we pretend to support the community but don't do a thing for the life or work of the community, we deceive. When we say we want the whole world to share in God's grace and yet keep so much for ourselves and fail to give generously, we deceive. When we say together at church we want to follow Christ and then in private violate his ways, we deceive. When we bow our heads at church to pray and praise and put ourselves under the Word of God but in private are prayerless, praiseless and deaf to the Word of God, we deceive.

Our pledge to each other in church is not to be sinless. Rather, it is a pledge that we take seriously this call of Christ to follow him obediently. It means that we will try to be what we seem to be. It means that when we fail, as we often do, we'll come clean with God and each other.

We can find some of Ananias and Sapphira in each of us. Part of our calling is to strike them dead daily. When we find ourselves false, we should make a course correction to keep ourselves honest. Where we find our church false, in love we should keep each other honest. When we do, a miracle happens. We will have the power at last to stand side by side and speak to the falsehood of the world.

After this story, do you know what the Book of Acts records next? Signs and wonders occur. The mission of the church is launched. The church can't be silenced, even in jail. When the church confronts its own falseness, it has the freedom to confront the falsehood of the world.

21st Century Missions

The world is hungry for integrity and truth. It needs for the church to stand and hold a mirror to the falsehood of greed and to expose idolatry. But first, we must stop bringing false gifts to the church and bring our truest selves. When we let the truth set us free, we can take the truth to the world in Jesus' name. This is what it means to give faithfully.

Mike, a potato chip deliveryman, found this to be true in his life. A few years ago he confronted the falseness in his life that centered on alcohol addiction. He had lost everything, including his family. With this confrontation of falsehood a dramatic change occurred in his life and in the life of his church. He was so full of gratitude he wanted to make sure everyone had the same opportunity for newness that he had found. He even volunteered to go on a missions trip to Panama and work with Kuna Indians because alcoholism was a problem for many on the Kuna islands.

He wasn't sure how the Kuna tribes would receive him. You can imagine his utter amazement to discover they were

lined up to welcome him to their islands. Using a white sheet for a movie screen, he fired up a generator and showed the Jesus film in the Kuna language. A rainstorm erupted, so Mike prepared to stop the film. The Kuna refused. They threw together a small shelter to protect the generator, and the people stood in the pouring rain for over an hour, listening to every word.

Mike is also a marine engine mechanic. For days he worked with the Kuna fishermen helping repair their motors. While working side by side with them, he shared his story. The anglers could relate.

Mike says, "I still can't get over how God could use a potato chip deliveryman to share the gospel with hundreds. I have been a part of a miracle."

This is missions in the 21st century: ordinary people doing extraordinary things. It is the people of God freely, faithfully and honestly giving.

Written by John Upton, executive director, Baptist General Association of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

Obeying God

Acts 5:17-29

Theme: Obedience to God's authority instead of human authorities requires wholehearted love, trust and obedience and often carries serious and costly consequences.

Introduction

Sare was the first Azeri speaker in Azerbaijan to make a public commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to be baptized. It was a radical step for a man who had led a very dissolute life, was nominally linked to the majority religion of the country and had no prior knowledge of the Christian faith.

A friend invited him to a Russian-speaking Baptist church in Baku, the nation's capital. Sare was immediately struck by the power of the story of Jesus. He received a New Testament and testifies that reading it led him to faith in Jesus Christ.

Sare has been imprisoned on at least two occasions because he obeys "God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29).

Having experienced the love of God in the person of Jesus, he felt constrained to share his newfound affection with his family and friends. Sare is a very effective and committed

evangelist. Barely a decade later, many hundreds of Azerbaijanis have become followers of Christ because of the witness of this dedicated disciple. Sare gives all the thanks to God, but the faith and courage of this extraordinary servant of Christ have been instrumental in the amazing growth of the Christian church in a hostile environment.

Yet, this has not been without cost. Sare has not only endured imprisonment, he has been publicly vilified, abused, shunned by former friends and eventually forced to remain at home while his congregation worshipped God. The only way to prevent harassment of the congregation was for the pastor to remain home and leave the work in the hands of others. The morning I preached at the church in Baku, the pastor could not attend!

Sare's story is a classic case of obeying God rather than human authorities. He and his family have suffered severe consequences.

When the authorities burst into church one Sunday morning, Sare advised his people to leave rather than have their names recorded as Christian believers. No one left. The church members also suffered for their commitment to Christ. Sare's people understood that it is better to "obey God rather than human authorities."

How different are our experiences of church life compared to our brothers and sisters in Azerbaijan! I wonder how we would respond to persecution and denial of our right to worship God freely. We would hope that if tested in that way, we too would obey God rather than human authorities. Our first allegiance must always and only be to Jesus.

The Biblical Witness

Acts 5:17-18 **The Apostles Arrested**

¹⁷Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, ¹⁸arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.

It is fascinating to note the regard in which the apostles were increasingly held.

In the previous section it is reported that because of the “signs and wonders” performed by the apostles, others were reluctant to join them. These were the men who had walked and talked with Jesus for three years, a matter of great wonder to other followers of the crucified Galilean.

The attitude of the high priest and Sadducees was quite the opposite. Rather than being in awe of the apostles, they were jealous of their gathering influence and decided they had to be stopped. Reverence and rage. Adulation and anger. Pedestal and prison! Talk about extremes!

How strange that people can have such radically different views of the apostles, yet not so strange when we see how attitudes toward public figures polarize people. Whether it is a politician, music idol or sports star, as many will vilify as will glorify. And so it was toward the apostles; so it is toward Jesus. Too much adulation being directed towards any human being can be dangerous and is not good for either party involved; and certainly no one deserves the blind hatred that certain individuals attract.

As followers of the one who forgave His persecutors, recognizing our common humanity, we need to “hate what is evil” (Rom 12:9) but not the person, made in God’s

image, who does the evil. The same Romans passage reminds us that as God’s people we are called to “bless those who persecute you” (Rom 12:14). Self-interest and the desire to preserve the status quo encouraged the religious leaders to try to stamp out those who differed from them.

The high priest “took action” (Acts 5:17). In contrast to the Pharisee leader, Gamaliel, who later urged caution (v 34), the high priest felt he had to do something about these upstarts who were preaching about Jesus; so he had them arrested and put in prison. When we are “filled with jealousy” (v 17), it is likely that we will act irrationally and unwisely. The high priest felt that taking action to exterminate the perceived threat was necessary. Like a high priest before him, he had not counted on divine intervention.

Acts 5:19-21 **The Apostles Released**

¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, ²⁰“Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” ²¹When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching. When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

It intrigues us that men languishing in prison could be suddenly free when the jailors outside are assuming they have them under lock and key! Our Western worldview struggles with this happening while, as people of faith, we realize that the God who created a universe and raised a Son from death to life is able to turn a key and induce sleep from a few prison guards.

The instruction to the apostles was very clear: “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life” (v 20). There was nothing foolhardy about the apostles’ actions. Like Daniel, they were emboldened to face danger and possible death, not because they were particularly brave men, but because they were faithful and obedient to the risen Christ. “We must obey God rather than any human authorities,” (v 29) they would later say.

And they were not to water down their message. They had to explain the whole story, at a time soon after their colleague Stephen had been stoned for doing exactly that!

Acts 5:22-24 **The Apostles Sought**

22But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, 23“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” 24Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on.

There is humor in the dashed expectations of those who would judge the apostles. They were all in readiness to gravely consider the situation of those who would stand in their presence to be lectured and perhaps sentenced to remain in prison or even to death. (In verse 33 we learn that they became so enraged they “wanted to kill them.”) The judge and jury were there, but the prisoners could not be located! No one could work out what had happened. They had disappeared before their eyes.

Acts 5:25-27 **The Apostles Reappear!**

25Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” 26Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. 27When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them,

The freeing of the Christian leaders changed the equation. No longer could the high priest and his cronies treat the apostles with contempt. Word had gotten around that not only had those who were doing marvelous things been thrown into prison but, incredibly, they had been miraculously released.

This time the people knew what was going on, forcing the authorities to be more circumspect towards those who had suddenly become popular identities. The events had so stirred the imagination of the populace that any hostile move against the apostles could have brought about swift retribution against the authorities. They were in fear of being stoned themselves!

Acts 5:28 **The Apostles Interrogated**

28saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

The Council laid two charges against the apostles. First, they had “filled Jerusalem with their teaching.” Repression often brings about the opposite of what it intends to accomplish. Trying to muzzle the apostles brought their message to the notice of the people.

The other charge was that the apostles were “determined to bring this man’s blood” upon religious leaders looking frantically for a way to expunge the memory of the crucified Jesus. The message of the apostles was offering new life and hope to the people. The religious leaders betrayed their sense of guilt and their paranoia by interpreting the apostles’ word and actions personally.

Acts 5:29 **The Apostles Speak Out**

²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Peter was the spokesperson but we can imagine the quick murmurs of assent from his friends. The words are a model of courage and commitment, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

The response that Martin Luther gave before the hostile Church Council is an echo of the words of Peter, “Here I stand, I can do no other!” Without arrogance, careful of motive, mindful of our own weaknesses, we too must in moments of spiritual crisis offer our allegiance to God rather than to the pressures that human expectations bring. Jesus Christ is Lord. In every circumstance of life, He is our Lord and Master. Let us serve Him with joy and without apology.

21st Century Missions

National church leaders and missionaries who work with them are daily confronted with issues that force them to choose between obedience to Christ and passive acceptance of demands made by human authorities. This is especially so in countries where a totalitarian government

or a religious majority exercises control. Neither is necessarily responsive to the human rights of Christian believers, especially the right to worship God freely and without compromising Christian beliefs and standards.

It is tempting to expect a response like that of the apostles and Peter when told to desist from speaking about Jesus. And yes, sometimes that is the response Christians under oppression make. When this happens, we thank God and extol the faith and courage of those involved. Sometimes inevitable and enormous consequences follow. Many modern-day apostles face fine, imprisonment and even death for their stand against evil and their decision to obey God rather than human authorities.

Unless we are in a position to be their advocates, our only recourse may be to cry out to God to protect and strengthen those like Sare, who refuse to compromise in the face of naked persecution and unfair accusation.

We would be naïve to think, however, that this is a phenomenon that only happens in faraway places. The possibility exists for us to confront the same question faced by the apostles and faced in a today’s missions context. Sometimes we are so used to governmental and societal assaults upon our freedom that we accept standards incompatible with the scripture because we have become used to accepting values that are questionable. Perhaps it is because we long ago failed to take up a cross and follow the slap of Jesus’ sandals to the foot of Calvary as he urged us to do. Perhaps we have forgotten to live in the Spirit as Jesus challenged us to do and have relied on our own intuition rather than upon the teachings of God’s Word. We must obey God rather than human authorities.

However, let us be careful. What we may claim is obedience to God could be encouraged by our own pride, our stubbornness, our carnality. We may be persuaded, not by the teaching of God's Word and the leading of God's spirit, but by the lure of our party political preference, by our reading scripture to support our own views, by our rationalization to get our own way, indeed, by all manner of false prophets. If we claim to be obeying God rather than human authorities, let us be sure that it is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom our obedience is directed.

God is God, and is worthy to be obeyed. Jesus Christ is Lord and deserves our wholehearted love and devotion. "Trust and obey, for there's no other way" is an old hymn with a timeless message, and to be "happy in Jesus," we must trust and obey.

Written by Tony Cupit, director of evangelism and education, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, Va.

Resolving Conflict

Acts 6:1-7

Theme: Conflict resolution is essential to a healthy church on mission.

Introduction

More than two decades ago in the Baptist community in Germany, women began to apply to be admitted to the seminary to receive their theological education. The executive board of the Baptist union was sharply divided over the issue.

Those who were against this move argued that these women, once they had completed their education, would then want to serve as pastors and that this was against the biblical witness. Others said that if the women were led by the Holy Spirit, as they testified, may we humans resist the Spirit's calling?

It seemed to be a classical conflict between "letter" and "spirit." The controversy gave rise to a re-reading of scripture and to the discovery that certain portions of Scripture that seem to restrict the role of women (1 Tim 2:12; 1 Cor 14:34) should not be absolutized at the expense of other portions of Scripture that indeed show women in ministerial leadership positions in the early church (1 Cor 11:5; Rom 16:1, 16:6 ff).

The conflict was no longer between "letter" and "spirit," for the "letter" was not as rigid as tradition wanted it to be.

Structural changes were implemented and, in accordance with the Baptist principle of the autonomy of the local church, a German Baptist congregation now may extend a call to a woman to be its pastor.

The Biblical Witness

The first seven verses of Acts 6 open a new section in the Book of Acts and serve as an introduction to the Stephen narrative (6:8-7:60). Certain discrepancies exist between this text and the foregoing. Whereas the previous picture of the early church was that of a peaceful, harmonious community in which all believers “were of one heart and soul” and in which there was “not a needy person among them” (4:32, 34), chapter 5 introduces the greed of Ananias and Sapphira, and chapter 6 exposes another quarrel in the church: “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews” (6:1).

Somehow, the previous description seems too idealistic, for the reality of the church—both then and now—is more characterized by conflicts and tensions. Church history and especially Baptist history sadly underline this fact, and any Baptist church historian readily admits it as well. Even the early church in Jerusalem was no exception.

How did the early church implement crisis management? How can conflicts in the church be resolved so that ill feelings do not prevail and distract the church from its real objective, which is to spread the good news among all peoples?

How can differences and discords be used creatively to open new ways for the church to be what God calls it to be?

Acts 6:1 Growth, Division and Conflict

¹Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

The internal conflict and tension in the Jerusalem church was caused by at least two major factors. The church had numerically increased to such an extent that the leadership—the twelve—(v 2) could no longer take care of all people and all tasks at the same time. In addition, the church began to be divided by language and possessions.

“Hellenists” felt that widows within their group were overlooked and suffered from physical needs. The growth of the church had this negative side effect that some were being neglected, apparently in favor of others, so that there was “murmuring” in the church just as the people of Israel had done in the desert (Num 11:1).

This was a very serious situation for the early church and for Luke. He portrayed the church as the “true people of God,” which is why such internal frictions should be resolved quickly. Hence, the focus of attention is not so much on the poor who need help but on problem-solving under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Who were the Hellenists? The scholarly community has widely discussed this issue, and it seems most likely that the “Hellenists” [Hellas = Greece] were Greek-speaking Jews of the diaspora who had converted to Christianity. They could not adequately understand the Hebrews, who spoke Aramaic.

The Hellenists seem to have been a special group within the early church in Jerusalem. They were, therefore, very important in the early missionary expansion of the church beyond the borders of Palestinian Judaism. The Hellenists apparently were responsible for the Aramaic Jesus tradition to be translated into Greek, the *lingua franca* at the time, and the indispensable means of communicating the gospel and transplanting it from Hebrew background to the nations. Thus, the Hellenists began what the Apostle Paul later carried on.

Whatever else could be said about the Hellenists and the Hebrews, one point is obvious: the distinction between the two groups is not ethnic—they were both of Jewish background—but linguistic.

Why were so many Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora in Jerusalem so that widows were reason for complaint? Some scholars suggest that quite a number of diaspora Jews liked to come to Jerusalem to spend their last years in that holy city and to be buried there. If the Messiah would come, he would certainly appear in Jerusalem; people wanted to meet him there, which is why they made their way to the “city of peace.” If a married Jew died and left behind a widow, she likely had no family or close friends to take care of her. This seems to have been the main reason why there were widows in the first place and why the Christian community was challenged to take care of them.

Widows, in ancient and even in modern societies, have been much too often victims of unfair practices and/or discriminatory customs. Their sources of income and their entire standing in the community were largely defined by their husbands. When their husbands died, widows were often without support and became victims of other men in male-dominated societies.

In some cases, widows were also left with children to care for so that their lot was even more deplorable. Under the law (Deut 14:29) and prophets (e.g. Jer 49:11), the Israelites were bound to provide for widows and orphans. Luke, in his gospel, reports that Jesus had special concerns for widows. He even raised the only son of a widow in the town of Nain (Lk 7:11-17).

It is, therefore, consistent with the entire Old Testament tradition as well as with the Jesus tradition that the church ought to take care of orphans and widows. The twelve must have done so previously, but as the church grew, they were unable to minister to all people equally so that Greek-speaking widows were overlooked “in the daily distribution of food.” Hence, the internal difficulties arose.

Acts 6:2-7 **Resolution and Restoration**

²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Luke was not interested in the question of who was to blame for the situation. His only interest was how the dispute was resolved. Luke's gospel provides us with seven steps:

1. The discrepancy was recognized as such by the twelve, who before had done both the preaching and the distribution of charity.
2. The apostles took the leadership role by calling a meeting of the entire community of "disciples" (this word occurs here for the first time). The twelve were careful to involve all the disciples, whether Greek-speaking or Aramaic-speaking.
3. The apostles further exerted their leadership by suggesting a division of labor. They thought "it is not right" before God that they "should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables" (v 2) where food was being supplied. The proposal amounted to an alternative: the apostles wanted to continue to *serve* the word, whereas "seven men" should be selected to *serve* the economic arrangements within the church.
4. Criteria for the selection of the seven men were supplied by the apostles. They should be in "good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (v 3). They must possess natural and spiritual gifts to execute the special task on behalf of the church.
5. The proposal of the twelve met with pleasing approval by all.
6. The popular choice produced the seven men. Stephen heads the list, as subsequently in chapters 6 and 7 he plays a major role. He is listed together

with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. Of these, only Philip is mentioned elsewhere in passing (8:4 ff.; 21:8). We know nothing of the other five. It is important to note that all seven men have Greek names. For the last on the list, Nicolaus, the extra information is given that he was "a proselyte of Antioch" (v 5), implying that the other six must have been born Jews.

7. After the selection, the apostles' prayer and their laying on of hands completed the course of action.

Notice the careful composition of this entire passage as evidenced by parallel constructions and other literary techniques:

Verse 1 notes that the disciples increased in number in "those days." Verse 7 indicates that the number "increased greatly" in Jerusalem.

Verse 2 points to a conflict, a negative situation, and the twelve called together "the whole community." Verse 5a reveals a positive situation. The conflict is resolved, and the "whole community" is pleased.

Verse 3 records a command to select seven men "of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Verses 5b-6 reveals the fulfillment of that command: Stephen, "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit," together with the others, stood before the apostles.

Verse 4 notes the role of prayer in the lives of the twelve. Verse 6b notes the role of prayer and laying on of hands as the seven were set apart for their new ministry.

Verse 7 picks up the idea of increase in number (see v 1) and underlines this statement by adding that “many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

In view of the details given in this passage, the question must be addressed whether or not the conflict was settled. This is a real question, as subsequently Stephen as well as Philip are reported to be preaching rather than waiting on tables, and Philip is called an evangelist, “one of the seven” (21:8), implying that the others were also evangelists.

One aspect is certain: the seven continued to do what the apostles had previously done, i.e. serving the community by preaching and distributing foodstuffs. However, the division of labor meant the creation of a new structure in the community. The new situation demanded a restructuring and rearranging of responsibilities so that the apostles could serve better and all in the church were better served. The entire church exercised its authority to create a new office of service.

Another question remains: Were the seven able to integrate the Greek-speaking widows into the daily distribution of food within the Aramaic (Hebrew) group or are the Greek names of the seven an indication of separate developments as theologian Brian Capper has suggested? There is too little evidence to reach a definite conclusion.

21st Century Missions

What lessons can we learn from the early church about resolving conflict in the Christian community?

- Conflicts need to be clearly identified.

- Suggestions for resolving them must be made by leaders as well as others.
- The entire community must be involved in solving the tensions.
- New and innovative steps must be taken, even new structures created, if need be.

Effective missions in the 21st century depends upon healthy conflict resolution. A most troubling conflict in the church today, one seldom faced by congregations and church leaders in the North, is the North-South divide. It resembles the conflict in Acts 6 on a larger scale as it is also a divide that separates the rich from the poor within the one body of Christ. This scandal must be addressed and resolved not merely by diaconical relief work (“crumbs from the master’s table”), but by structural reforms.

This overwhelming economic and political responsibility must be an integral part of the mission of the church in the 21st century.

Written by Erich Geldbach, professor emeritus of ecumenical studies, Ruhr-University Bochum, now residing in Marburg, Germany.

Breaking Barriers

Acts 8:26-38

Theme: Cultural, racial, linguistic, economic and political issues often form barriers that effective missions work must overcome.

Introduction

In the desperation of the last years of the disintegrating communist realities of my native country of Bulgaria, my wife and I were reading, discussing and trying to make sense of that thick book of Christians and the Jews. Month after month we tried to decipher its enigmatic sayings.

One day my wife was so preoccupied with trying to find the meaning in the text she was reading that she was courageous (or silly) enough to take the Bible to her place of work. This was a dangerous step which could have had serious consequences if she had been caught reading it. While she was sitting in her office, taken by the reading, she heard a familiar voice behind her, asking, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Startled, she turned around and saw a colleague whom she knew for years to be “awkward.” The woman was always polite, smiling, caring and never engaged in gossip and slander in spite of very difficult circumstances in her personal life.

It took my wife some time to confess that she did not understand the meaning of what she was reading, in spite of the

fact that it was written in her native language, and in spite of her high academic standing. This text simply did not easily follow human logic. The sterile world of rationality and the grip of intellectual pride kept us from seeing the depth, the inspiration and the relevance of the revelation of God for our life.

My wife’s colleague then sat beside her and began to speak, explaining the text, as well as sharing her commitment to Jesus Christ. At the end, she invited us to visit their small community that turned out to be a Baptist church. We joined them in studying and discerning the meaning of the scriptures together. It was in the guided communal reading of the Word’s witness that the Spirit touched our hearts. God’s revelation more often than not has a witnessing face.

In the light of this testimony, one may resonate with my long-lasting interest in the biblical story and its characters recorded in Acts 8:26-40. Much of my appreciation for the story and the insights into the narrative of Luke-Acts is informed by my interactions with the thought of Dr. John B. Polhill. Through numerous personal conversations, lectures, sermons and writings, this caring friend and mentor has opened for me new horizons into the narrative of Luke-Acts and its immediate relevance for the life of the church.

Few would contest the wisdom of the saying: “The Bible is a treasure. It is the wisdom of God.” Yet cultural, racial, linguistic, economic and political preoccupations form barriers that can hinder and, in fact, hide the treasure. In spite of considerable efforts invested in “reading the Bible,” its message may not come through. God regularly uses a human face and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to make the biblical witness come alive in every cultural context.

The Biblical Witness

In the sequence of stories tracing the development of the early communities of Jesus' disciples and their response to Christ's commission (1:8), Acts 6-12 depict them moving from being "witnesses in Jerusalem" to furthering it "in all Judea and Samaria."

The story of conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch at the Judean border marks the culmination of the Hellenists' (6:1) efforts to break out from the narrow confines of Jewish Christianity. It is an inspiring record of the first non-Jewish personal conversion story in the Christian narrative. The fact that the first convert was an African and an outsider makes it even more remarkable.

The flow of the story naturally develops in three successive stages of preparation (vv 26-29), witness (vv 30-35) and commitment (vv 36-38). A binding force behind the narrative is God's unquestionable leadership. The missionary advance unfolds in the power of the Spirit, inspiring a faithful witness to the inclusive, triumphant and transforming good news of Jesus Christ.

Acts 8:26-29 **Unlikely Witness**

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."

In a sharp turn, the biblical narrator picks up in verse 26 the story line introduced in 8:5 and left open in 8:13. Phillip is in

the focus of the narration again, the third time he is active in the story of the mission of the church in Acts.

A Hellenist (not the apostle with the same name, Mark 3:18 and parallels) chosen for his spiritual sensitivity and practical wisdom (6:3) to serve the community in Jerusalem (6:5), Phillip was tested by severe persecutions (8:1) following the outbreak of violence after Stephen's stoning (7:59). After a successful experience in mass evangelization of the Samaritans (8:5-13), an angel of the Lord (functionally equivalent to God's Spirit) called him. The Spirit continued to lead Philip throughout this story (vv 29, 39) just as his daughters later also experienced (21:8-9).

The message of God's mouthpiece could not have been more puzzling: Philip was directed to witness in an incredible place—at the desert south of Jerusalem, at the most inappropriate time—in the hottest hours right at midday. Who would travel that route, anyway?

Obedying divine guidance, Philip encountered the most unusual prospect for witness. On his side, Philip was an established Jewish believer. An urbanee, he was equally at home in the two dominant cultures of his region: the Hebraic and the Greco-Roman. As a Jew he could enter the Temple and worship God; as a follower of the Way he was enabled to see into the future of God's Kingdom of God amongst the nations.

The stranger Philip met was a foreigner (an African), the highest ranking official (similar to minister of finance) of a remote kingdom of Meroe (or Kush, not to be confused with modern day Ethiopia) and a eunuch. He was most likely a God-fearing Gentile (in pilgrimage to worship in Jerusalem, v 27), but unlike Cornelius (Ch 10), without any hope of

becoming a full member of the Lord's Assembly. Due to his physical blemish he was destined (Deut 23:1) to visit the Court of the Gentiles in the temple area but never enter the Temple. It is not by accident perhaps that he was reading Isaiah's promises for full restoration of all outcasts to the house of the Lord, including the foreigners and the eunuchs (Isa 56:3-8).

A nice balance exists between verses 26-27 and 29-30a, reinforcing Philip's obedience to the leadership of the Spirit. He was commanded to "get up" and "go" (v 26) and "go over" (v 29), so he "got up" and "went" (v 27) and "ran up" (v 30a).

Acts 8:30-35 **Do You Understand?**

³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

Running beside the chariot under the Spirit's direction, Philip heard the eunuch reading a text from the prophet Isaiah. A magnificent picture of God's ideal future for humanity and the richness of his promises to Israel, the prophet's vision was held in high regard by the Jews. Jesus

used Isaiah's vision of vindication of justice (Isa 61:1-2) to inaugurate his ministry of salvation (Lk 4:16-21).

The text the eunuch was reading, however, was one of the most difficult servant psalms to interpret in Isaiah (the Septuagint text of Isa 53:7-8). The issue was not so much about the deeds of the suffering servant, but rather his identity. This was precisely the text of prophecy fulfillment most closely associated with Jesus' identity in the early Christian thinking.

What better a chance for Philip's witness? Was it a coincidence or was the Spirit already at work? As Jesus had done earlier for the perplexed inquirers on a route to Emmaus (Lk 24:25-27; 44-47), Philip opened the text for his listener.

There is a lesson to be learned here. Philip's question of understanding has a wider application. Scriptures cannot be fully understood without interpretation and for the Christians, Jesus provided the hermeneutical key.

Acts 8:36-38 **The Good News**

³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" [Here some ancient authorities insert an additional verse ³⁷And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

The response of the eunuch was enthusiastic and instantaneous. Philip must have been preparing him for the proper

response to gospel message along the lines of Peter's sermon recorded earlier (2:38). Upon emerging from the water, the two characters of the story experience two different manifestations of the power of the main character: God's Spirit. The eunuch's life was transformed. The joy is a sure sign of responding in faith to the good news of Christ (8:8, cf. Gal. 5:22).

Verses 39-40 record that Philip, being led by the same Spirit to this encounter, was snatched away to continue proclaiming the good news of inclusion in Azotus (Ashdod) north of Gaza and along the coastal cities of Palestine.

The thrust of this passage and of the whole chapter is that in the Kingdom of God proclaimed by the prophets and inaugurated by Jesus, all sorts of people are included: Samaritans, eunuchs, women as well as men, and even occultists. Every one is welcomed upon radical repentance and faith in Jesus: a message to be reinforced in the later addition of verse 37.

21st Century Missions

If the mission of the church is a witness to the transforming power of the gospel enacted in personal and communal life, the story of the eunuch is a model exemplifying personal transformation.

If the mission is encapsulated in the life of discipleship and if it is in hearing the call of God and witnessing through the leadership of the Spirit to the new that comes in Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal. 6.15) in obedience to the calling, the story of Philip clarifies this pattern.

The eunuch's conversion was more than an event in the geographical spread of Christianity. John Polhill wrote in the New American Commentary, "It is much more the story

of the gospel becoming a truly universal gospel, breaking the racial, national, and religious barriers in which it was born and carrying out a genuinely worldwide witness. It is a triumphant story of the inclusive gospel."

While technically marking the beginning of the second stage in breaking barriers in the advance of the gospel, the stories of Acts 8 related to the mission of Philip in Samaria and his witness to the eunuch could be considered as a genuine fulfillment of Christ's commissioning in its fullness.

The phrase "the ends of the earth" used in Hebrew scriptures and in Greco-Roman literature for denoting the extreme limits of civilization was applied equally to Rome (by Hebrews) and to Ethiopia (by the Greeks and the Romans). While there are many completed missions in Acts, the ends of the earth are never reached in Acts; Christ's commission is yet to be fulfilled.

Polhill reminds us that "the mission goal is never completed... each ending is the starting point for a new beginning ... There must always be new beginnings. The "ends of the earth are still out there to receive the witness to Christ."

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Taking Risks

Acts 9:10-19

Theme: Emotional, cultural, social and sometimes even physical risks accompany missions work.

Introduction

“You will find a great adventure—or a great adventure will find you!”

The first of J.R.R. Tolkien’s wonder-filled trilogy and then the movie based on it introduced millions to this promise.

In Tolkien’s story, Frodo is to bear a ring of enormous power whose effects tend to bend towards evil those near it. It sways individuals toward their own lusts and pursuits and to the perversion of their abilities and powers. The ring is to be carried to the great place of fire from whence it was forged, and destroyed. Various characters are drawn into the story, each of whom has his own struggles because of the evil so near, within and without. Coming together to share in the adventure, they commence the journey, immersed in the great task.

Jesus too calls people to great adventures of faith and to a grand mission in his name. In serving others and fulfilling our callings in missions, we find ourselves walking with other companions along the Christian way. We discover that we really do need each other, and indeed the Presence of God, as we journey. Yet it is not always easy to be wel-

coming of those whom God brings to join us. Therein we often find risks.

According to recent United Nation reports, the Toronto area of the province of Ontario in Canada has become the most ethnically- and culturally-diverse place in the world. As a result, the Christian church faces a tremendous challenge, one that calls for a new sense of adventure and for creativity, stamina and cooperation. We face both risks and rewards as we seek to obey our Lord and join in the divine plan in our cities and villages.

Several churches affiliated with Canadian Baptists now have over 40 different nations represented in their fellowship. They have risked opening doors to welcome and include new Christians from all over the world. They are learning to welcome and integrate new forms of worship, different styles of music, various cultures and different ways of doing ministry into their fellowships.

The pursuit of faith adventure entails risk, and the greater the challenge, the greater the risk. While that risk is indeed physical for believers in many parts of the world and sometimes for those God sends as missionaries, often it is not but is still quite palpable. What does risk-taking mean for 21st century missions?

The Biblical Witness

Acts: 9:10-12

New Insight, New People, New Practices

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” ¹¹The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas

look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

Not long after he was present at the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, a Jewish Pharisee named Saul pursued the adventure of his life along the road from Jerusalem to Damascus. He found to his great amazement that God had other plans for him.

Arrested by the Lord himself through a vision of great light, which then caused his sight to fail, Saul was led to a Christian disciple named Ananias (9:1-9).

But first Ananias had to be converted. He needed to receive a word from the Lord so that he could be ready to receive and minister to Saul. He was not inclined to welcome someone known to be bent on seizing for imprisonment, or worse, disciples like himself. But Saul, known to have papers for arresting such disciples, was soon to knock at Ananias' door, claiming to have seen a great vision of light, to have heard the voice of Jesus directing him to this very place to seek a word of further direction.

How might we have responded? What if a former member of the Taliban came to your neighborhood, or even knocked on your door, with a similar story of God's intervention?

We know God's mind and will when we get close to God's heart. God speaks to us and leads us to people and places by divine appointment. The circumstances of our day, including the people who cross our paths, may well be the ones with whom God has called us to minister, and with whom, perhaps, we are now to form community. As Ananias discovered, responding obediently entails risk.

Listening with sensitive awareness to God's voice and with the scriptures as our guide, we seek also to listen to the voices of other believers who may speak God's will into our lives. Each of us, perhaps in new and risky ways, may be called to say "Yes, Lord" to something or someone we have previously feared.

Often God's will is revealed to us in the most amazing and intricate detail. Perhaps the problem in responding is not that we don't know what is God's will but that we are afraid of where God may be taking us and what God might be asking us to do.

Acts: 9:13-14 **Risky Business—Is God Calling?**

¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."

Ananias' reaction to the divine directive is understandable. God asked him to deliberately seek out and help a man who had a reputation for persecuting followers of Christ.

God is not threatened by our discussing the situation or even by our outlining our hesitation. After all, too many zealous but misguided Christians have done silly and even evil things because they thought they heard God asking them to do something. We must pray for discernment to know when God's Spirit is speaking. The evil done by even well-meaning but misguided people in the name of God has often created more mess than mission in our world.

Ananias followed the tradition of the Psalmist and many others recorded in scripture with his honest dialogue. Their examples teach us to give searching, wise discernment

that we may be sure of God's instructions. Indeed, sometimes deepest faith is born in the crucible of our honest doubts and fears.

Acts 9:15-16 Instruments of God

¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

God patiently persisted with Ananias and reassured him, just as God does with us. Saul, it turns out, was a part of the divine plan, and God wanted Ananias to get in on the blessing of the divine plan as well. God wants us to "get it," too. Often we will not get all the answers we want, but if we are faithful, we may well get more of God. God encourages and sometimes even pushes.

Notice that included in God's plan for Saul's life was the call to "suffer for the sake of [God's] name" (v 16). Saul, who had witnessed Stephen's earlier martyrdom, would himself discover the privilege of suffering in Christ's cause. And so will we, as we follow in our own part of the adventure.

Acts 9:17-19 Mission Accomplished—Risk & Reward

¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and

was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.

Leaving the security of his own turf, Ananias entered the home where Saul was staying, coming close enough to lay hands on this new Christian brother. He demonstrated acceptance and gave Saul God's word of direction. He ministered in the enabling of the Spirit, for Saul's blindness was dispelled by his actions and words. Because Ananias faced his own fears, took the risk of faith and ministered in the Spirit's power to Saul, the Christian church came to know the gifted contribution of this saint whose writings inspire and direct our lives and experience today.

We may not remember lesser-known saints like Ananias who have helped in our own lives, but we may be called to be similar encouragers and enablers, overcoming the same kinds of fears, acting anyway. Thus, we will know what it means to take risks—and also to find great rewards.

21st Century Missions

Because people from over 200 nations and speaking hundreds of languages have come to live in Toronto, missions for us involves not only sending missionaries overseas but also welcoming people locally.

Canadian Baptists have begun several risk-filled, sacrificial activities, seeking to be attentive and available to God. Matthew House, a welcome center in inner-city Toronto, was created to assist refugee-claimants now at this end of the refugee highway. Many of them have experienced unspeakable atrocities. Some are the only surviving member of their family and have lost everything and everyone.

Several have been loved into the faith, baptized and welcomed into the fellowship of local churches.

Each week, working primarily among Islamic families, 40-50 Canadian Baptists tutor and teach English to Somalis in their homes. This ministry took place even in the days of anxiety immediately following September 11, 2001, among children named Saddam and Osama, who feared leaving their apartments.

An Oromo church has been established to serve the largest people group from Ethiopia, now in Toronto. They have experienced persecution and dislocation because of ethnicity or faith. One leader is, for the first time, presently translating the scriptures into the Eastern Oromo dialect. The window of opportunity for this effort is quickly closing, as blindness from glaucoma descends upon him. He began translation while he was imprisoned in Ethiopia, suffering for his Christian faith.

Those who join God in the divine mission discover both risk and reward. Some are called to leave home, family, friends and everything familiar in obedience to God's call to missions and encounter repeated physical risks, even persecution. Others encounter risks of different kinds without ever leaving home.

Like Saul, we must become aware of our own blindness. We must confront our tendencies to ignore or overlook people who are unlike us. Turbans, saris, mosques, Gurdwaras, temples and the many other elements of global culture we now find in our cities should remind us that missions is both local and global.

From Jerusalem to Damascus to Toronto to New York, the great cities of the world can become welcoming centers for

the Diasporas of the world. When we welcome people from other cultures, our life and witness will be strengthened. As we listen to and obey God's Word, great blessing awaits us and them, as we share in the great adventure of mission with Jesus.

Like pebbles in a pond, we drop the gospel into the hearts of individuals all over this shrinking world. Those who are then arrested by the love of Christ will be moved to share the good news with others in distant places on this planet as well.

Written by Laurence Barber, area minister, Toronto Area Association of Baptist Churches, The Baptist Convention of Ontario & Quebec

Witnessing to All

Acts 10:34-43

Theme: Effective witnesses look beyond appearances.

Introduction

As I rode the subway back to my hotel from the Baptist meeting, I noticed that a number of folks who had been at the same gathering stood on the train with me. One stood out. He was tall, his suit well-pressed, his hair slicked back. He was clearly a pastor, but he could just as easily have been a successful executive.

We got off at the same stop. He was several feet in front of me. At the station's exit, with his back against the fence, sat a bedraggled and dirty man. He held a tattered cardboard sign with irregular letters written in a shaky hand. "Homeless, Need Help," it read. In his lap lay his hat, turned hopefully upward, awaiting the kindness of strangers.

The pastor in the suit barely glanced at the man. He reached into his pocket, dropped something into the hat without breaking stride and quickly was on his way to the car.

As I watched it tumble through the air, I realized that it wasn't money that left the man's hand. It was a witnessing tract people at the meeting had received.

I grew angry as I walked to my car. This was drive-by evangelism at its worst. How could he not care enough to stop and explain what he had so carelessly given? Why had he not cared more about the man's physical need if he truly cared about his soul? Self-satisfied, the preacher had walked by, convinced that he fulfilled God's call to love his neighbor.

It was only as I drove out of the lot that it occurred to me. Two of us preachers hadn't broken stride by the man. The first at least had done something, while I had done nothing (although I was convinced that I knew what should have been done).

As I look back on that sad moment, I only hope there was someone else behind us who not only knew God's love but was possessed by it enough to act.

Both of these failures to be an effective witness, as diverse as they were, had the same root. Neither of us preacher-types sought to approach the man where he was, as he was, to reach him in his need. The reasons for walking by are too many to count—too busy, fear of getting sucked in, far from home, not wanting to risk personal investment. I suspect that both the tract-dropper and I had many people we were actively trying to help back in our places of ministry. How in the world could we find the energy or the compassion to take on this additional burden?

At least ten years have passed since that experience, but I still carry that homeless man with me. I wonder if the burden of a witness would have been a much lighter load than carrying him with me for the rest of my life.

The Biblical Witness

Acts 10:34-35 No Partiality

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

No real witness begins without a context of caring. Peter spoke to Cornelius only after God had prepared them both for the encounter. For Cornelius, the kind and seeking centurion, an angel revealed to him that he needed to speak to Peter. Cornelius immediately responded by sending emissaries seeking the apostle.

This, of course, is contrary to our understanding of witnessing. We assume that those who have the gospel go out to seek and save the lost. In this instance and others (e.g. the conversion of Saul), God begins the witnessing before any Christian gets involved.

As the messengers traveled, Peter received a message of his own. Three times, unclean animals were lowered before him and he was encouraged to kill and eat. Three times Peter refused, citing his good Jewish upbringing that required him to retreat from the unclean. Three times he was admonished that God’s creation should not be called impure.

While Peter pondered this, Cornelius’ messengers arrived and Peter was instructed by the Spirit to go with them. Clearly God was preparing both the giver and receiver long before the actual spoken witness.

When Peter finally arrived and began to share his faith with Cornelius, it was a quite different one than he would have shared just a few days earlier. Until his own revelation, he would have wiped his hands of Cornelius, declaring him an unclean Roman pagan and unworthy of the effort of witnessing.

But now he spoke from his new knowledge and affirmed that God shows no partiality. The Greek word used here for partiality is a combination of the verb “to take” and the word “face.” Peter literally said that God does not take people at their face. As humans, we constantly make judgments based on appearances. We use our judgment to determine who is worthy of the effort of witnessing.

After his vision, Peter realized that Cornelius was indeed worth the effort. No longer did the centurion’s nationality serve as an excuse for silence. Peter recognized that people of every nation can become true disciples.

This all may seem rather trite and empty to us in our day and age. Most of us do not have a Jewish heritage, nor do we understand the culture of the day that precluded inter-ethnic witness. And yet, we too have our own face-value judgments that impede our witness. Each Sunday morning, most churches gather with members who look alike, dress alike and share the same socio-economic group. By our ceremony and practice, subtly and not so subtly, we send the message that unless you are like us, this place is not for you.

Acts 10:36-38 The Message

³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That

message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:

Having established that God's message is to all the nations, Peter began to share with Cornelius the content of the gospel that "Jesus ... is Lord of all" (v 36). Cornelius was already aware that the Christians arose from the Jews and placed Jesus Christ as the center point of their faith. Peter then explained that the spread of the Christian message began after the baptism by John.

"You know," Peter began, which indicates that his witness came not from a cold distance, but after a relationship had been established. Too often our witness begins with the assumption of the other person's need, rather than beginning with listening. Peter did not make witnessing into a formulaic recital but tailored his witness to Cornelius.

Acts 10:39-41 We Are Witnesses

³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

From Peter, we have what appears to be a summary of the preaching of the early church. It began with Jesus' baptism. This baptism was not one intended to be a symbol of repentance but rather a coronation. The language of anointing indicates that the church believed that it was at Jesus'

baptism that he received the power and authority of God which validates the claim of Lordship.

Given power and position, Jesus used his standing not to claim personal privilege. Rather, his actions were directed toward doing good and healing. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely," the old saying goes, but Jesus used the advantage of his coronation to serve. Peter established his authority to speak about these remarkable happenings because he had seen them for himself. This is really what witnessing is about—experiencing Jesus in a personal way and sharing that experience with others.

Yet the life of Jesus, remarkable as it was, is only a portion of the Christian message. Any preaching of the life without the cross and resurrection leads to the heresy of Jesus the good man, while preaching the cross and resurrection without the life leads to the heresy of Jesus without a moral or social example.

Peter avoided these errors by following his teaching on Jesus' life with a recitation of the events of the cross. Strangely omitting any explanation as to why anyone would want to kill someone who was doing good and healing, Peter hurried to describe the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The significance of the resurrection is found not only in the demonstration of God's power, but as a confirmation of faith. Jesus being raised from the baptismal water and being raised from the tomb are both symbols of divine appointment. By eating and drinking with the disciples, he confirmed his return from the dead.

Peter shared the central teachings of the church with Cornelius. Peter was a witness to what he had witnessed: the life, death, crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

Acts 10:42-43 **He Is the One**

⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

This experience would be little more than an exciting tale without some need for response. Peter made it clear that all who have witnessed and believe in Jesus are compelled to preach the gospel to others. Having experienced the power of God, believers are asked to witness to it and tell others of its availability.

The most important part of Peter’s message is nestled into the conclusion. Believing in Jesus is the way one receives forgiveness of sins. It is here that Peter moved from his own witness to the power of God to a call for Cornelius to respond to that same power.

Following this passage, verse 45 tells us that even as Peter spoke, the Holy Spirit came upon those who were listening. It is a reminder that authentic witnessing is not merely a human event, but is a human event covered in divine power.

21st Century Missions

The message of this text is clear. Christians are called to witness to all people regardless of face value. God loves every single person and wants each of us to have the opportunity to respond to the call to believe in Jesus Christ, receive forgiveness and have eternal life.

There are two types of witness. One form of witness is passive and involves living the Christian life. As people come into contact with us, the presence of the Spirit in our lives overflows on theirs. The second type, which is active, involves going to someone and sharing our faith in a direct fashion. This is the example Peter displayed in this account.

It is important to note that even as Christians are enjoined to witness to all people, we are not called to be a direct witness to everyone. God’s hand was on Peter and Cornelius prior to their encounter. There were other Christians whom Cornelius could have summoned, other Gentiles to whom Peter might have gone. It was their sensitivity to the Spirit that brought them together.

As we seek to be effective witnesses, the encounter between Peter and Cornelius reminds us of several important points.

God leads the way. The text is remarkably clear that this witness is orchestrated by God. As Christians, we must ask whom in particular God is leading us toward. It is nice to have a warm feeling toward the need of humanity, but God wants us to witness to particular people, including those who may not fit our preconceived notions as worthy of or needing a witness.

Peter cared enough to go out of his way. When Peter learned of Cornelius’ questions, he stopped what he was doing. He did not send someone else or hope that someone with more time would take care of it. Effective Christian witnesses are ready to stop what they are doing to share the presence of Christ.

Peter cared enough to know what Cornelius already knew. The canned evangelistic efforts pushed by some

denominations seek to convert all people rather than reach out sensitively to each person. This story reminds us that we need to care enough to know someone before we can hope to effectively share our faith with them.

Peter's witness included both his belief and a call to faith. Witnessing is an exercise in sharing both the story of Jesus and calling for a response. When either the person of Jesus or the need for a response is expunged, the witness ceases to be true to the biblical mandate.

I have often reflected on the homeless man who left the station that day with a little money and a pre-printed tract. I can only conclude that he sticks in my memory because God had prepared him for an encounter and I walked quickly past.

What person is God placing inconveniently in your way to hear the gospel?

Written by Bob Fox, senior pastor, Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Ky.

Moving Beyond the Old Ways

Acts 11:1-18

Theme: The presence of God's Spirit in the lives of believers introduces new and creative ways to express the Christian faith in worship, ministry and witness.

Introduction

As I was growing up, Baptist church activities formed the framework of my family's life.

Sundays were devoted almost exclusively either to getting ready for or attending church: Sunday school and worship in the morning, discipleship classes and worship in the evening. We could usually squeeze in a quick trip to visit grandparents in the afternoon, but we always headed back in time for church that night. Sundays were exhausting.

Wednesdays meant a mad dash for parents from work to home to church so that children could participate in choirs and missions organizations while adults attended Bible study and prayer meeting.

Baptists "did" church this way for years. It was one of the things that distinguished them as Baptist.

Many Baptist churches still effectively function by this pattern. Some continue to follow it not because it works but because they think it is the only right way. For a number of

legitimate reasons, others have discontinued Sunday night activities and services, except perhaps for youth gatherings and committee meetings.

I embraced this change with much relief and absolutely no regrets. Job-related travel, time, distance and other factors make getting back to church on Sunday evenings difficult and sometimes impossible for many people.

My brother jokingly accused me of selecting my church specifically because it didn't have Sunday night services. Other people have been honestly suspicious when I explained my church's weekly schedule. "And this is a *Baptist* church?" they asked.

The less-than-subtle implication was that we simply were not doing church right. Further, perhaps I should examine myself to make sure I was spiritually fit. I was, after all, not going to church on Sunday nights.

What solved a dilemma for some created a problem for others. Sometimes good and noble things become patterns and soon develop into traditions many vow are biblically mandated.

Deviating from established church traditions not only can create tension; it can also represent to some people less than faithful Christian practice.

How do we know when to let go of something important that no longer seems to be relevant? What will happen if we do? What will happen if we don't? How do we move beyond old ways?

The early church struggled with and resolved these issues, and so must we, if we are to be effectively involved in doing missions in the 21st century.

The Biblical Witness

It comes as no surprise to find the apostle Peter in the middle of a pressing church matter of the magnitude Acts 11 records. He had become a strong leader among the apostles, according to accounts in the Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters.

His name appears first in each listing of the apostles (Matt 10:2; Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13), another likely indication of his status within that group. Along with James and John, he was one of Jesus' inner circle, (Mk 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33), so he had had significant experiences and conversations with Jesus only a few others had had.

Mark's Gospel portrays Peter as a spokesman for the other apostles. Although some of Mark's accounts of Peter are less than flattering, the first half of Acts casts him as a leading character on the stage of the early church and includes no hint of criticism. He clearly could be brash and impulsive. He sometimes spoke before he carefully thought. But his role in the early church in Jerusalem was undeniably strong.

Peter was no doubt still working out his own personal faith while at the same time helping others come to faith in the resurrected Christ. His learning did not stop with Jesus' ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit; at least on some levels, that is when it really began. He would continue putting together the pieces of his life of faith based on all he had seen and heard both in Jesus' company and later in the company of the Holy Spirit.

The conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, was a significant piece in this puzzle for Peter. His decisive conclusions following this experience marked a major shift in thinking

not only for him but also for the early church. It helped them move beyond the old ways.

Acts 11:1-3 **Old Rules**

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

Because they were aware that Gentiles had “accepted the word of God” (v 1), the apostles and other believers in Jerusalem were also likely aware that Peter had “ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (10:48). But it was not the baptism of Gentiles that they initially criticized and wanted Peter to explain. Instead, they were concerned about the fact that he shared a meal with men who had not been circumcised.

They were also likely concerned that by associating with Peter, who had eaten with unclean people, they too would become unclean.

Before we trivialize or casually dismiss their concerns, we need to remember that even Peter had at first struggled with the idea of eating non-kosher foods (10:13-16), and later when he associated with Cornelius, he acknowledged that doing so was unlawful for him (10:28).

The concern of these other believers for keeping the laws regarding purity was really a concern for unity within the community. They had become known in Jerusalem for holding everything in common (4:32), and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, this extended beyond the physical realm.

Would sharing the Holy Spirit with unclean Gentiles make them unclean as well?

Human nature doesn’t disappear within the walls of the church. Even people who have experienced forgiveness and grace can sometimes fail to extend these gifts to others whose faith journey differs from theirs.

Acts 11:4-10 **New Possibilities**

⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven.

This marks the second time in as many chapters that Peter recounts the story of his vision and Cornelius’s conversion (see also Acts 10). It was truly a turning point for him personally and for the early church.

Peter seemed not to be offended that he was being questioned by others in the church. Neither did he play the trump card that he was the leader of the apostles and therefore above question or suspicion. He was prepared to give them the explanation they sought. Peter understood their concern; after all, he had been concerned about the legali-

ties of associating with Cornelius and other Gentiles, too. Good leaders learn to expect questions and criticism and try to offer solid, rational answers.

For their part, those who questioned him merely pointed out something that looked suspicious to them and asked him about it. Raising questions and seeking explanations is a mark of healthy leader/follower relationships.

How Peter responded was as important as what he said. He explained “step by step” (v 4) what had happened. That he had had a vision was probably not completely surprising; visions had been common among Israel’s prophets as well as among the early Christians, according to accounts in Acts and Revelation. Because visions carried with them the revelation of a message from God, they were taken seriously.

Peter identified for his fellow believers where he was (v 5), his condition (v 5), what he saw (v 6) and what he heard (v 7). He carefully noted that the large sheet he saw came “down from heaven” (v 5) thus connecting it to God, and that the voice he heard was connected to what he saw on the sheet.

He recognized the speaker as “Lord,” (v 8) and explained how he had objected to the instructions to kill and eat for food those animals he had believed were unclean. He reminded the Lord and then his listeners that day that “nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth” (v 8).

The proclamation that “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (v 9) opened up all sorts of new possibilities Peter and the others had never considered. He realized that until he stopped classifying people as he

always had—clean versus unclean, repentant Jews versus uncircumcised Gentiles—he could not be instrumental in continuing the divine plan, which included Gentiles.

Peter explained that this happened three times; then “everything was pulled up again to heaven” (v 10).

Acts 11:11-17 **New Vision**

¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’

Peter’s step-by-step explanation continued. When three Gentile men came from Caesarea, God’s Spirit told Peter to go with them. Further, the Spirit instructed him “not to make a distinction between them and us” (v 12). Wisely, Peter took six other men along with him, evidently men who had also been circumcised (see 10:45), so that they, as well as he, could bear witness to what happened. He didn’t act without careful consideration, but he did act when God’s Spirit prompted him to act.

Peter learned that he wasn't the only one who had had a vision. An angel had instructed Cornelius to "send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter" (v 13). Further, the angel assured Cornelius that this Peter would "give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved" (v 14).

Though Peter's account of Cornelius's vision differs at this point from Cornelius's account (see 10:31-32; Cornelius's account includes the angel's promise of salvation), the end result is the same. As Peter spoke to Cornelius and the others gathered at his house, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning" (v 15).

Finally, Peter drew his explanation to a conclusion with the evidence that put the matter to rest for him. Recalling Jesus' words, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (v 16), he realized that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, the gift of Christ and the fulfillment of Christ's promise. This confirmed for Peter that God's plan for salvation included Gentiles.

How then, Peter asked, could he stand in the way of the divine plan? He could not refuse to baptize them with water when clearly God had already baptized them with the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit he and the Jewish believers had received. Peter understood that he did not dictate the divine plan.

Acts 11:18 **New Life**

¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Peter's carefully worded and completely thorough explanation left those who had questioned him in stunned silence. Then, "they praised God," and came to the same conclusion as Peter. Their community of faith must be opened to Gentiles because of their repentance. The Gentiles had no requirements for salvation other than repentance. The matter was settled.

Not only did they accept what had happened, they praised God for it. God had shown mercy and grace to the Gentiles, just as God had shown to them.

21st Century Missions

Incorporating long-held religious traditions into their new community of faith seemed logical and right to Jewish Christians in the early church. But what seemed natural to them was problematic for Gentile Christians. Determining how to "be" and "do" church provided all of these believers with opportunities for significant dialogue and growth.

Following Peter's logical explanation and example, the Jewish Christians were open to new possibilities and chose not to force their religious patterns on Gentile believers.

Effective missions efforts recognize that many of the Western patterns for "doing" church cannot easily translate into other cultures and settings. In fact, the Church is enriched by different worship and witness expressions from various faith communities around the world.

When CBF global missions field personnel Rick and Ellen Burnette worshipped with the First Church in the small town of Fang, Thailand, many things were familiar to them. The church's formal, liturgical worship style stemmed from the influence of American Presbyterians, who had had a major

missions focus among the Northern Thais beginning in the mid-19th century. With worship based on American Presbyterian liturgy, the church chimes the hour at the beginning of the service and sings the Gloria Patri, the Doxology and many hymns (all in Thai, of course) familiar to Western Christians.

But not everything was familiar. For example, people—and dogs—tend to wander in and out during worship services. Dog fights even occasionally erupt under the pews. On the birthdays of the King and Queen of Thailand, the congregation stands and sings songs to honor them.

Now living in the city of Chiang Mai, the Burnettes experience very informal worship with people from various tribes, including Palaungs, Lahus and Karens. Instead of singing mostly traditional hymns, these believers enjoy singing choruses.

While the Burnettes note that the indigenous Thai churches are very much a legacy of Western Christian missions, the ethnicities and cultures of their members also influence their approaches to worship and ministry.

Whether it is first-century Jerusalem or 21st century America or Thailand, God has given all believers the same gift, one that can find expression in unlimited, creative and new ways.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor, Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Feeding the Hungry

Acts 11:27-30

Theme: Addressing the chronic hunger and starvation of millions of people around the world is critical to global missions efforts.

Introduction

I will never forget that day. I knew it as I looked into their eyes.

A small group of mothers with their young children gathered outside a wrecked Baptist medical clinic. For years, mothers had given birth there and then returned for postnatal care. Now, there were no staff and no medicines. The mothers could produce no more milk, so they desperately tried to squeeze some juice from fruit plucked from a tree to feed their children. Genocide in Rwanda had left them and countless others to fare for themselves.

As I looked into the eyes of these children, I knew that few would even live through the day.

Unfortunately, it is a script I have seen replayed around the world.

In Cuba, I have seen mothers mix sawdust with flour so that the size of their children's bread rolls would be bigger.

In North Korea, I've watched young children eat cookies we delivered to them in their orphanage.

In post communist countries I have seen mothers standing in line in the hope that there would be some food, maybe one loaf of fresh bread, at the end of the line.

In India, I've seen entire communities wonder where their food would come from after a cyclone destroyed their crops.

In Kosovo, I've helped distribute much-needed food parcels to families returning from Albania. Many of them wanted to harvest crops from their fields, but the fear of land mines prohibited where they could go.

What causes chronic hunger and starvation to be realities for millions of people around the world? According to *Bread for the World* and *Seeds*:

Violence, militarism and warfare almost inevitably lead to hunger. Ironically, hunger and poverty also breed violence.

Powerlessness is another contributing factor. Hunger is fundamentally a political question. People are hungry because their voices are not heard in the halls of power.

Hungry people are almost always poor. Very poor people are chronically hungry.

Environmental overload also contributes to global hunger. Over-consumption by affluent people and rapid population growth cause a great strain on the environment and contribute to hunger and poverty, especially in poor countries.

Discrimination, racism and ethnocentrism underlie many situations of unequal access to resources and often lead to violent conflict and hunger. Women, children and elderly people are often denied access to decisions and opportu-

nities that affect their well-being and development, fostering the cycle of hunger.

Hunger in a world of plenty is an indictment of the moral condition of modern society. Humanitarian and Christian values need to be expressed not only in the family but in the national and international community as well. Affluent people need to join with lower-income people in voting for those values that lead to the elimination of hunger.

The Biblical Witness

Antioch was an important city in the Roman Empire, with only Rome and Alexandria achieving greater prominence. Paul was in Tarsus, a place of safety for someone who was persecuted, and as a Roman citizen, Paul of course would be safe in his own city.

Barnabas was one of the leaders of the church in Antioch, and who better to work with him and advise him than Paul, his senior friend and colleague? So, Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch. Both men were Greek speakers.

For a whole year both Paul and Barnabas ministered in Antioch and taught many people. It was in this city that the disciples were first called Christian, though who gave them this title and when is open to discussion.

Acts 11:27 Visitors from the Mother Church

²⁷At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

We often think of prophets as elderly, Old Testament characters, though the term used here and in other New Testament references simply means teacher or preacher. Some Bible students place prophets as inferior to apostles, yet superior to evangelists and pastors. The debate about their role continues today in some circles.

These visitors seem to have been well respected and well received. We know little about Agabus, though he is mentioned again in Acts 21:10. We know even less about his fellow travelers, who are not even named.

The mother church in Jerusalem had a problem, and one of its fast-growing daughter churches was asked to come to the rescue. So, these prophets went from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Similarly, inner-city “mother” churches today often struggle through difficult circumstances of poverty, unemployment and poor housing and education, while the daughter churches in the suburbs thrive.

The situation is repeated on a broader scale around the world where war, strife, crop degradation and massive debt prevent countries from feeding their own people. Often they send emissaries to the Antiochs of this world to ask for assistance, but all too often they return empty handed, having been told that, “charity begins at home.”

Acts 11:28 **The Crisis**

²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.

History records four famines during the reign of Claudius, and it is not clear to which one Agabus referred here. Was he sharing the horrors of a recent tragedy? Was he newscasting what was actually happening at the time, or was he foretelling a future drought and famine?

In many parts of the world, hunger and famine are all too common and recurring events. Many people live with their consequences year after year. People are not just hungry when their tragic faces appear on television, but are in fact hungry “24/7,” all year long.

As I write this lesson, images of starving children in the Darfur region of Sudan are imprinted on my mind—children who have never had to worry about calories, carbohydrates, anorexia or teenage obesity. War and pillage have left these children with little or no food, and parents long ago lost any ability they might have had of looking after them.

Where are our prophets today to warn us of our current hunger situations around the world? Who are these prophets? Are they communicating with us? Are we listening?

What practical steps can you take, individually and with your Bible study group, to better inform yourselves about hunger issues?

Acts 11:29 **The Response**

²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;

It is the natural instinct of human beings to help those who are in distress, no matter where they are or how serious the need. Recent floods in New Jersey and fires in California

brought an immediate response from the general public and from authorities.

But when Christians give, is it just a natural humanitarian response, or something more? I would hope that Christians give as a part of their Christian discipleship, being the hands of Jesus reaching out to care for those in need in His name.

Some would argue that it is a politically astute move to feed our neighbors and even our enemies, as that could lead to our own increased security. It seems that since 9/11, every action we take must be measured alongside our own national and individual security.

These disciples “determined” to give, apparently decisively, concluding what they would do together, with each person doing his or her part, “according to their ability.” The response was quick and involved everyone.

How do we respond to the needs of the hungry? Is it a matter of loose change in a bottle, though that can add up? Is it an annual check in the hunger envelope, though that can help? Or do we take seriously the call to give according to our ability?

And is it just the keen and concerned who give? Note that in the scripture that “each would send relief,” yes, according to their own ability.

Acts 11:30 **The Plan**

³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

This short story, just four verses long, is often referred to as the first Christian relief fund. The organizational system was simple: each believer gave; the elders managed the gifts; and Barnabas and Saul delivered the gifts.

I wonder why they decided to send the gifts by Paul and Barnabas? Was it to show the importance of what was happening, by sending such respected leaders as Paul and Barnabas?

What importance do we give to hunger ministries, and indeed other social ministries? Are they an important part of the church’s overall mission? How holistic is the gospel we present?

One of the many accusations some Southern Baptists made recently against the Baptist World Alliance was that social ministries were becoming too much of a priority and a deterrent from evangelistic ministries. Really?

How does a local church give equal priority and resource to its social ministries as part of sharing the holistic gospel of Jesus Christ?

I have often wondered why these believers did not send back the offering with Agabus. Was he not to be trusted? Did the donors want to take the offering themselves? Were they foretelling the 21st century paradigm of the donor delivering the gift so as to be involved in hands-on ministry?

21st Century Missions

Though this “severe famine all over the world” happened nearly 2000 years ago, people throughout the world are still hungry and malnourished today. The human needs of so many in our world continue to multiply, and as Christian

disciples we are called to do our part in meeting these needs.

Baptist World Aid (BWAid) of the Baptist World Alliance has sought to serve those in need in our world for almost 85 years. From the very beginning, BWAid determined to help irrespective of the color, race or creed of those in need. How sad that in some places today there is the belief that food can only be distributed after the recipients have “heard the gospel.” Why not allow Christ to speak through the actions and not compartmentalize in the spoken word? Let our actions speak louder than our words!

How would you react if you had to listen to a sermon before you could pick up your supplies from your local grocery store?

BWAid uses three words to describe its ministry. It *entrusts* the indigenous Baptist leadership in an area of need to decide priorities. It then *empowers* these leaders to determine programs and projects; and finally *enables* them with the resources to carry out the program.

In this ministry they may need the assistance of missionaries and others, but they may well be able to manage the program themselves.

They may well ask for short-term volunteer teams to travel from here to there to assist in projects such as building programs, medical help and other ministries; but then again, they may not. We need to respect the autonomy of the indigenous leaders, as we hope that they would respect ours.

The ministries of Baptist World Aid continue to demand a response from Christians around the world in general and

Baptists in particular. For more information about a variety of needs and mission opportunities around the world, visit BWAid’s Web site at www.bwanet.org/bwaid. You may also contact Baptist World Aid at Baptist World Alliance, 405 North Washington Street, Falls Church, VA 22046, USA; or email at BWAid@bwanet.org.

Written by Paul Montacute, director of BWAid, Baptist World Alliance, Falls Church, Va.

Commissioning Missionaries

Acts 13:1-5

Theme: Commissioning individuals for specific ministries reminds all believers of the sacredness of each person's call from God and challenges us to obey God's call to serve.

Introduction

Right in front of over 3,000 people in the Greensboro (N.C.) Coliseum, my middle son, Benjamin, had a meltdown. Despite our concerns that children under the age of six might not work out so well in a missionary commissioning service, others insisted that our toddlers take part. They'll be so cute, they said.

But Benjamin, then a one-year old, didn't want to be cute. It was 8:30 p.m. He had missed his afternoon nap. And he was being thrust into the spotlight of the 1994 Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly.

As we missionary appointees stood on the coliseum stage, Benjamin began squirming and making noises of protest. "Oh, Lord," I prayed, "Please grant that my young son somehow becomes temporarily docile and lethargic."

My prayers went unanswered as Benjamin began to squeal louder. Suddenly it was my turn to deliver a convicting and inspiring personal missions vignette that I had been practicing all week. Just as I stepped up to the microphone

Benjamin's wrath was unleashed for all to behold. He went momentarily rigid before simultaneously grabbing both the mike and my glasses with a squall of fury.

I was later told that the spectacle, simultaneously broadcast on two large screens on either side of the stage, was not pleasant to look upon. Someone mercifully extracted the erupting Benjamin from my grip. With glasses askew, I turned to the mike and squeaked out a few feeble words to the effect of, "Thailand...family...poor hill tribe people," and then limped off to the edge of the stage.

At the time, the whole embarrassing episode left me wondering why we must subject ourselves (and our children) to commissioning services. For less personal reasons, others probably wonder the same thing.

Are commissioning services merely customary, an ingrained part of our Baptist liturgy that we feel obligated to do every so often? And why, generally, is it only missionaries who are commissioned? Have we become too narrowly focused on the role of missionaries as opposed to the rest of the body of Christ?

Unlike some Baptist institutions and traditions of the past, such as Training Union and brush arbor meetings, commissioning services do not appear to be on the wane. So if the commissioning of people in God's service is still seen as relevant, are we confident that we're applying the rite as fully as possible?

The Biblical Witness

The setting recorded at the beginning of Acts 13 is the church at Antioch. The origin of this congregation was tied closely to the turmoil that followed the stoning of Stephen

(7:54-60). Immediately after Stephen's death the believers in Jerusalem experienced great persecution from the Jews. This unrest resulted in almost all of the believers in Jerusalem being scattered across Judea and Samaria (8:1).

In the following days, some of these refugees ended up in Antioch where they shared the good news about Jesus Christ with the Greeks. The result was a large number of persons in Antioch who "became believers and turned to the Lord" (11:21).

News of the conversions at Antioch reached the remaining believers in Jerusalem. There, the church responded by sending one of their own, Barnabas, to check on the situation (11:22).

Ministering among the earliest converts in Antioch, Barnabas encouraged even more people to come to faith. Possibly overwhelmed with the developments, he invited Saul, the former persecutor of believers, to assist with the new congregation. Together, in over a year's time, they nurtured the church at Antioch. Incidentally, it was there that the disciples of Christ were first called Christians (11:25-26).

The church at Antioch had attained maturity in a short period of time. Not only was numeric growth taking place, but the congregation demonstrated the importance of putting faith into action when they sent famine relief to the poor in Jerusalem (11:27-30).

Acts 13:1-3 **Set Apart, Sent Out**

¹Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the

ruler, and Saul. ²While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Gifted leaders helped guide the Antioch church. Verse one refers to a meeting of five prophets and teachers, including Barnabas and Paul.

One hallmark of this group was its diversity. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (4:36). Saul of Tarsus (later called Paul) had been a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). According to the NIV Study Bible, Simeon's name is Jewish. However, some believe that he may have differed in race from the others in the church. Lucius, the holder of a Latin name, was from Cyrene, the capital of ancient Cyrenaica. And notably, Manaen had been raised with Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea under the Romans (v 1).

As the five prophets and teachers worshipped and fasted, the Holy Spirit commanded, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (v 2). Unlike spiritual callings that many of us may have first perceived on a personal level, this announcement appears to have been received collectively.

Why were only Barnabas and Saul chosen? Possibly for this new task, they had the right blend of gifts and talents that would be required. Still, despite the command for the two to leave, there was obviously more work to be done in Antioch, work for which God had been preparing numerous individuals all along. For instance, hardly a year had passed since Barnabas, and later Saul, had arrived to serve the church. But now they were being called to yet another task. Meanwhile, others such as Lucius who had

been led to Antioch from Cyrene would be staying, at least for the time being.

Contrary to common belief, callings from God are not necessarily static. At any given time, individuals or families may be called to serve in a different capacity, whether a new role in the same church or another job in a distant city.

We don't know the exact amount of time that elapsed from the call of Barnabas and Saul to their actual commissioning. All that is recorded is that after the announcement, the group fasted and prayed (v 3), all of which may have taken place over a number of hours or possibly days.

After the believers had prayed and fasted, Saul and Barnabas were commissioned to serve, during which time the others "laid their hands on them" (v 3). In Old Testament times, the laying on of hands accompanied the consecration of offerings as well as the ordination of persons for service. In the New Testament, this custom was employed during other events, such as for healing or imparting spiritual gifts. However, the laying on of hands continued to be used for ordination, as when the seven were chosen to serve the Church at Jerusalem (6:6).

The commissioning service at Antioch was simple. The group of five appears to have carried out the act with complete autonomy. No time was wasted consulting back and forth between Jerusalem and Antioch. The five prophets and teachers knew that they were receiving an order from the Most High and reacted with promptness.

Acts 13:4-5 **Speaking the Word**

⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵When

they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them.

Sometime after the commissioning service, "sent out by the Holy Spirit," Paul and Barnabas left Antioch for Seleucia, a seaport not far to the west of the city. From there they sailed to the island of Cyprus (v 4).

Cyprus was not an unfamiliar destination to this pair. The island happened to be the home of Barnabas (4:36). They had other Cyprus connections as well. During the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, the believers were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Antioch and Cyprus. In each place, they preached to resident Jews (11:19). And in turn, some of the Cypriot believers eventually made their way to Antioch where they evangelized the Greeks with great effect (11:20-21). Now with Saul and Barnabas' arrival in Cyprus, the gospel had come full circle.

They landed at the port of Salamis on the eastern shore of the island. Following a familiar pattern being carried out by other apostles and believers, the missionaries "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (v 5). As Jews, it must have seemed logical to Saul and Barnabas that they seek out other Jews with whom to share the gospel (Rom 1:16). Therefore, synagogues served as a natural venue for making contact as well as for proclamation.

At this point in their journey, the two missionaries were accompanied by Barnabas' cousin, John (John Mark), who at the time served as their assistant (v 5).

21st Century Missions

Although Antioch may be considered the scene of the first New Testament commissioning of missionaries, it was not the location of the first recorded missionary call. From Abraham to the prophets and on through to the apostles, the scriptures offer numerous examples of individuals who were set apart and sent out in service of God.

Yet, since Antioch, the commissioning service has remained an important part of church life. This function reminds us of the sacredness of each and every calling. And ultimately, it helps us to focus upon the One from whom each and every call is issued.

The problem is that commissioning services may have somehow contributed to an unfortunate dichotomy within the church. Basically, we have the few who are sent off somewhere else to serve the Lord, and then there are the rest of us who stay and live ordinary lives.

The Baptist tendency to pedestalize missionaries has helped to perpetuate the idea of exclusive service. Recently, a friend stated that it's time for missionaries to be demystified. He's right. The distinction between vocational missionaries and other Christians has to be blurred. Otherwise, many in the church may fail to see the significance of their own calls.

The fact is that every single follower of Christ has been called to serve. Obedience to God's call makes us all missionaries, although vocations and locations of service vary.

Some missionaries are sent to be God's witnesses (and not particularly the tract-sharing type) to their hurting neighbors across the street. Others have been set apart to hold babies and encourage the youth. There are those who've

been sent to lend a hand in a Habitat for Humanity project across town. And how many have been called to reflect Christ's love in the classroom or workplace?

I recently met a biologist who knows he's been called to care for God's creation by monitoring the status of mussels in the Tennessee River. These creatures are akin to mine shaft canaries in an ecosystem that's being negatively impacted by agricultural runoff. Isn't creation care a missionary calling?

The old missionary dichotomy was never adequate. Perhaps the time has come to lay hands upon those who heed the call to care for their aged parents, as well as those who reach out to spiritual seekers in their own neighborhoods, not to mention those who travel to serve on the other side of the globe.

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Listening to Reports

Acts 14:24-28

Theme: Listening to reports of those involved in missions helps increase missions involvement and support and is vital in expanding God's kingdom.

Introduction

“What were the people like? Were they friendly? Were they suspicious?”

“Show me your pictures!”

“Where all did you go?”

“How was the food? What about the hotels?”

“Was the temperature unbearably hot?”

Family, friends and coworkers peppered me with questions when I returned from China. After all, it was the mid-1980s, and the country had only recently opened its doors again to Westerners.

My three-week tour took me to churches, schools and universities, hospitals, a seminary and a Bible publishing house, in addition to the usual historical sites and attractions. Along the way I met scores of gracious Chinese Christians and looked into the faces of thousands more

Chinese who had not yet had the opportunity to know about Jesus.

In spite of extensive reading in preparation for the trip, I was far from prepared for all I experienced. I was eager to talk about all I had seen and heard when I returned, but the questions people most often asked were not the ones I really wanted to answer first. My stories were much richer and deeper than food, lodging and temperature.

One especially poignant moment occurred on our group's visit to the seminary in Nanjing, which happened to coincide with graduation. Because the service had already begun when we arrived at the chapel, we waited in the foyer, which still allowed us to see and hear what was going on inside.

Although there were over 20 of us crowded into a very small and stuffy space, no one seemed to mind. We knew we were part of something rare and extremely significant.

From a distance we heard the sound of a number of voices singing. It was soft at first but grew louder as the group got closer. Though the words were in Chinese, I immediately recognized the tune. I turned to look outside and saw the seminary's graduates processing toward the chapel along the dirt path.

“I have decided to follow Jesus ... no turning back, no turning back.”

It was late June. The temperature was hot and the climate was sticky and sultry, yet chills ran down my arms. The faces of the graduates glowed as they walked inside and took their places. Most of them and their families had suffered terribly in the years before they could continue their education and reach this milestone.

“Though none go with me, I still will follow ...”

This was the story I wanted to tell when I returned home, the story of this holy moment, the story of the lives of these remarkable people and what God had done in and through them.

Missions work continues in part because those who go return and tell others what they have seen, heard and felt. When they do, those who listen can more readily catch a vision for what God is doing and how they can become a part of that.

Those who go have a responsibility to give reports. Those who send and support them have a responsibility to listen carefully. And all have a responsibility to determine how they fit into God’s ongoing missions plan.

The Biblical Witness

Following their commissioning by the church in Antioch, having been “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (13:4), Saul and Barnabas began what would become a round trip. Almost immediately, they experienced success as well as opposition in Paphos. A magician, a “Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus” (13:6) who was also known as Elymas, strongly challenged them and their work.

When the proconsul wanted to hear “the word of God” (v 7) from Saul and Barnabas, Elymas tried to dissuade him. Saul, “filled with the Holy Spirit,” (v 9) rebuked him, causing him to experience temporary blindness. “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord” (v 12). Interestingly, following this encounter, scripture consistently refers to Saul as Paul.

From Paphos they traveled to Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. “After they had proclaimed the good news to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch” (14:21). Retracing their earlier steps, Paul and Barnabas “strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith” (v 22). They also appointed elders in each of the churches they had earlier established and “entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe” (v 23).

That Paul and Barnabas concentrated their efforts in cities made sense on a couple of fronts. A large number of people from a diversity of cultures and backgrounds lived in cities, so they could get their message out to a wider audience more quickly. And because they expressed interest in all kinds of people, they communicated the messages that God’s salvation is for all people and the church exists not in isolation but in relationship to the world around it.

A lot had happened on their trip. Both Jews and Gentiles had heard about and responded to the gospel message. Paul and Barnabas felt the need to give a report to those who had sent them out and give and receive encouragement by again being in their presence.

Acts 14:24-26 After a Long Journey

²⁴Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed.

Although they were on the return leg of their journey, the two men nonetheless continued to preach and teach in the places they had earlier been. Not everyone had been open to their message the first time, but they were not discouraged. They saw the second trip through these cities as another opportunity for more people to hear and respond to God's message. We have no indication of the response they received on this occasion, but their example of persistent and faithful witness is important. Even if they saw few or no results, they continued to lay foundations upon which others could later build.

Their work now completed (v 26), they returned to the church and the people who had sent them out.

Acts 14:27-28 **All God Has Done**

27 When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. 28 And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

Imagine the excitement of the Antioch congregation when word spread that Paul and Barnabas were back in town. When they first sent them out, they didn't know exactly where they were going, how long they would be gone or what results they would experience. There was always the possibility that they would never see them again. The return of these two leaders in the faith no doubt relieved anxiety and prompted all sorts of questions: Where have you been? What were the people like? Where did you stay?

Paul and Barnabas "called the church together" so that they could let them know what "God had done with them" (v 27). Scripture does not elaborate on how they did this. It's possible that they had a number of meetings with small

groups, though it's just as likely that everyone who could assemble in one place at one time did so. Even without the aid of the high-tech audiovisual equipment to which we are so accustomed, their reports were met with gratitude and enthusiasm.

Notice that the two men reported what "God had done with them," not what they had done as a result of their own efforts. Missions is God's work done God's way through God's power. Paul, Barnabas and we are all instruments God uses. Missions is God's story, not ours.

They also reported how God "had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles" (v 27), an important reminder that salvation was God's gift to everyone. Perhaps for the first time, the congregation at Antioch began to understand more fully that the family of God was big enough for everyone, their God was capable of anything and they had a responsibility for communicating this message.

Paul and Barnabas were apparently in no hurry to leave, and the congregation was in no hurry for them to go, for they "stayed there with the disciples for some time" (v 28). They were no doubt physically, emotionally and mentally tired. The time they spent with the Antioch Christians helped revitalize them and build them up for what God wanted them to do next. It also gave them additional opportunities to teach, strengthen and inspire the believers there with regard to their local and global responsibilities.

21st Century Missions

"It's the most wonderful thing I've ever participated in," my coworker said. "You see immediate results. You know you are doing something to make life better for someone else. And it's long-lasting."

She was talking about her participation with Habitat for Humanity, and she was responsible for leading the organization we worked for to sponsor a series of women-only builds. She wanted to start by involving our employees in blitz-building a house and then expanding the concept with other groups of women.

Not exactly the poster child for a home-building skill of any kind, I had a hard time seeing where I fit into the picture. But the more she talked, the more interested I became. That's how I ended up on the roof of Thelma's house-in-progress, nailing shingles and occasionally hitting one of my fingers with the business end of the hammer. When it became apparent that my skills could be better used elsewhere, I learned to cut and nail vinyl siding in place. Feet firmly planted on the ground, I had at last found my niche in the world of Habitat for Humanity.

A single parent of two young children, Thelma was also the sole caregiver for her severely mentally disabled adult brother. She held a steady job and provided for her family as best she could, but until she was approved for a Habitat house, she could see no way out of the crime-filled neighborhood where they lived. She and her sister dreamed of one day opening their own business, a childcare facility for single mothers like themselves.

Many of us who had worked on Thelma's house were present the day it was dedicated and she received the keys. Many more listened that day to the story of how it all had happened. They heard from Habitat representatives, from some who had helped with construction and from Thelma herself, her children and brother beaming at her side. Because they listened to these reports, some of them decided to become involved in building a Habitat house down the street. Would they have eventually done so any-

way? Perhaps. But listening to firsthand stories motivated them to more immediate involvement.

Doing missions effectively in the 21st century means providing adequate opportunities for those who go to tell others what God has done through them. Both awareness and involvement increase as a result and God continues to grow the kingdom, story by story.

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Compromising as Courage

Acts 15:1-21

Theme: Because Christianity involves an inward conversion of the heart rather than an outward physical symbol, we work toward the common good with those whose views and practices differ from ours.

Introduction

I've never understood tattoos. Once they were the exclusive domain of the rebellious spirits of society, but they've now reached mainstream status in our culture. For some, they are an expression of individualism, a way to be different from anyone else. For others, they become a symbol of unity as fraternity members or groups uniformly adhere their logos or Greek letters to their bodies.

In addition to some of the dangers in getting a tattoo, the part I haven't understood is why humans—we who change our minds in the blink of an eye—decide to put something so indelible, so permanent, on our skin.

I'm sure those who go under the needle and ink feel the need to express themselves in an outward way, a kind of free speech that lets the world know an opinion or feeling. Personally, if I have that much of a need to express myself, I'll buy a bumper sticker. I can always change that when I change my mind.

In a story last year on CNN.com, the news agency reported a recent trend in tattoos: removal. More and more, people who were totally committed to having a message or image irreversibly inked on their bodies are deciding to take them off surgically. According to CNN, one tattoo artist “echoes the advice of doctors: Don't get a tattoo of your sweet-heart's name. ‘Unless it's Mom,’ he said, ‘because your mom won't go away.’”

In much the same way, a group of early Christians felt the need to continue the Jewish tradition of outwardly showing their devotion to God through the act of circumcision, an act that permanently changes the male body. Stronger than a feeling, this group felt the ritual was necessary to complete one's salvation through Christ. Their belief led to a discussion among believers in Antioch about the nature—and true expression—of salvation.

The Biblical Witness

Acts 15:1-5 No Small Dissension

*¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”
²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with*

them. ⁵But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, "It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses."

After Paul and Barnabas had finished their first missionary journey, they returned to Antioch, their sponsoring church. Some people in the church were loudly proclaiming that Gentile believers must adhere to Jewish traditions (specifically, circumcision) to be truly saved. Paul and Barnabas had strong convictions that this kind of teaching was false and injurious to the expansion of Christ's Kingdom.

These first missionaries felt so strongly about this issue that they traveled to Jerusalem for a meeting with the apostles and elders. It appears that two distinct factions had emerged in the early church: the Pharisaic believers, who believed that only Jews and converts to Judaism could be saved; and Hellenistic believers, those who believed that salvation was available to anyone who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord of their lives and had a genuine conversion experience.

Acts 15:6-12 **An Unbearable Yoke**

⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the

contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." ¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The meeting (v 6) was probably chaired by James the Elder and dealt with two issues:

- Do Gentiles have to be circumcised and become Jews to receive Christianity?
- What should be the difference, if any, in social relations between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians?

Peter dealt with the first question (vv 7-11). He reminded the church elders of his experience when Cornelius became a believer (Acts 10) and concluded that Cornelius and his family were saved by faith and not by religious ritual. God, Peter reminded them, "knows the human heart" (v 8) and gave the same Spirit to them that they had also received.

Further, he said, God "made no distinction between them and us" (v 9). He compared the requirement that Gentiles be circumcised to an unbearable yoke, one that "neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear" (v 10). While male Jewish Christians had indeed been circumcised and therefore declared "clean," none was able to keep completely the myriad other laws, thereby making them "unclean," or no better off than an uncircumcised Gentile. All stood in need of the grace of God, and all were saved the same way (v 11).

Paul and Barnabas also dealt with the first question concerning Gentiles having to be circumcised by telling of their

experience in observing genuine conversion of Gentiles on their missionary journey (v 12).

The only “circumcision” that matters, they concluded, is the one God performs on individual hearts.

Acts 15:13-21 **So That All May Seek the Lord**

¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ¹⁶‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, ¹⁷so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸known from long ago.’ ¹⁹Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

James addressed the second question regarding social relations for believers, quoting a passage from Amos 9:11-12 out of the Septuagint. James sought a compromise by recommending that the Council not trouble the Gentile Christians with divisive and destructive regulations.

He also asked Gentile Christians to make concessions: abstain from eating things offered to idols; abstain from

sexual immorality; abstain from eating animals that were strangled; and abstain from eating or drinking blood.

James obviously felt because Jewish believers were waiving circumcision in the case of Gentile converts, the Gentile Christians should be asked to respect Jewish Christian convictions that made full fellowship difficult. Paul would amplify his convictions on this issue in Galatians 2.

The application of this passage is especially important for believers in a global environment where traditions, biases and practices can divide rather than unite. It is imperative that we not elevate creedal theology and specific interpretation of beliefs to a level that injures our fellow believers. The example of the Jewish believers, who put aside their feelings about circumcision for the sake of the advancement of Christ’s Kingdom, is a worthy model for us.

In a similar fashion, Christians today must put aside feelings on issues that can keep us from sharing our faith with non-believers or sharing in faith with Christian brothers and sisters. By following the biblical model, we can overcome barriers to unity and achieve compromise on issues where we differ, including culture and ethnicity; political beliefs and opinions; financial status; worship style; nationality or language; ministry direction; age and religious traditions.

As a matter of prayer, what are the differences or distinctions that cause you to lose fellowship among other believers? Is it a difference in style, perhaps something as small as a personal habit that keeps you from fellowship with another? Is it perhaps a slight difference in biblical interpretation that has caused both you and another to separate from each other’s company?

The Gentile believers showed sensitivity to the Jewish Christians who had a hard time partaking of the “agape”

meal and of meat offered in pagan worship and in condoning sexual promiscuity. If a practice or lifestyle makes fellowship difficult, then the offending Christian should be willing to change his or her actions for the benefit of the other. That is courageous compromise.

Paul interpreted the spirit of the terms of the agreement in Romans 14:1-15:6, and it's so appealing and refreshing because it is so egalitarian: Everyone is equal under the Lord.

Paul urged his readers to treat each other fairly and without judgment because: "Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God'" (Rom 14:6-11).

One of the most divisive attitudes within Christianity is the all-or-nothing mindset, with some Christians contending that if their views and practices are not universally accepted, then they will disengage from involvement. Global Baptists have seen much of this attitude in recent years. At its heart is the lack of courage to compromise for the common good.

21st Century Missions

Through the ministry I lead, I have had several opportunities to be a part of evangelistic ministries to children living in international orphanages. I continue to be amazed at God's saving grace when He uses laypeople who do not even speak the native tongue of the children to share the gospel. Even more amazing is to see the transformation in the lives of the children who accept the gospel's invitation. Those are tender moments that transcend language, nationality and human understanding.

During the summer, we hold several evangelistic youth camps for orphans in other countries where we participate in orphanage work. In one, a 13-year-old boy constantly asked for a Bible during one of the week-long camp sessions. "Can I have a Bible? Can I have a Bible?" he kept asking workers and volunteers with Buckner Baptist Benevolences.

At the end of each camp, counselors and children participate in a ceremony and have a "blessing time" where each child receives a Bible and a gift box or bag. When this boy received his Bible, he wept and promised, "I'll read it every day." Later, his group leader led him as he prayed to receive Christ.

Following his conversion, he ran around the camp screaming, "I'm a Christian, I'm a Christian." His excitement at receiving Christ was instant, and the rest of the camp knew it immediately.

An orphan in another country had searched his entire life for love and a sense of belonging and found a Heavenly Father who would never let go. When he accepted Christ, there was no ritual, no formal ceremony for this child who had been abandoned and left to grow up without a parent's

care. But he did find the warm, enveloping embrace of his Savior and an immediate change in his heart.

His language, country, culture and customs were different, and he would learn to practice his newfound faith within these differences. But the same Spirit lives in him as lives within the Buckner staff and volunteers who worked with him and led him to this faith.

Our Christian worldview should allow us to hold each other in such high esteem that we respect others' traditions. Why? Paul answered this question when he penned his prayer for the Roman Christians: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom15:5-6).

May it also be so with modern-day believers.

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