

## Missions in Acts 1-15

In most cases, it's possible to tell where a map was made by the country that takes center stage: we all like to believe that our nation is the center of the earth. This leads to some cartographic peculiarities: Japan is in the 'far east' only on a British map; on an American map, Japan is far west; on a Pacific-centric map, Japan is in center. One Australian wag satirized the entire scheme by putting his homeland in the center, even though it meant placing the South Pole at the top, with Latin America and Africa pointing up. Similarly, the Chinese word for China – *Zhōngguó* – literally means 'Middle Kingdom,' center of the earth.

The way we draw our maps reflects the way we see our world: with ourselves – our nation, our ethnicity, our families, ourselves – at the center. The phenomenon is not restricted to cartography, politics, or ethnicity, but also infects our spiritual perception. Some conservative Christians consider America – at least in its early years – as a Christian nation. Or appeal for God to be on America's side in war, or in national crisis.

This is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it is a key theme of the book of Acts, that the early Jewish believers were quite content to stay in their holy huddle, as though salvation were for the Jews only, until God thrust them out into the rest of the world.

### Day One: Acts 1:1-11 Stay or Go?

Jesus calls his disciples to stay in Jerusalem *temporarily* (1:4-5), until they receive the Spirit. Then he calls them to go into the rest of the world, sharing the gospel (1:8). They, however, want him to stay and to establish the kingdom of Israel (1:6), as promised in the Old Testament when Jerusalem would rule the world, God's people would live there in peace and prosperity, and all nations would come to Jerusalem in search of God. They want to stay permanently, with God's blessing and comfort; he calls them to stay only temporarily, and then to go into the world, risks and all.

Why is it that the standard exhortation to missions – including the last night of the Urbana conference – typically ends with: ‘Will you go if God calls you?’ Jesus said, “Stay until ...” We say, “Stay unless ...” Just a few letters, but a world of distinction.

### **Day Two: Acts 8:1-40 To Samaria**

Eight chapters later, where were the Christians? Still in Jerusalem! So God gave them incentive to leave: Stephen is executed, and virulent persecution breaks out against the church, and all but the apostles flee for their lives (8:1b-3). Still, to their credit, as they fled, they talked about Jesus wherever they went. Deacon Philip is the first recorded evangelist to reach non-Jews. He preached to the despised, mixed-breed Samaritans, and many came to faith (8:4-8,14). Then he preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, who promptly believed (8:26-40).

Consider your national and ethnic loyalties, and how they impact your missions priorities. Being Chinese can facilitate access to China and ministry once there; yet far higher percentages of Han Chinese have heard the gospel, than some of the minorities in China, especially Muslim minorities. Pray for those who have recently left CBCGB to reach minorities in China.

### **Day Three: Acts 9:1-19 To the ends of the earth?**

In a massive irony, Paul, the intensely scrupulous Jew and Christian-basher, was to become a Christian responsible for reaching gentiles, and to get bashed for it (9:15). Did God give up on the other Christians, so that he had to convert someone new? In any event, note where even Paul started, whether he was in gentile territory (9:20-22), or in Palestine (9:26-29). Jesus called the disciples to go into the whole world, he gave them the Spirit to empower them, and now he has called a special apostle to lead the outreach. Still, which regions have a church at this point? (See 9:31.) Perhaps even blinding, healing, and calling a special new apostle were not enough to get immediate action!

Since most of our members – and our missionaries – are Chinese, it is natural that most of our mission work occurs among Chinese: being the same ethnicity is a helpful bridge to the gospel. Of course, Jewish Christians in the first-century could well have argued similarly. What might we do as a missions-sending church to extend our vision beyond China and Chinese? Should some from our midst go to work long-term among the Hopi? in Latin America? in Africa? Pray for God to guide our congregation and our members, where they can most effectively use their gifts, given worldwide needs.

#### **Day Four: Acts 10:1-11:18 Light breaks through**

As a 'God-fearer', Cornelius had a mixed identity. He was a gentile, yet he also worshipped the Jewish God. What did it take for Peter to go and preach to a gentile? What lesson did Peter finally learn through this incident? (See 10:34) How did God confirm that he accepted Cornelius? (See 10:44) How did the Jewish-Christian evangelists respond? (See 10:45) How did the church in Jerusalem respond? (See 11:1-18). How do we make sense of their reactions?

Peter and the church in Jerusalem needed a vision and a supernatural coincidence before believing that God wanted all people everywhere to hear the gospel and have opportunity to accept Christ. We have Scripture that tells us the same. Yet how much of our time, effort, and money goes to strengthening those who already have the gospel, rather than to reaching those without? How many more Bible translations do we need when over 2000 languages do not yet have the Bible? How many more churches does Boston and America need, when large tracts in the world have none? How can you/we better direct some of your/our time, effort, and funds to reaching the unreached rather than further enriching the reached?

#### **Day Five: Acts 11:19-26 The first intentional outreach**

Ironically, after all this time, when the first intentional outreach to

gentiles began, it was not the corporate church which launched it, but an assorted collection of individuals (11:19-20). Though persecution spread them far, the believers from Palestine preached the gospel only to Jews (11:19). It was Christians from gentile countries who took the initiative to share the gospel with non-Jews (11:20). Only then did the organized church come into the picture, sending Barnabas and Paul to disciple the gentile believers (11:22-26).

Pray for our missions committee, and the various CBCGB church boards, as they set the missions vision for the church, that missions might not be left up to motivated individuals, but could be strategized and initiated at the highest levels of leadership.

### **Day Six: Acts 15:1-29 An attempted roll-back**

The spread of the church beyond Jerusalem and the Jews inevitably prompted a conservative backlash. It's fine if gentiles come to faith, the conservatives argued, but they must live like Jews, including circumcision, food laws, and the rest of the OT regulations. Paul and Barnabas protested, and the argument was so vigorous that they appealed to Jerusalem to settle it (15:1-4).

The argument was as much cultural as it was theological. As more gentiles poured into the church, it would no longer feel Jewish (unless they could force the gentiles to adopt Jewish customs). In the end, the Jerusalem ceded the point, and the church became predominately gentile, in ethnicity, in culture, and in 'feel'.

This is the the issue that may face the worldwide church in years to come. For the first time in history, the majority of Christians live in the southern – rather than the northern – hemisphere. Still the northern hemisphere dominates, largely because of its affluence and its history. Pray for this transition, as southern hemisphere Christians gain in number, and in influence, that they will also take the lead in cross-cultural missions.