SOMEONE ELSE WILL LISTEN

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The beginning and the end of the book of Acts captures a universal principle in the life of the church.
Category: Observations

The second chapter of Acts famously recounts Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and the fact that about 3,000 people were added to the church on that one day. That's a pretty impressive church growth statistic there! However, the thing I want to emphasize is that these people were Jews. They were drawn from all sorts of different places and spoke different languages, but they were Jews from the diaspora who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost.

Now, let's skip to the end of the book of Acts, Chapter 28, where Paul says this in his closing address to the Jewish leaders in the city.

> *â€˜The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:*
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> *26Â â€˜â€œGo to this people and say,*
> *â€˜You will be ever hearing but never understanding;*
> *you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.â€™*
> *27Â For this peopleâ€™s heart has become calloused;*
> *they hardly hear with their ears,*
> *and they have closed their eyes.*
> *Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*
> *hear with their ears,*
> *understand with their hearts*
> *and turn, and I would heal them.â€*
>
> *28Â â€˜Therefore I want you to know that Godâ€™s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles,*
> *and they will listen!â€™*

Paul's message is that the Jewish people will hear, but not understand because their hearts have become hard. However, in contrast, the Gentiles will listen to the message.

Acts starts with large numbers of Jews being converted on one day but ends with the statement that the Jews won't listen to the message, but the Gentiles will. In one sense, this is symbolic of the whole message of Acts, the way that Christianity goes from being a minor Jewish cult to a worldwide, multilingual, multicultural movement. I touched on this a couple of days ago. However, I want to highlight a slightly different theme; one which I believe that we need to get to grips with in our situation in the UK.

The simple message is that at one point in history, the Jews received the message of Jesus and were converted in large numbers, but this state of affairs did not continue. In a very short space of time, they stopped listening and the Christian faith moved out into the wider world. This doesn't mean that no Jews ever became Christians after Acts 28, but it does mean that the majority of believers were Gentiles and Jewish converts were relativelyÂ rare. As a one-offÂ phenomenon, this

would be interesting, but as historian Andrew Walls has pointed out, this process has been repeated down through the centuries (I've blogged on Walls' concept here).

Down through history, places and peoples that once accepted the gospel have turned their back on the Christian message, while others have picked up on the faith. Time and time again, places at the centre of Christianity have drifted away from the faith, while places at the periphery have become new centres. We are seeing this played out before our eyes once more as the ancient European home of Christianity becomes increasingly secular and the faith finds new centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I don't think the book of Acts is prophesying what must happen, but it provides an excellent description of a process which seems to reoccur through history.

Just a couple of thoughts. Firstly, I think that western Christians need to look at the future with a degree of humility. We are used to thinking of ourselves as the centre of the faith, as the ones who determine what is normal for Christianity. This was never a healthy way to view ourselves, but now it's just downright wrong. We are not the centre and we are not normative for the faith around the world. Yes, we have things to share, but we have more to learn.

The second thought is a quote from my blog post about Andrew Walls from a few weeks ago:

> *For what itâ€™s worth, I donâ€™t think that the near extinction of Christianity in Europe is inevitable in the next hundred years or so â€“ though I donâ€™t think it is impossible either. One factor which (as far as I am aware), Walls hasnâ€™t looked at is the impact of migration on the transmission of the faith back into areas which once were the centre. Today people travel and relocate to an extent that is unique in history. Geographical and cultural barriers are broken down by mass travel and migration and a whole new generation of Christians, with a different outlook are coming to Europe at a time when Europeans are rejecting the Gospel. From my perspective; the future of the church in Europe in the mid-to-long-term lies in their hands.*