PENTECOST: NOT THE CHURCH'S BIRTHDAY

Posted on May 18, 2016 by Eddie

It was mission that gave them their sense of separate identity from their Jewish roots. The Church was born in Antioch, not Jerusalem.
Category: Observations

Over the last few years I've noticed an increasing trend for people to talk about Pentecost as the Church's birthday. I'm not sure why the church needs a birthday, but if it does, I'm not sure Pentecost would get my vote.

The problem with the idea of a birthday for the church is that it came into existence through a lengthy process, not at a single event. You could date the birth of the church from the resurrection, from Jesus meeting his disciples in the upper room in John 20, from Matthew 28, Acts 1, Acts 2 and so it goes on. Each of these events marked a significant point in the process that brought the church into being. Of course, the big advantage of Pentecost is that we can more or less date it correctly. If you are going to have a birthday, it helps to have a date (even if it changes every year). However, my choice for the birthday of the church wouldn't be any of these days.

Let me pick up the story of Acts somewhere around chapter 10. Up till this point, the Church was almost entirely Jewish, though some Samaritans and the odd God-fearing Gentile such as Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch had become believers.

Following on from the persecutions in Jerusalem, Jesus' followers were scattered around the Middle East, and wherever they went they told their fellow Jews about Jesus. However, in the city of Antioch, which is in modern day Syria, some believers from a Greek background started to actively seek out Greeks and explain to them the message of the Gospel. We donâ€™t know who these people are, but they broke with all of the traditions of the group. God blessed them, nevertheless, and many Gentile Greeks became believers. This is significant, because these were just any old Greeks. They werenâ€™t presented as good people or God-fearers like Cornelius or the Egyptian. They were just ordinary, everyday Greeks-in-the-street: and God accepted them.

Back in Jerusalem, the Apostles heard about this and were somewhat concerned, so they sent a man called Barnabas up to Antioch to check things out. Barnabas took a good look at what was happening and had no complaints. Far from correcting them, Barnabas encouraged the group to carry on as they were. Meanwhile, he went off to a neighbouring city to find Saul and the two of them returned to Antioch and worked in the church in Antioch for a year. During this time, many more Greeks became believers in Jesus.

At first glance, it seems as though Antioch marks just another step in the process of the Jesus movement becoming more open, but in fact, Antioch marks a paradigm shift: a complete break with the past. In this short passage we see two very significant things happening.

The first is that the Greek believers who started telling other Greeks about Jesus didnâ€™t tell them about Jesus the Messiah, they spoke about the Lord Jesus. This may only seem like a small thing, but it has huge consequences. Messiah was a Jewish term and would mean almost nothing to Greeks, so the disciples found a Greek term: Lord, to use in its place. The miracle at Pentecost told the disciples that any language could be used for the Gospel and now these Greek believers are putting that lesson into practice. In order to explain the message of Jesus they dropped the sacred

term Messiah and used the easily understandable word â€˜Lordâ€™ instead. They taught about Jesus according to the context in which they found themselves. Because the believers had basically lived in a Jewish context up until now, they had never had to do anything like this before. But this little group of Greek disciples were now starting to use and develop the principles of cross-cultural mission.

There were a couple of unintended consequences of the use of the term Lord. The first is that people started to treat the word Messiah, or Christ in its Greek form as part of Jesusâ€™ name. Jesus Christ is Lord, really means that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, but we think of Christ as being Jesus family name as in â€œJohn *Smith* is my friendâ€ . The other consequence is that the confession, â€œJesus Christ is Lordâ€ eventually brought the believers into conflict with the Roman Empire. The Romans proclaimed that Caesar, the Emperor was God and they swore allegiance to him by saying that Caesar is Lord. The disciples refused to say that, for them there was only one Lord: Jesus Christ. Many of them suffered for this simple confession of faith.

Alongside the use of the word â€œLordâ€ , the other significant thing that happened at Antioch was that this is where the disciples were first called Christians. In all probability this was an insult. People who had been crucified were considered the lowest of the low and to name the disciples after a man who had been crucified as a criminal was to brand them with a pretty unpleasant name. But the disciples took it as a badge of honour, and from now on the Jesus movement has a name: Christianity. They were still not completely separated from Judaism, but it was now clear that this was a distinct group, not just a slightly strange Jewish sect.

It is no surprise that the Christians gained a distinct identity in the same place that they got to grips with reaching out to others in mission. As long as they stayed within their Jewish cocoon, they were not able to become the people that God intended them to be. But in Antioch, they broke free of that cocoon, reaching out to their Gentile neighbours with the Good News of Jesus and in the process, they became the Christian Church. *It was mission that gave them their sense of separate identity from their Jewish roots. The Church was born in Antioch, not Jerusalem.*

This is the third in a series of posts on Pentecost the others are:

- Pentecost: The Unnecessary Miracle
- Pentecost: Miracles Don't Happen