CASTING LOTS AND VANISHING APOSTLES

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The fact that we don't hear about Matthias is not the point. What is important is that a whole new set of characters, Paul, Timothy, Silas, Priscilla, Acquilla, Barnabas, Apollos and so on appear through the book of Acts and take the story forward.
Category: Observations

One of the passages which has always fascinated me is the incident in Acts 1 where the disciples decide to appoint an Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot.

> *So they nominated two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias.Â Then they prayed,Â â€œLord, you know everyoneâ€™s heart.Â Show usÂ which of these two you have chosenÂ to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs.â€ Â Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.*
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> *Acts 1:23-26*

It seems that whenever this passage is mentioned, it is in order to criticise the Apostles for their method of decision making. Apparently, casting lots isn't a good Christian way to do things and the proof of this is that we never hear anything about Matthias again, so obviously choosing him wasn't a good idea.

Now, casting lots may or may not be an appropriate decision making tool for Christians. I don't think the book of Acts is setting out to describe how church government should or should be done at this point. However, I do think that there are some pertinent points that can be made from this passage.

The first is that the decision to appoint a successor to Judas emerged out of a process of prayer and meditation upon Scripture. Whatever, the rights and wrongs about casting lots, the Apostles got their starting point bang on. This is where big decisions about the future of the church (or mission agencies) need to start. Strategic planning and other tools of management may have their place, but serious, prayerful meditation on the Scriptures in the light of our current context is where we have to start.

Secondly, while we might not be happy with the idea of casting lots to make a decision, what else where they supposed to do? One of the key factors of this passage is that it is in Acts Chapter 1. The Holy Spirit doesn't descend on the Apostles till Acts 2. From then on, we see the Spirit clearly intervening as decisions are made; but we aren't at that point in the story yet. In fact, this whole incident is a nod to the past. Jesus chose 12 disciples in a clear echo of the 12 tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the Apostles grasped the importance of that number. Their decision marks a continuity between the Old and New Testaments. This is something that doesn't resonate very strongly with many Christians today, but it is an important feature of the New Testament and we

should not lose sight of it.

But, obviously Matthias was the wrong choice, because we never hear about him again! I've heard this point made many, many times, but it really doesn't stand up. A few verses earlier, starting at verse 13 the Apostles are listed and for the vast majority of them this is the last time we hear anything about them. Matthias isn't alone in vanishing from the scene, so do Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot and a good few others. In Acts 4 we meet Barnabas, who plays a much more key role in Acts than any of the Apostles, apart from (perhaps) Peter. In Acts 6 the seven deacons are appointed, and two of them, Stephen and Philip dominate the story (in different ways) in Acts 7 and 8. Then in Chapter 9 we meet Paul who is the main focus of not only Acts, but much of the rest of the NT. By half way through the book, the original Apostles have almost faded from sight.

Now this does not mean that the original Apostles didn't do anything useful or important (I discuss that here). However, I think there is an important principle that we all need to bear in mind. Christianity is constantly renewed from the margins as it crosses cultural barriers and finds new impetus. When it is (for whatever reason) constrained to one cultural expression it loses its strength and authenticity. It took Paul, an outsider to rethink the relationship between Christianity and the Old Testament law and to relate the faith to the culture of the Roman Empire.

The fact that we don't hear about Matthias is not the point. What is important is that a whole new set of characters, Paul, Timothy, Silas, Priscilla, Acquilla, Barnabas, Apollos and so on appear through the book of Acts and take the story forward. This wasn't particularly comfortable for the Jerusalem church, but it had to happen.

The question for our generation, is where are the leaders from the margins who will take the faith around the globe and who will help it to grow in a Western culture that is very different to the one that my generation understand. There is a place for Matthias, but what we really need is a new generation of Priscillas, Acquillas, Timothys and Pauls - people from what we consider the margins, but who represent the future of the faith.