

THE MISSION BEGINS

Scripture Reading: Acts 13:1-5, RSV.

Jews and Christians are doing more together in this century than ever before. They are attempting to understand each other and practice the ecumenical spirit. There is more talk about the validity of all world religions and less emphasis on the validity of only one. The issue most irritating to many Jewish leaders is proselytizing. They resent efforts by Christians to convert their people to Christianity; they view this as anti-Semitic.

There is more involved here than religious beliefs—being Jewish is something one is totally. Your whole existence is defined by it. It is religion, culture, family—everything. Someone once said to me: “Being an Adventist is like ‘ethnicity’ (belonging to an ethnic group). You can't ever shake it.”

You never shake being Jewish, anymore than you can shake being black or Hispanic. Granted, it is somewhat of a physical feature as well in black and Hispanics, but the total immersion into being this is comparable.

To many Jews becoming a Christian means that you are renouncing your Jewishness! You are turning your back on your race, culture, heritage and your people. Jews who become Christians deny this. They insist that they are still Jews to the core but that they are Jews who accept Jesus as Messiah. They claim that they are true to their Jewishness by doing so. In some cases Jews who become Christians are cut off from their families, ostracized by their friends and made unwelcome in their synagogues.

In the beginning the Christians in Jerusalem were tolerated, because while the gospel was being preached, the leadership in the church at Jerusalem held on rather rigorously to their “Jewishness.” They attended synagogue, observed Mosaic ceremonial law, etc. The Jews were mollified somewhat by early Christian respect for Judaism, so they were able to coexist for a time.

When the Gentiles began joining the church, the situation changed. It was no accident that Peter was one of the first apostles seized by the authorities. He played a prominent role in the acceptance of Gentile believers (God-fearers like Cornelius) into full membership in the Christian church.

This was a departure that the non-Christian Jewish leaders couldn't tolerate. It also created problems within the leadership at the church in Jerusalem. James, the brother of Jesus, had attained a position of leadership in the early church. Paul, in talking about his and Barnabas' visit with the leader to accredit Paul fully as an evangelist among the Gentiles, mentions meeting the “pillars”: James, Peter and John. That is the order in which he named them in Galatians 2 in which he comments on this meeting.

The understanding was that Paul and Barnabas would evangelize among the Gentiles, while the Jerusalem leaders concentrated on evangelizing Jews. Apparently James was a much more open and broad-minded Jewish Christian than many of those who worked with him (as his attitude in the Jerusalem Council shows). However, James was careful to retain the confidence of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem. You see this in Acts 21 where James urges Paul, upon another arrival in Jerusalem, to make sure that he goes to the synagogue and observes the purification rites as any good Jew should. He tells Paul that the word has come back to the church leaders in Jerusalem that he is

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telling the Gentiles to turn away from Moses (probably correct) and ignore Jewish customs. “Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.’ Paul, you need to do something to win back their confidence. We need you (and I need to maintain their confidence if I am to lead and assist you in this important work).”

Barnabas and Paul are sent out by the church in Antioch to evangelize. I’d like to note the mention of Manaen (Acts 13:1), the “foster brother of Herod the tetrarch.” He is listed as one of the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch! Two foster brothers—one kills John the Baptist, the other becomes a prophet-teacher in the early church! Imagine the number of families to whom this happened. They were split down the middle over Jesus the Christ.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas go out to Cyprus, which was Barnabas’ hometown. His cousin, John Mark, goes with them to be their helper. It is speculated that he accompanied them on this journey primarily because Mark was well along into collecting a gospel of Jesus’ sayings and teachings. Paul and Barnabas relied on this information for their work.

They visited the Greek city of Salamis and the first place they went was the synagogue to preach. Later they traveled to Antioch in Pisidia and something major took place here. It seems that they usually went to synagogues first to witness to the Jews, even though their mission was to Gentiles. Obviously they still felt they had a mission to Jews but I think there was a more subtle strategy. Every synagogue in the Gentile world had some Gentiles who attended every Sabbath—the God-fearers. The entree of Paul and Barnabas into the community went through the synagogue. These Gentiles went home and talked to other Gentiles about this new message. That created a lot of problems for Paul and Barnabas.

Before I go into these problems, I want to take note of two things that have happened at this point.. The Bible says that John Mark leaves them and goes back to Jerusalem; this upsets Paul and finally destroys the relationship between Paul and Barnabas. We don’t know why he went back. Paul treated this as an act of desertion.

The other thing that needs to be noticed is that Luke starts this account of the missionary journey listing them as Barnabas and Paul. In the middle, however, he talks about Paul and the people who were with him. Barnabas is fading into the background and Paul is becoming more prominent. Barnabas doesn’t seem to resent this; he accepts it and works cheerfully. If anything, you get the feeling that he encouraged this to happen. There is an old couplet that describes Barnabas:

It takes more grace than I can tell
To play the second fiddle well.

Antioch was a key city, a Roman colony placed on a strategic road to safeguard the interests of Rome. Paul and Barnabas go to the synagogue where Paul preaches a powerful sermon. He tells that the promises made to David have been fulfilled in Christ, the crucified and resurrected Messiah. The impact of that sermon on that congregation was unbelievable. They had never heard anything like this. They wanted to hear more the following Sabbath and they arranged for Paul and Barnabas to come back to speak. Of course the leaders were apprehensive.

“On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw

the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying” (v. 44, 45). How would you like to come to church here some week and find all of the seats taken by strangers? The Gentiles who had heard Paul the previous week had gone out to their city and persuaded them that what he had to say was so compelling that the whole city showed up to hear what was going on.

There is another problem here that affects the synagogue: The Gentile God-fearers who were embracing the Christian faith, as well as some of the Jews, were depleting the synagogues. Membership was going down.

The events in Antioch become a pattern for everything that happened to Paul and Barnabas in the rest of the work. The Jews and the Jewish leaders, as a body, rejected the claims of Christ to be Messiah. Individual Jews accepted it, but the general community turned it down. When it was clear to Paul and Barnabas that they were going to get nowhere with the Jews but were receiving tremendous response from Gentiles, Paul said, “It is right that the Jews should have the first opportunity to hear the gospel preached. It is your privilege. You are honored by God in this way. But you Jews who will not accept the gospel, will never have the honor of evangelizing the Gentiles according to God’s plan.” He quotes Isaiah 42 and the promise which says that the Gentiles will come to the light, that the Gentiles will flock to the word of the Lord, and come to Mount Zion. Paul tells them, “You are proving yourselves unworthy of this prophecy. If you won’t accept the gospel and won’t be the agent through whom the gospel is spread to the Gentiles, we will skip you and go directly to them. God will not beg you to do his work. God will not force you to do his work; he will get it accomplished some other way. He can work as effectively without you as with you.”

The God-fearers who had been attracted to Judaism became the nucleus of the new Gentile congregations. In many cases they became the leaders of the early church.

This was a special cause of Jewish hostility to Paul: the Jewish communities regarded him as one who poached on their preserves, a sheep-stealer who seduced from attendance at the synagogue many...Gentiles for whose complete conversion to Judaism they had hoped and seduced them from the synagogue by offering them God’s full blessing on what seemed to be easier terms than those imposed by the synagogue on would-be proselytes. (F. F. Bruce, p. 282.)

This attitude has persisted, not only among Jews but among Christians toward other Christians. Seventh-day Adventists have been accused of going into other churches and “stealing their sheep.” The issue, however, is more complex. The question is whether or not the members have the right to hear what people claim is a message from God and make up their own minds. The methods must be ethical, but there is nothing intrinsically unethical about appealing to anyone to rethink his own commitment to God and embrace what the speaker believes is a message of saving importance to the hearers.

When the Jewish leaders couldn’t stop the Gentiles from joining the early church, they tried a new tactic—they made things so difficult for the preachers that they had to leave town. This happened again and again throughout the book of Acts. The leaders in the Jewish communities stirred up opposition to Paul and the gospel even among the Gentile population. This is one of the major reasons Paul repeatedly went on the offensive against Jewish leadership and Jewish thought in his writings.

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There are a couple of sidelines we need to look at. When Paul gets to Iconium, he made such an impact in that city that a description of Paul was later recorded. It is so unflattering that scholars think it must be accurate: A man “small in size, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, bald-headed, bow-legged, strongly built, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man and at times he had the face of an angel.” (Ibid. 9, p. 288.)

Maybe ugly is too strong a word for this description but it is certainly not that of a handsome figure. That was one of the reasons Paul was so underrated by people. It wasn't until they listened to him that they began to see the depth and the power. We tend to underrate people. There was an article recently in the *Washington Post* about the research that shows that good-looking people are regarded as more intelligent, get quicker promotions and have more lifetime advantages than the average looking. Television has made this worse—only the most beautiful people in the world can sell soap! We have this general conception in our culture that you have to be physically good-looking to be successful. On that basis, a lot of people speculate that Abraham Lincoln could never be elected President today—his voice was too high, features were too gaunt and ugly. He would not do well on TV; neither would Paul. Today, he could not have been a TV evangelist. We ought to realize that over the long haul basic qualities count, not the way people look. I'm reminded of the play concerning the Elephant Man—a person made grotesque by disease. Many people screamed in fright when they first saw him. The play indicates that when people got to know him, however, they found him so beautiful that they became locked in a permanent relationship.

However Paul did make an impression on people, even if it wasn't always a flattering one.

I want to mention the miracle in Lystra which caused the inhabitants of the town to worship him. The background to this is that a local legend told that Zeus and Hermes had visited Lystra and blessed the couple who showed them hospitality. The people of Lystra felt that Zeus and Hermes would return. When they saw the miracle performed, they felt the legend was being fulfilled. Paul and Barnabas didn't understand the language of the area, so they didn't realize at first what was happening. When the people bowed down to them, they tore their clothes and voiced their dismay. This gives you an example of the kind of excitement these two men created on this 18-month journey through these Gentile cities.

On their way back to Antioch, they repeated their visits to these new churches to encourage the congregations, to appoint local elders and build up the work. In their reports they emphasized not what men had done to them, but what God had done *through* them. When people mentioned the terrible things that had been done to them, Paul's response was consistent: “We must go through hardships for the sake of the gospel. Get that through your heads. There are no guarantees of safety and comfort. No guarantees of tranquility and peace. We must go through hardships if we want the gospel to progress.”

Some of our members have helped other volunteers in their ministry to the Cambodian refugees in Thailand. There is a massive program going on there to relieve the suffering of people. What is not so well-known is that the young volunteers are working 14-18 hours a day, and they have baptized over 1,000 Cambodian refugees since the program started. It is a hard, difficult, dangerous life. To listen to their stories and help them bury their children is a terrible experience. We must go through hardship for the sake of the gospel.

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What was the response of the church in Antioch? The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. The last verse reads: “They gathered the church together, reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles and they rejoiced and stayed there a long time with the disciples.”

This is recorded so we will do two things: (1) preach faithfully in spite of suffering, be aggressive about our faith and not apologetic, and (2) expect God to do through us great things for the world to whom we speak.