

ARTICLE

Mission Essentials: The story of cross-cultural mission in Acts

By Dean Flemming on March 14, 2012

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The story of the early church is a story of crossing boundaries. Acts narrates the movement of the gospel of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, according to Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. Like ripples from a stone that is dropped into a pool of water, the witness of Jesus' followers extends toward ever wider geographical areas and new groups of people. The Holy Spirit guides and empowers this movement from beginning to end.

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The first signs of a boundary-crossing gospel appear on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the miracle of people from all nations hearing the good news in their various languages. This symbolizes that the gospel is not confined to any single nation or to the Hebrew tongue. It is able to address all people in their own "heart language." This is a foundation pillar for the church in mission in every generation.

Nevertheless, in the early chapters of Acts, the Christian movement operates solely within the cultural and religious borders of the Jewish people. It is not until Jesus' disciples are scattered by persecution that we see the gospel crossing cultural boundaries. In Acts 8, a Greek-speaking Jew named Philip leaves the familiar confines of Jerusalem to share the good news with the people of Samaria (see Acts 8:4-25). This is a bold step. The Samaritans, who were not full-blooded Jews, were considered culturally and religiously inferior by Jewish people. The Samaritans' positive response to the gospel shows that God is interested in "outsiders," as well as "insiders."

The story of Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian official on a desert road enables the gospel to cross another boundary (see Acts 8:26-39). This man is a dark-skinned African, probably a Gentile. At the same time, he is a sincere seeker after the God of Israel, returning from worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem. Philip meets him where he is, explaining the Scriptures that he is already reading. The result is that for the first time in Acts, a Gentile comes to faith in Jesus the Messiah. Racial, cultural, and geographical barriers come down.

Acts 10 and 11 describe Peter's encounter with the Roman officer Cornelius. This is a critical moment in the gospel's movement into the Gentile world. It is actually the story of two conversions. On the one hand, Cornelius and his household readily receive the gospel when they hear it from Peter. This event symbolizes that Gentiles, as well as Jews, are welcomed into God's family.

On the other hand, Peter has to experience a theological and cultural conversion. Through a vision of unclean animals (Acts 10:9-16), God shows him that his understanding of who is "in" and who is "out" of God's favor is far too narrow. At first, Peter resists. "Surely not, Lord!" (Acts 10:14). Ultimately, he is dragged "kicking and screaming" by the Holy Spirit into the discovery that God doesn't play favorites, but accepts people from every nation (Acts 10:34-35). Are there times when our culture-bound perspectives get in the way of what God wants to do in the world?

If the story of Peter and Cornelius paves the way for a mission to Gentiles, we see an actual example of that mission in the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26). This is the first multicultural church, where Jewish and Gentile Christians worship, and, apparently share meals (a big issue in their cultural world!) together. The church in Antioch is also the first missionary sending church. Under the guidance of the Spirit, they send out Paul and Barnabas on the first "overseas" mission to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 13:1-3). Mission today remains, not the activity of "lone Christians," but the calling of the whole church.

It is in the ministry of the apostle Paul, however, that we see the gospel truly reaching the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The second half of Acts tells the story of the missionary work of Paul and his colleagues, as the word of God penetrates the Gentile world. There is more to say about that than space allows. Therefore I will simply highlight one dimension of Paul's ministry—how he approached different cultural audiences. Paul was absolutely committed to the gospel that announces God's mission to reconcile all people through Jesus Christ. At the same time, Paul was flexible in the way that good news could be expressed.

How do we define "cross-cultural"?

In our Mission Essentials series, we are exploring what we mean by the term, "cross-cultural," and how Scripture demonstrates and highlights this aspect of God's mission to the world.

In our opening article, Dean Flemming, professor of New Testament and missions at MidAmerica Nazarene University, discusses how the narrative of Acts reveals the Holy Spirit leading the first Christians to carry the good news of Jesus Christ to cultures other than their own.

Check back each week for new installments on this topic, and join the conversation by contributing your comments at the close of each article.



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New articles, contributed by voices from all six world regions in the denomination, are published regularly in Engage.

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If we compare what Paul said to a group of Jews at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (see Acts 13:13-43) to his message to some educated Gentiles in Athens (see Acts 17:16-33), we find great sensitivity to the situation and the audience. In the former case, Paul narrates a story that is well known to his Jewish listeners, relating how God has worked in the history of his people Israel. He repeatedly quotes Scripture to show that God's promises are fulfilled in Jesus. In Athens, however, Paul begins with a point of contact familiar to his Gentile audience—an altar to an unknown god. This becomes a springboard to talk about the "Lord of heaven and earth," who created everything. It is language these biblically illiterate people can understand. And rather than a series of Bible quotations, he cites their own Greek poets!

Paul was flexible in the way that good news could be expressed.

Yet Paul does not water down the message. He announces the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead, even though some of his audience think this claim is disgusting and silly (17:31-32). Paul offers a good model for us today. Our efforts in mission must always be sensitive to the life situations of the different groups of people we encounter. At the same time, we must tell and live out the good news without compromising the message. The gospel challenges aspects of every worldview and culture—including our own.

The story of Acts, then, is the story of barriers coming down. The gospel is for all kinds of people and every culture. And we are also part of that story. The church today is called to get caught up in the same mission of God. God's purpose to bring salvation to the world through a Spirit-empowered church is

an unfinished story. It is a story that is still being lived out in places like Lima and London and Lagos—to the very ends of the earth.

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