THEY SHOULDN'T BE EVANGELISTS!

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The best evangelists are probably not the people you think they should be.
Category: Observations

This is the second in a short series of blog posts looking at the overall message of the book of Acts. Yesterday, we looked at the way in which the Gospel spread from peripheral Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman Empire. Today, I'd like to consider who it was (in human terms) who was responsible for the breakthroughs that allowed the message to make this transition.

As we saw yesterday, the first believers in Jesus were a small group of Jews, but through an incremental series of leaps forward, we get to the position 28 chapters later, where Gentiles are well integrated into the church. Given that Jews were not even allowed to eat with Gentiles at the time, this is a remarkable transformation. Let's go step by step.

Acts 2: Pentecost

In Acts 2, the disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit and led by Peter spoke to Jews from across the diaspora who had come to Jerusalem for the feast. Though this was very significant in terms of language, it doesn't represent a great breakthrough as all of the people who were converted were Jewish.

Acts 8: Samaria and The Ethiopian Official

In Acts 8, Philip fled to Samaria to avoid persecution and preached to the Samaritans - people who weren't Jews, but who weren't quite Gentiles either. Later in the chapter, he led an Ethiopian official, who was interested in Judaism, to faith. This guy was definitely a Gentile, but he had a 'faith' of sorts. (See my post on Philip here.)

Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius

In Acts 10, Peter leads a God-fearing Roman centurion to Christ. This is a similar situation to the one in Acts 8, the difference being that Cornelius' whole household was converted as opposed to one Ethiopian. Another big difference is that God had to give Peter a significant vision (which had to be repeated) before he was ready to go to Cornelius.

Acts 11: Antioch

This was the big breakthrough. In Antioch, some Greek-speakingÂ believers (Jews from the diaspora) started telling Gentiles about the Lord Jesus and the Gentiles were converted. This is the first record of Gentiles who had no background understanding of Judaism coming to Christ. The significant thing is that we don't even know the names of the people who spread the message. (There are a couple of other very significant things that happened in Antioch, read about them here.)

So, if we leave out the day of Pentecost because it didn't involve Gentiles becoming believers, there are four significant steps in the outward journey of Christianity.

- Samaria: Philip
- The Ethiopian: Philip

- Cornelius: Peter
- Antioch: Nameless Greeks.

The interesting thing is that in three of the four events, the key messengers were Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora, not key leaders from Jerusalem. The only one of the original Apostles who crops up in any of these steps is Peter and God had to bang him over the head with a vision to get him to do what came naturally to Philip and the unnamed Greeks.

Let me just take this a bit further. Once the pattern of reaching Gentiles was established in Antioch, Paul became part of the church there and used it as his base for his missionary travels. Now, we tend to think of Paul as a central character in the story - after all, he wrote a significant proportion of the New Testament. However, it is worth remembering that he, too, was a diaspora Jew from Turkey, and far from being one of the central characters in the early days of the church, he tried to murder the first believers. In these terms, PaulÂ too is a person from the periphery. Not only that, but he built on the work of the unnamed Greeks.

So, what's the point of this? Simply, that I reckon that the best evangelists are often those who are at the periphery of the church, not the ones who are involved in running the church, or leading the teaching programme. To be an evangelist involves having lots of contacts with people who aren't Christians and that's difficult if you are a full-time pastor. Peter led Cornelius to Christ, but it didn't come naturally to him. If we are to reach an increasingly multi-cultural and secular Britain for Christ, we are going to have to identify the Philips and the unnamed Greeks in our churches and encourage them to do their stuff. The problem is, that they may not dot all the 't's and cross all of the 'i's that we think need to be dotted and crossed. However, I don't believe that a model of evangelism that is predicated on inviting people to church to hear a presentation of the Gospel will reach our nation. Evangelism today, will not look the same as it did fifty, or even twenty years ago.

I will admit that there are risks in this; just as there were in the book of Acts. The Apostles in Jerusalem were unsure of what happened in Samaria and Antioch and sent people to check out that everything was ok.