

THE GOSPEL SPREADS

Scripture Reading: Acts 11:21-26, RSV

I attended my first General Conference session 2.5 years ago in Dallas. For those who may not be familiar with Seventh-day Adventist organization, the General Conference is the highest level of church organization which supervises *the* operation of the Adventist church around the world. Every five years there is a global session in which representatives come from every continent on earth to elect officers to administer the work of the church.

What impresses anyone, but especially a first-timer like myself, is the incredible diversity of cultures and peoples in the church. It is more like the United Nations than anything else I have ever seen—a tapestry of peoples to absorb. That diversity is not limited to language, customs and color but includes even the ways in which we think about God and his salvation. While there is a common soil out of which all these believers grow, a soil rich in doctrine, we are as diverse as an azalea bush and an oak tree in many ways.

This is not to be regretted—it is definitely God's plan. We have churches which ordain women as local elders and deaconesses, like Sligo, and we have churches that refuse to do so. We have churches which sing Bach and churches that would regard such music as inappropriate. We have congregations who will study only out of the planned lessons for our Bible classes or Sabbath School and others that allow people to study other subjects as well.

There is even diversity in the ways in which people may be treated who make mistakes. Some congregations are quick to discipline people who “sin”—and others are slower to do so.

All of these differences add up to a term—the Greek word “ethos.” it refers to the “spirit”; or “disposition” of a community. Although it is a hard-to-define term, we all have a vague sense of what it means. We realize, for example, that the “ethos” of the Sligo Church is not the same as the Waynesboro Seventh-day Adventist Church in Virginia, nor even the same as nearby S.D.A. churches. We sense the difference and sometimes we find the church we feel most “at home” and support it. I suspect this difference in local churches exists everywhere in the world. I don't care whether you are going to church in Rio de Janeiro or Moscow. That diversity is everywhere; it will always exist and has always existed!

When we look at the congregation that grew up in Antioch as Acts tells us the story, we realize at once that here we have a very different local church ethos than existed in the headquarters church of Jerusalem. If we ask ourselves again the question we have repeatedly asked during this series of sermons on the book of Acts, namely, why does Luke spend so much time talking about this local church, we see clearly that the spirit of this church was the one Luke liked best!

There is even a tradition that Luke came from Antioch, that he was won to Christ by this church in the evangelistic explosion described in chapters 11 and 12. If that is true, it gives us one more reason for Luke's attention to what happened in this “home” church.

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire—only Rome and Alexandria were larger. Like other metropolises of the ancient world, it had a large Jewish community. Famous for its sexual vice

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due to the cult of Artemis and Apollo at Daphne centered five miles away, with its ritual prostitution, it was an unlikely place for the church to grow. But grow it would into the center of Gentile Christianity and the missionary movement that took the Gospel to the Roman world. It was as if the most significant things in the Adventist church started happening all of a sudden in a city like New York or Cairo—a place where few would expect the message of salvation ever to make a serious impact.

In its early stages as Acts 11:19 makes clear, some of the believers who went to Antioch to escape the persecution that killed Stephen preached only to the Jews. They met with success. Some people, never mentioned by name (probably laypeople rather than leaders), began to preach to “Greeks.” While Peter had preached to a God-fearer, that is, a Greek or Gentile who believed in Judaism, this group of believers seemed to go beyond even that I group and preached to Gentiles who had little or no affiliation with Judaism. The believers who did this were from Cyprus and Cyrene—one an island in the Mediterranean and the other a city which is now known as Libya. They took a risk! They dared! As far as we can tell, not even Peter interpreted what happened to Cornelius as setting a precedent for preaching the Gospel to Gentiles with no knowledge of Judaism whatsoever. But some of these believers felt that God was leading.

We must note that God did not only tell the world church leaders all he had in mind; he told some local members as well. However, it should also be noted that order was observed and a world church leader was sent to investigate the phenomenon, which I'll discuss more a little later.

Here we have some obscure members daring to experiment in a way that the members of the Jerusalem church would not dare. There certainly was a different ethos in this congregation! How would they do it? How did they talk about the Messiah? They were trying to communicate to people who knew nothing of Old Testament promises, nothing about the hope of Israel. It would have been meaningless if they had used this approach. What worked in Jerusalem would have failed in Antioch. They needed a new evangelistic approach!

The Greek terms Kyrios (“Lord”) and Soter (“Savior”) were very familiar ones in the religious world of the eastern Mediterranean. There were mystery religions and cults where the people were trying to find a divine lord who would guarantee immortality and salvation to people who believed. Many people were concerned about the future.

The interested individuals were told that what they were looking for could be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who had become a man, who had suffered, died and conquered death in Palestine. This message fit the needs of the hearers! It was spoken in terms the hearers could understand, even in terms hearers used in their own religion!

What is the modern equivalent? Using terms reserved for the Buddha in that culture. Shintoism in Japan. Hindu realities in India. There was a very creative approach to evangelism here. It was a new challenge and new answers and techniques were used. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

Nothing succeeds like success. The Gentiles accepted the message; it was the very thing they had been looking for. It suited them and their needs.

We have two things here:

1. We have Gentile believers who were non-affiliated with Judaism.
2. There were tremendous numbers of them. The converts were on a larger scale than ever before.

The leaders in the church at Jerusalem realized this situation was unprecedented, so they sent Barnabas to investigate. They chose the best person for this task—the “son of encouragement,” broad-minded Barnabas. He was a Cypriote Jew by birth, like some of those who had been preaching in Antioch. As such he was more open to Gentiles than someone born and raised in Palestine.

He saw what was happening and, true to this name, encouraged them. His faith and devotion inspired the church at Antioch to even greater things. The number of converts increased rapidly. The work increased so rapidly that Barnabas needed help. He needed a colleague but whom? Then he remembered Saul of Tarsus. It had been several years since he, along with others in the Jerusalem church, had gone with Paul to Caesarea to put Paul on a ship for Tarsus. He felt that Saul/Paul had the qualities needed to do the work in Antioch.

Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul. This was not as simple a task as it sounds. There is evidence that Paul had been disinherited by his family for accepting Christ, so he could not be found in his family home. Barnabas persevered and found Paul and took him to Antioch. For a whole year the work in that city increased remarkably. The new converts were carefully taught the fundamentals of the faith and how to live a Christian life.

It is remarkable that all of these Gentile converts mixing in with Jewish Christians did not produce more conflict. However Antioch was a cosmopolitan city “where Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian rubbed shoulders, where Mediterranean civilization met the Syrian desert; radical and religious differences which loomed so large in Judea seemed much less important here.” (F.F. Bruce, “The Book of Acts,” *New International Critical Commentary of the New Testament*, p. 241.)

We come again to this question of “ethos,” of spirit, of the character of a local church. Antioch was very different than Jerusalem. The church at Jerusalem would have split apart if the leaders had started baptizing Gentiles in that city. But God wanted to begin somewhere!

I believe there are implications for us today. If there are places in the world where women cannot exercise leadership because of cultural limitations, those churches should not necessarily hold back those places ready for such a forward move in the work of the church in preaching the gospel. “Where the Spirit indicates God wants to begin, let a beginning be made!”

One more thing about this remarkable local church needs to be pointed out: It did not care only about spiritual needs. As Acts 11 makes clear, they were just as faithful and zealous in meeting the material needs as well:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world;

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and this took place in the days of Claudius. And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts. 11:27-30, RSV.)

By and large the Antioch Christians could not possibly have known the Christians in Jerusalem, yet they sent relief as “anyone had need.” It took a tremendous offering for the church in Jerusalem which was suffering from famine. This generous act impressed non-Christians. “See how they love one another” was often said. Later on Julian commented that they even took care of the pagan poor. They did not limit their generosity to their own members. What a very impressive display of caring!

What a local church! At least once in his/her life, every person ought to taste the sweetness of belonging to a church like this one. It began the foreign missionary movement of the whole Christian community in an organized way. They took risks. They were daring. They kept up with the leading of the Spirit! Never underestimate the power of a local church!

Saul and Barnabas were elected to go to Jerusalem with the offering. Judea was hard hit by a famine in about A.D. 46. It may have been on this trip that Barnabas and Paul got into the question of this apostleship to the Gentiles that Paul talks about in Galatians 2. If they were indeed going to extend the church to the enormously populous Gentile world, they needed authority and support from Peter, James, John and the others in Jerusalem.

This Bible story has shown us several points:

1. The diversity of local churches, depending on local members, etc.
2. Diversity of evangelistic burden. Antioch felt a burden for the Gentiles; Jerusalem had this concern for Jews. Different congregations may have concerns for different population groups, sometimes even different educational and social groups.
3. In order to keep up with the leading of the Spirit, the local church started creative evangelistic outreach to Gentiles. It started a foreign missionary movement. It became the base of operations for the work of the apostle Paul.

May God help Sligo to be an Antioch in the 20th century.