

Waking the Sleeping Giant - 2

Mission Perspectives

As we begin to embrace the truths within the book of Acts, I want us to exercise our heads a little more than our hearts today as I make some more general observations about the Book of Acts. In fact, this is less of a sermon and more of a lesson. Today I want to begin to give you some insights into cultural anthropology, modern missiology and contemporary sociology, but I plan to present it in a way that is simple, practical and relevant to our current situation.

The book of Acts opens with Jesus instructing His eleven Apostles, who were all Jews. Later, one hundred and twenty people gathered in the upper room and they too were all Jews. Except for an isolated exception here and there, such as the Samaritan woman at the well and her friends, virtually every one of the early believers was a Jew. No intentional effort to bring the good news to non-Jews is recorded in the Gospels or in the book of Acts - until we come to chapter 8. There, Philip began to evangelise the half-breed Samaritans, and later in Acts 10 we see Peter visiting the home of the Gentile Cornelius. But a systematic mission to plant Churches among the Gentiles is not recorded until Acts 11, where 15 years after Pentecost, missionaries from Cyrus and Cyrene travelled to Antioch.

Paul said in Romans 1:16 that the gospel was "... *first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.*" Why was this and why would Jesus say in Matthew 15:24: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*" It will not be possible for us to understand the cross-cultural ministry that unfolds in the book of Acts, without first going back to the Gospels to understand how and why Jesus built a nucleus of 120 Jews to initiate what has now become more than twenty centuries of transcultural worldwide missions.

Paul had some understandable theological reasons for saying that the Gospel was for the Jews first. He had some personal reasons too. Paul was a Jew - a Hebrew of the Hebrews - who dearly loved his own people. He had such a burden for them that he once said he would give up his own salvation if, by doing so, the Jewish people would follow Jesus as their Messiah (Romans 9:1-5). The covenant which God made with Abraham 4,000 years ago was a clear expression of God's heart for the world. He chose Abraham to be the patriarch of His special people - Israel. God's intention was to not only bless Israel - but much more.

In Genesis 12:3 God said to Abraham: "... *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*" If the Jewish people had been faithful to God's commission in the Old Testament times, history would have been very different. Even today, many Jews do not understand why history changed so radically for them when Jesus came.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says that God, true to His covenant with Abraham, brought the Messiah into the world through Jews and to the Jewish community. But Judaism as an institution would not accept the Messiah. They were like an olive tree whose natural branches had been broken off and wild branches had to be grafted in. But why? Romans 11:20 tells us it was due to their unbelief. The root remained a Jewish root, but the subsequent branches for 2,000 years have been primarily gentile branches, and Paul says in Romans 11:25 that this hardening on the part of Israel will continue until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

So that is one reason why we would expect the first believers to be Jews. However, there is another side of this which would raise questions in our minds. According to 2 Peter 3:9 part of the nature of God is that He is, "... *not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" For God there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28). The clear intentions of Jesus Himself were that the gospel should spread among the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

When He was about to depart, the great commission He left with His disciples was to go and make disciples of all nations. The Greek word Jesus used for *nations* was *ethne*, which today we call peoples or people groups. Jesus of course knew this. He was very aware that He was the Son of God - the long-awaited Messiah. He knew that when He died on the cross, the blood He shed would be for the remission of sins for everyone, both Jew and Gentile. He knew that He was beginning a process of redemption that would culminate with a great multitude in heaven comprising all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues, standing before the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

So, the question persists, why were the one hundred and twenty who surrounded Jesus at the beginning of the Book of Acts all Jews? Why stick to the Jews when He knew that it was the Father's plan to bring salvation to everyone? Jesus made it clear that He had come to bring salvation to all mankind - the kingdom of God was for Jews and non-Jews. So, if His reasons for maintaining a Jewish group had little to do with theology, perhaps they were for reasons of methodology.

Assuming that Jesus had planned a systematic strategy for His three short years of ministry, as opposed to just letting it all happen, could it be possible that He intended to set a pattern for the future of all Christian missions? If so, Jesus might have been modelling a principle that plays a key role in contemporary missions. A principle that modern mission specialists have referred to as the 'people approach' to world evangelisation. As Church growth specialist Donald McGavran once said: "*People prefer to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.*"

Culture is something that most people do not take lightly, as those who study mankind are quick to inform us. Even though the gospel of Jesus Christ transcends all cultures, it is still true that violating, denigrating or challenging the way of life or the way of thinking of a particular people group has proven to be a very poor way of subsequently attracting them to the gospel. Although there may be some variations and exceptions, modern missiology teaches that the most viable strategy for extending the Kingdom of God throughout the world, is to set targets, people group by people group. So, what is a people group? *The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation* arrived at this definition many years ago:

A people group is a significantly large sociological grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelism, this is the largest possible group within which the gospel can spread without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.

The Jews were one such people group in Jesus' day, but within this group there was a considerable variety - from Matthew, a tax collector working for the Roman Government through to Simon the Zealot who was committed to overthrowing the same Government! Yet in spite of the differences in politics, age and personality, they belonged to the same ethnic group. They had the same colour skin; they shared similar cultural values, including prejudices; they ate and abstained from the same foods; spoke the same language and perceived themselves to have a common affinity for one another. Now if the people group approach to bring the world to Christ is based on this high view of individual cultures, how can we justify that Biblically?

Culture is often seen as a barrier that encourages separation and disharmony socially. Some think of cultural differences as an evil that needs to be ignored, if not stamped out. Their goal is to assimilate all peoples into one language and one culture.

In today's world however such a goal is being challenged theologically by a few brave mission scholars but from a practical, sociological point of view, such a goal is totally unrealistic. This nation for example is one of the most multi-cultural in the world. Despite the best efforts of some isolated political voices, we are beginning to accept, appreciate and even celebrate our cultural diversity and recognise the integrity of each people group.

As Christians, we need to get back to the Bible and understand that God is the creator of human cultures, and we need to accept that God has something to do with the makeup of our society. There are three important insights that help us understand multi-culturalism in a positive light.

1. *The human race is one*

All the diverse peoples of the earth ultimately belong to one family. God created Adam and Eve to be the forbears of all humankind. If we go back far enough, we will find that every human being is genetically related to every other human being. Paul affirms this in his sermon in Athens in Acts 17:26 when he said: *"From one man God made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live."*

This is the basis for the Biblical truth that in the community of the Kingdom of God there is no difference before God between Jews and Gentiles.

2. *God intended humans to be one, but diverse*

Although it's true that the Kingdom of God admits Jews and Gentiles on an equal basis, it is also true that in this present life each culture is distinct. As we look at the Biblical evidence, we discover that this distinction and the uniqueness of all people groups is part of God's creative design. Biologically speaking, the genes and chromosomes of Adam & Eve must have contained all the genetic material for the human diversity we see today. The first Biblical list of human people groups appears as far back as Genesis chapter 10 - called by some as *'The Table of the Nations.'*

According to Genesis 10:5, each people group was separated into their lands, everyone according to their own language and family. The way that came about is recorded in Genesis 11 in that well known story of the Tower of Babel, when God decided in one action to confuse their language so they may not understand each other (Genesis 11:7).

Now the most common interpretation I have heard of the Tower of Babel story is that it was God's punishment for the sinful rebellion of mankind and that the result was disorder in the international world - it was not the plan and purpose of God. This interpretation is very common and is often used by those preaching for racial reconciliation.

However, I believe this negative interpretation is not compatible with either a Christian understanding of cultures - or contemporary views concerning world mission. Suggesting that the diversity of our human cultures only has its root in human sin, rather than in the purposes of God's creation is not the only way to understand Genesis 10 & 11. It is my belief that the sinful rebellion at the tower of Babel was actually an effort on the part of mankind to prevent the human race from becoming diversified, according to God's plan.

From the beginning, God had set in motion His design to separate humans into people groups so they could *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth”* as He said to Adam. However, the early human race, who still all spoke one language, rebelled against this plan. They intuitively perceived that as they multiplied, families and clusters of families would need more land for farming and hunting and that if they continued to scatter across the earth - their social separation would eventually produce increasing differences in their culture.

The reason they started to build the tower and the city around it, is clearly stated in Genesis 11:4: so that they would *“...not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”* Their supreme fear was to allow God to diversify them, and they were willing to make a pact with the devil himself, if necessary, in order to prevent it. We all know that their scheme didn't work because God sovereignly intervened.

God accomplished in an instant what ordinarily would have taken centuries to achieve. He changed a mono-lingual society into a multi-lingual society. This effectively stopped them building the tower and the city and rapidly accelerated the geographical scattering of the people groups - each now with its own language. A growing number of Biblical scholars have abandoned the traditional, negative interpretation of the tower of Babel story and have begun to see that diversity is not a condemnation or punishment. Ethnic pluralism, or multiculturalism is to be welcomed as a divine blessing, not seen as a curse. This high view of human culture and its origins is a valuable building block for formulating any sound, biblical and practical strategy for reaching the world for Jesus Christ.

3. God is concerned to bring all peoples to Himself

In 1 Timothy 6:15, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as, *“the only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords.”* In Matthew 24:14 we read that *“ .. this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations ...”*

The way God's master plan has been and is being implemented most effectively in the world today is through the people group approach to world evangelisation. In order to sort out the most appropriate evangelistic methods of spreading the gospel to all the people groups in the world, it is helpful for us to understand the various kinds of evangelism that exist.

Basically, there are three levels of evangelism that apply in our multicultural world. The experts have come up with some very creative labels - they call them E1, E2 and E3.

E1 is that first stage of evangelisation in which the only barrier we have to cross if we have a burden for the lost and desire to bring them to Jesus, is what they call the stained-glass barrier. That is, getting out of the Church building and into the community around us. This is a huge barrier for many of us who have settled down quite nicely into our protective Christian ghetto. Yet at the same time it is the easiest of the three levels of evangelism because in most cases, the people outside the Church building are of the same culture - they speak the same language. They are people with whom we can more easily identify from a cultural and human perspective, as we bring them the gospel.

Now E2 and E3 are the areas of evangelism where we must cross a cultural barrier of some kind in order to present the truth of Jesus Christ to the lost. The basic difference between E2 and E3 is the degree to which that cultural barrier exists. E2 is the level where we cross the first barrier and get out of the Church fortress and into the society around us, but then encounter another barrier where there is a culture within a culture. This is increasingly relevant in Australia as our cultural diversity continues to intensify.

For example, if we desire to bring the gospel to the aboriginal people around us or to the Chinese or Indian people in our region, we will need to cross this extra cultural barrier. This is E2 evangelism because we have two barriers to cross. There's the cultural barrier between the Church and the unchurched, and then the barrier of a different culture within our culture.

These people are still part of our society, they are still part of our culture by virtue of the fact they live amongst us, and this makes it a little easier, yet we need to respect that they are also part of a culture that is quite different to ours. These different cultural people groups are not just ethnic groups. I believe the largest people group within this city that is part of our culture and language and yet have a totally different set of priorities and ways of dealing with life, is the youth.

People under 25 in this culture can no longer be reached through E1 evangelism. There is a greater difference than at any point in the past. There was a time when youth leaders and youth pastors could be 30 or 40 years of age and still relate well to young people. This is now the exception - not the rule. The most effective ministry to youth today is taking place where the leaders are themselves under 25.

The Church is slowly beginning to realise that if we keep complaining about how rebellious and different today's youth is and don't find ways to cross over the cultural barrier and speak to them in their language and relate the truth of the Gospel through their cultural mindset, then we may not have a Church in another generation.

The third level of Evangelism, E3, is when we take the gospel into another culture in their own setting. This is what we have traditionally called missions, where we go to another people group in their native land. Socially and culturally, they are totally separate to us. This is surely the most challenging form of evangelism. Now we need to understand that this separation is cultural and social and spiritual and lingual, but sometimes not geographical. More and more in this nation and others, we are discovering whole cultures which exist largely untouched by the culture around them. So, as you've heard it said many times, you don't need to leave your country to become a missionary. There is now more truth in that statement than in any previous generation.

Now most people are won to Christ through E1 evangelism, Churches in local communities, reaching out within their own culture. Most evangelists are mono-cultural evangelists. Most Pastors are mono-cultural Pastors. It has always been this way and will remain that way till the Lord returns because God calls and equips most people to minister primarily to those people in their own culture - but not all. God has also called some people to use their particular spiritual gifts in different cultures. If He hadn't, then Christianity would never have spread across the world. Those whom God has called to minister in those second two levels of evangelism He also equips with a missionary gifting.

Given the fact that thousands of unreached people groups have yet to be brought the gospel, it may come as a surprise to learn that less than 1% of committed Christians appear to have been given the missionary gift. Low as this might sound, the fact is that less than half this number of Christians around the world are actively engaged in cross cultural ministries. If as many as 1% of the world-wide Church was ever fully mobilised and trained, then the resulting missionary force would be more than adequate to reach all unreached people groups in this present generation.

How can it be done with so few? It's really simple and it goes back to the fact that most evangelism is mono-cultural (E1). The job for cross-cultural ministers is to plant the gospel in a people group by E2 and E3 evangelism methods, but then to equip the leaders of that culture to carry on the E1 level of evangelism.

If you have had anything at all to do with overseas missions or have read any magazines which tell us about cross-cultural ministry, you will have read or heard that nationals evangelise far better than missionaries. E1 evangelism is by far the most effective. Kooris preaching to Kooris; Chinese preaching to Chinese; youth preaching to youth; elderly to elderly; even men to men and women to women. And that brings us right back to our original question in the Book of Acts: Why is it that Jesus' nucleus of one hundred and twenty believers were all Jews? It's because Jesus, like 99% of Christians that followed Him, was a mono-cultural minister.

I am speaking here of Jesus' human ministry. His three years as an itinerant preacher in Palestine. In that role, God had called and equipped Him to be an E1 evangelist. Even Jesus as a man operated within the reality of humanity when it came to evangelism and most of us can relate to His E1 style of evangelism where He ministered primarily within one people group. That's why I said earlier that I believe Jesus' three years of single-culture ministry to the Jews was more of a strategic choice than theological one.

As far as we know from the Scriptures, Jesus did not train any of His disciples for cross-cultural ministry, although some may have ended up there later. So, the first genuine E3 ministry appearing in the book of Acts would be in chapter 8 where we read of Philip preaching to the Samaritans. More radical E3 cross-cultural missionaries would be those who went from Cyprus to Cyrene to the Gentiles in Antioch in chapter 11. And of course, the most outstanding example would be the Apostle Paul who became known as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Now these last two sermons may have been a lot of mumbo jumbo to you, but I would encourage you to review them carefully before we continue this series because I believe this teaching is critically important in this nation in particular if we are to effectively bring the gospel to the world. The mission field is on our doorstep. There was a time recently when most of us could be oblivious to E2 and E3 level evangelism - unless we were gifted and called as overseas missionaries; a time when the vast majority of Christians only had to cross that first barrier ... the stained-glass barrier ... and enter a familiar culture. Today, we have hundreds of fully developed and distinctly different cultures living together in this great melting pot we call Australia.

In the next sermon we will look in more detail at Jesus methods of evangelism and I hope and pray that the Holy Spirit will give us some practical handles to grab on to in order to bring the grace and mercy of God into the lives of people in our community and across our nation.