LET'S NOT GO BACK TO JERUSALEM

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Some thoughts for today from the big picture of the book of Acts.
Category: Observations

After loads of posts on churches and mission agencies, I thought it was time to return to a subject which really motivates me; the Bible, in particular, the book of Acts. I have to admit that I'm fascinated by the broad structure of Acts. There is a lot to be learned from the individual stories, but I believe that we get a lot more from Acts when weÂ grasp the different levels of the big story that Luke is telling.

Let's just think about the first and last verses of Acts. The book starts in a rather intimate setting; Jesus revealing himself to his disciples and talking to them over a meal (1:4). We have a small group of people meeting somewhere in a rather obscure city on the edges of the Roman Empire. For all of the significance that Jerusalem holds for us, in the Roman Empire, it was little more than the capital of an insignificant province. However, by the end of the book, we find Paul living in Rome (OK, he was in prison) and the Christian message spreading throughout the city, even into the Emperor's household.

The contrast between the opening and closing of Acts is very clear. The gospel has gone from being the concern of a small group of friends in Jerusalem to a force which is starting to shake the foundations of the mighty Roman Empire. The intervening 28 chapters tell the story of how this happened.

One of the keys to the transformation is that what started as a purely small-scale, Jewish movement was transformed into a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural one. The transition took place over stages; the miracle of Pentecost in Acts 2, Philip preaching in Samaria and then to the Ethiopia Eunuch in Acts 8, Peter's encounter with Cornelius in chapter 10 and then some nameless Greek Christians witnessing to Gentiles in Antioch in Acts 11. At almost every stage questions and objections were raised as the faithful Jewish Christians saw their presuppositions threatened by the way that Gentiles were integrated into the church. It was far from comfortable for them. Just about halfway through the book, in Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem made a formal ruling on Gentiles being accepted into the church, but we know from Paul's letters that this wasn't the end of the matter. Opposition carried on for a while longer.

Today, of course, we don't question the idea of non-Jews being Christians. The transformation that occurred in the book of Acts has been embedded in the life of the church for almost two thousand years.

Or is it?

When I read some comments by Western Christians on the church in other parts of the world, I wonder whether we've really grasped the meta-message of Acts. When we expect Christians in other parts of the world to think like us, to read and teach the Bible in the way that we do and to share our presuppositions, I think we are making the same mistake as the early Jewish believers. The Gospel could only spread out of Jerusalem because the Apostles were willing to let go of long-heldÂ traditions in order to allow the church to flourish in a different cultural setting. Western church

leaders, theologians, and fund-raisers have to have the same attitude. If we try and insist that Christians in other parts of the world do things our way and think in our way, we are taking the book of Acts from Rome back to Jerusalem and that's a big mistake.