



“*Missio Ecclesia* – Mission of the Church”

Acts 2:1-12; Acts 10:34-43

God gives a mission to his church

Last week, we looked at the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God to reconcile humanity to God and renew God’s broken creation. This week, we turn to the *Missio Ecclesia*, the mission of the Church, the body of Christ. This story begins on the morning of Pentecost in Jerusalem, not long after Jesus’ return to the Father. And, later in Acts, we see the *Missio Ecclesia* in full flower when Peter goes to the home of a Roman gentile.

The Church is born

I wonder if Pentecost has an inferiority complex. After all, it is one of the three big days of the Christian calendar. Christmas gets more than its share of attention.¹ Easter, the biggest day of all, may not get as much attention as Christmas but at least it gets the giant crowds in the pews. But Pentecost . . . alas, no crowds, no special services, little more than just another Sunday.

Pentecost marks the birth of the Church. Until Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples are a group of believers striving to understand what has happened and where this Jesus movement is headed next; but they are not the Church. Until Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would be sent by the Father after Jesus’ departure (see John 15), has not arrived. Until Pentecost, the disciples are simply waiting.

At last

After Jesus’ ascension (his return to the Father), the believers returned to Jerusalem to wait. There, they stayed together and devoted themselves to prayer (see Acts 1:12-26). They also had to restore the circle of Jesus’ closest disciples to twelve by replacing Judas Iscariot. Just as there were originally twelve tribes of Israel, the inner circle of disciples had to be twelve, representing the restored Israel. So they cast lots (rolled dice!)² and Matthias was added to make twelve again.

The believers prayed and waited, but I wonder what they thought would happen next. Jesus had said that the Father would send them the Spirit, who would teach them everything and remind them of what Jesus had said (John 14:26). Whatever the believers imagined, I doubt it quite measured up to the dramatic reality of that Pentecost day.

The believers were all in one place on that day. It was early, about 9:00 a.m. Suddenly, there was the sound of a huge wind and tongues of fire leapt from believer to believer. These were theophanies, dramatic manifestations of God. God was suddenly with them in a way that God had not been with them before.

The Spirit, God-present, then gave each believer the ability to proclaim God in languages they couldn’t know. It would be like me suddenly preaching a sermon in Russian. What they said wasn’t gibberish; rather, it was the undoing of the multiplicity of languages following God’s destruction of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). It signified the restoration of God’s creation, which God had already accomplished in Christ, though it was not yet fully consummated.

¹ Interestingly, based on the evidence we have, it seems that Christmas wasn’t even celebrated by Christians until at least 200 years after Jesus. The Christians were Easter people.

² The casting of lots put the decision in God’s hands so far as the believers were concerned.

Pentecost

Pentecost has its roots in ancient Judaism and is still observed by Jews and Christians, though you'll see that there is a very big difference.

In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, customarily called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). For the Jews, Pentecost was an agricultural festival, during which the community would show gratitude to God for the first fruits from that year's crop, i.e., the early harvest.

Jesus was crucified during Passover in the spring. After his resurrection, Jesus spent about six weeks with various groups of disciples, teaching them and preparing them for his return to the Father. Jesus promised that after his departure, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their comforter and advocate. Jesus' disciples were to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, came soon after Jesus' departure. Because Pentecost was such a major festival, Jerusalem was stuffed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. In Acts 2, Luke tells us that the disciples were gathered on the day of Pentecost in a room near the temple, when there was a sudden sound "like the rush of a mighty wind" and tongues of fire leapt from disciple to disciple. The crowds were astonished at this, each person hearing in his or her own language the disciples' proclamations of God's great deeds.

This outpouring of God's Spirit marked the beginning of a new age. The disciples were new creations in God's kingdom and the Holy Spirit would forever be God's empowering presence in their lives. Indeed, the rest of Acts tells the story of how the Holy Spirit guided and directed the growth and development of the early church. Though we refer to Luke's book as the Acts of the Apostles, it really ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And God's Spirit is today, for each of us, God present with us, empowering us all to do God's work.

Peter, now empowered and led by the Spirit, then rose to speak to everyone within shouting distance. You can bet that the commotion caused by the believers and their astonishing language skills had drawn a big crowd from the throngs in Jerusalem for the festival. Peter began by invoking the words of the prophet of Joel, for what was happening that morning was not merely a fulfillment of what Jesus had promised the disciples, it was a fulfillment of the story told by Scripture. Indeed, God in the persons of Jesus and the Spirit, had stepped into space and time to restore and renew his creation, as God had promised he would do. The Day of the Lord had arrived. It might not have looked like what everyone imagined it would, but God's victory over sin and death had been won, shaking the cosmos to its very core. Yet Peter wasn't done. The man who had denied Jesus three times only weeks before would go on to deliver a shocking indictment of his fellow Jews.

A promise made for all?

Here's the question the apostles had to face in the years after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: Was Jesus the savior of the Jews only or would the Gentiles³ be saved also? To put a finer point to it: Would Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus have to first become Jewish, taking on the keeping of the Jewish Law?

It can seem easy to open the pages of Scripture and answer this question. Isn't the promise made to Abraham a promise that encompasses "all the families of the earth?" Yes (Genesis 12:3). Weren't the Jews given by God to be "light to the nations?" Yes (Isaiah 49:6). Didn't God promise a day when nation no longer lifted up sword against nation but they all sat under fig trees unafraid? Yes (Micah 4:4). And on . . . and on . . .

Yet, piles of Scripture can still leave the human heart untouched. Who could blame the Jews for losing their sense of mission to the world? The Assyrians had scattered ten tribes to the winds. The Babylonians had burned their temple and sent tens of thousands into exile. And for most of the last five hundred years, the Jews had traded one pagan Gentile oppression for another the latest edition being written in Latin.

³ "Gentile" simply means "not Jewish."

We need to have some sympathy for Peter and the other apostles as they struggled to hear and to live out God's incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Abraham, i.e., into God's plan to rescue Israel and the whole world. Even the gift of God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost did not obliterate the apostles' confusion and concerns.

All this said, we aren't then surprised that the story of the first conversion of a genuine, completely-outside-the-family Gentile, is no simple matter. We get angels, visions, and the Holy Spirit's direct intervention. The whole story, from Acts 10:1-11:18, including Peter's defense of his actions, is the longest story in the book of Acts.

Even the Gentiles

Cornelius is an important man, an officer in the Roman Army. He and his family live in Caesarea, a large city built by the Romans on the Mediterranean coast northwest of Jerusalem. Cornelius is one of the God-fearers, Gentiles who are drawn to the God of Israel and even read the Hebrew Scriptures (in Greek!) and pray to God – but are NOT Jewish, which, for Cornelius, would mean circumcision.⁴ Though not Jewish, he is a devout and generous man.

One day an angel comes to Cornelius to let him know that God has heard his prayer and seen his generosity. The angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter.

The next day, before Cornelius' men arrive in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his house praying. He grows hungry and falls into a trance. He then has a vision in which, basically, despite being a Jew, he is commanded to eat pork. Peter, of course, protests, for the food laws, like circumcision, set the Jews apart. If you ate pork, you weren't Jewish. If you ate pork, you were not part of the people of God.

When Peter wakes up, he is puzzled by what the vision meant but then the Spirit of God speaks to him, telling him that the front doorbell is about to ring, and he should go with the men he will meet at the door . . . and he does. When Peter arrives at Cornelius' home, he learns that Cornelius has gathered both family and friends. Cornelius falls on his knees to worship Peter, who gently corrects him. It seems that the purpose of all this is dawning on Peter, for he tells the gathering of Gentiles that God has shown him no one is "unclean" just as no food, such as pork, is "unclean." People are people and food is food. Old boundaries no longer have any use.

Cornelius tells Peter that a "man in dazzling clothes," came to him and had him send for Peter. Now, Cornelius, along with his family and friends, are ready to hear Peter's message. And Peter proceeds to tell them the story of Jesus, who is the "Lord of all." Even before Peter finishes, the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling within these Gentiles, enabling them to speak in tongues.⁵ Then Peter, seeing what was happening, baptized them all, the entire household, with water in the name of Jesus Christ.

There are a couple of important things to notice about the story.

- First, this is all God's doing – in the person of the Holy Spirit. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
- Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by God's insistence that, in essence, it is acceptable to eat pork. The much protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God. Your reading of the New Testament will be helped tremendously if you understand that this question became a long-running dispute. Acts 15 tells the story of major meeting of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem in 49AD to address this question.

⁴ Circumcision was one of what Paul calls "the works of the Law" that distinguished between Jews from non-Jews. It was a boundary marker. The food laws, which were the focus of Peter's vision, were also boundary markers. See the text box on the next page for more.

⁵ We can't really know from the text whether this experience of the power of the Spirit is the same as at Pentecost, when the disciples were enabled to speak in other languages. It could be or it could be another manifestation of the Spirit. But, like Acts 2, we know it was audible. Personally, I think it was a Pentecost 2 experience, signifying again the undoing of the tower of Babel.

“Works of the Law”

There is a phrase we sometimes use to express the idea that we can do enough good acts (good works) to make ourselves acceptable to God, to get to “heaven” as it were. The phrase is “works righteousness.” Much of Christian teaching is devoted to showing the fallacy of this notion. We are made right with God by God’s grace, for we are simply unable to love sufficiently on our own. We can never earn our way into God’s presence.

Christians have often mistakenly assumed that the ancient Jews practiced “works righteousness.” We think that the Jews believed that if they could keep the Law in all its many details they would be saved and get to “heaven;” hence, all the Pharisees’ concern about law-keeping. But this is a caricature of ancient Judaism.

Instead, the Jews of Jesus day believed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples on the earth. They, the people of God, would one day be God’s renewed and restored people. Thus, the question for a Jew was whether someone was in the people of God or not. Did they belong or not? Could the person wear the “badge of membership?” If they wore the badge, they would be made right with God.

When Peter is concerned about what he can eat or Paul speaks of the “works of the law,” they are referring to the Jewish external symbols of membership in the people of God: Sabbath-keeping, adherence to the food laws, circumcision, and so on. These “works of the law,” he writes, are no longer the badges of membership in the people of God, now the only badge of membership is faith in Jesus Christ.

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter’s baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jewish believers, Peter shouldn’t have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God’s way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised . . . and avoid pork . . . and keep the Sabbath . . . and so on. The decision made by the conference was a firm “no,” though those who wished certainly could keep the Law in good conscience.

Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such “works of the Law” (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away—for the most part. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from nonbelievers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us. It is the Spirit who is given to all who share in this faith.

As Paul would write to Christians in western Asia Minor (Turkey):

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6)

*One for all and all for **The One!***