ACTS: MISSION AND THE MARGINS

Posted on February 23, 2021 by Eddie

People on the margins are uncomfortable for churches. They do dangerous things like preaching to Gentiles in Antioch and running Bible studies for Ethiopians in chariots. But they are the ones out there meeting people!
Category: Observations

One of the things that strikes me reading the book of Acts is the way in which the outward expansion of the church is almost entirely accomplished through the activities of people on the margins of the Christian community.

The leaders of the community in Jerusalem, Peter, James and John seem to have been only marginally involved in the spread of the church. Peter, somewhat reluctantly shared the gospel with the Roman Cornelius (at Cornelius' Spirit inspired invitation), but then seems to have been as much of a problem as a help in Antioch (Gal. 2:11).

However, in Acts 8, when all but the Apostles fled Jerusalem, Philip (a Hellenic Jew) preached in Samaria (Peter and John did some follow up) and then to an Ethiopian nobleman.

In Acts 11 a group of diaspora Jews from Libya and Cyprus were the first to preach to Gentiles in a systematic fashion in Antioch, opening up the whole world to the faith.

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria.

In Acts 28, we are told that the believers in Rome went out to greet Paul, but we are never told how come there were Christians in the city. Who preached to them? We don't know.

Which brings us to Paul. Because of the way that Acts and, indeed, the whole New Testament is structured, it is easy to read Paul as being a central character. In terms of the subsequent growth and development of the Christian faith, Paul is clearly incredibly important. However, at the time, he was a somewhat marginal character. He was a diaspora Jew from Turkey and although he was considered an Apostle, he came to that role much later than the others. He spent very little time in Jerusalem and was not considered one of the pillars of the church (Galatians 2:9). Although history has proved him right, in his time, Paul was something of a maverick.

Now a slight *caveat* is needed at this point. Acts does not pretend to give us a full account of what was happening at this early point in church history. There are many stories that we don't know. However, I think that the general point that the church expands through the activities of those on the margins is a fair one.

On the broader level, I think that this is an illustration of Andrew Wall's principle that the church tends to grow from the margins while receding in its heartland (read more about this here, with

links).

> *If you consider the expansion of Islam or Buddhism, the pattern is one of steady expansion. And in general, the lands that have been Islamic have stayed Islamic, and the lands that have been Buddhist have stayed Buddhist. Christian history is quite different. The original center, Jerusalem, is no longer a center of Christianity â€" not the kind of center that Mecca is, for example. And if you consider other places that at different times have been centers of Christianity â€" such as North Africa, Egypt, Serbia, Asia Minor, Great Britain â€" itâ€™s evident that these are no longer centers of the faith. My own country, Scotland, is full of churches that have been turned into garages or nightclubs.*
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> *What happened in each case was decay in the heartland that appeared to be at the center of the faith. At the same time, through the missionary effort, Christianity moved to or beyond the periphery, and established a new center. When the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, Hellenistic Christianity arose as a result of the mission to the gentiles. And when Hellenistic society collapsed, the faith was seized by the barbarians of northern and western Europe. By the time Christianity was receding in Europe, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America were coming into their own. The movement of Christianity is one of serial, not progressive, expansion.*

However, on a more narrow level, I think there are lessons here for our church culture in the UK. We don't have much place for talented mavericks in our churches. When people show signs of gifting, we tend to pack them off to college to get formally qualified and then they are appointed as pastors somewhere. We bring them into the centre of things and make them part of the system. Partly, this may be because the church is short of leaders. However, and somewhat ironically, this sort of approach will also contribute to the lack of leaders in the church because it is the mavericks on the margins who are most likely to bring new people (and potential leaders) into the church.

People on the margins are uncomfortable for churches. They do dangerous things like preaching to Gentiles in Antioch and running Bible studies for Ethiopians in chariots. But they are the ones out there meeting people! We need a church culture that is far more varied and which has a place for awkward people on the edges as well as people at the centre who conform to our norms and habits.