

Agents of Hope: God's Great Missionaries

"All Things to All Men": Paul Preaches to the World

Lesson #2 for July 12, 2008

Scriptures: Acts 11:19-26; 13:16-42; 17:18-3; Galatians 1:8,9.

1. This lesson is about methods and approaches that we should use to reach across cultural and language barriers to reach others.
2. In the early 1800s, the great Bible societies were just getting started. Missionaries such as David Livingstone, Robert Moffatt, William Carey, and Hudson Taylor spread the gospel slowly but surely to remote corners of the world. Unfortunately, very often missionaries from Europe carried with them not only the gospel message but also their cultural norms to those outposts. Ninety years later, Seventh-day Adventist missionaries did something very similar. There was a time when some of the Adventist churches in the Middle East had signs over the front door saying, "no Muslims allowed"! Adventist missionaries working in the tropics in Africa believed that they had to wear white shirts and ties while preaching in church even though it was very hot and humid. That custom is being followed almost uniformly in tropical Africa even today. Fortunately, the church has now established "study centers" to reach the great non-Christian religious groups of the world. As a result, hopefully, we will be better able to reach over those cultural barriers to share the gospel.
3. Paul took a very different approach to the gospel in the philosophical climate of Athens than he did in the port city of Corinth. What does that tell us about how the gospel should be "carried" and presented to new cultural or new ideological groups? Should it be "tailored" to the situation?
4. Consider the experience of the early Christian church at Antioch. Read Acts 11:19-21.

In restrained sentences these few words tell of one of the greatest events in history. Now, for the first time, the gospel is deliberately preached to the Gentiles. Everything has been working up to this. There have been three steps on the ladder. First, Philip preached to the Samaritans; but the Samaritans after all were half Jewish and formed, as it were, a bridge, between the Jewish and the Gentile world. Second, Peter accepted Cornelius; but it was Cornelius who took the initiative. It was not the Christian Church who sought Cornelius; it was Cornelius who sought the Christian Church. Further, it is stressed that Cornelius was a God-fearer and, therefore, on the fringes of the Jewish faith. Third, in Antioch the Church did not go to people who were Jews or half Jews, nor wait to be approached by Gentiles seeking admission; of set purpose and without waiting for the invitation, it preached the gospel to the Gentiles. Christianity is finally launched on its world-wide mission.

Here we have a truly amazing thing. The Church has taken the most epoch-making of all steps; and we do not even know the names of the people who took that step. All we know is that they came from Cyprus and Cyrene. They go down through history as nameless pioneers of Christ. It has always been one of the tragedies of the Church that men have wished to be noticed and named when they did something worthwhile. What the Church has always needed, perhaps more than anything else, is people who never care who gains the credit for it so long as the work is done. These men may not have written their names in men's books of history; but they have written them forever in God's Book of Life. (*Daily Study Bible*, article on Acts 11:19-21)

5. Barnabas, originally from Cyprus and the one who had first welcomed Paul into the Christian community at Jerusalem, was sent to that culturally diverse church. When Barnabas realized how well the gospel was being accepted in Antioch, he sought help by going to Tarsus and recruiting Paul. Notice that Paul was then ministering to a church that was established because of the persecution

that he himself had caused to the believers in Jerusalem!

6. As a sidelight, it is mentioned that the church in Antioch—the third-largest city in the Mediterranean world in those days—raised money to send to the believers in Jerusalem who were suffering from a famine. Those new believers felt a responsibility not only for Antioch but for the larger Christian church. It was also in Antioch that believers were first called “Christians.” (Acts 11:26)
7. In order to reach people and convince them of some important truths, we must first “meet them where they are” and convince them that what we have to say is important. That requires that we rise above our cultural and spiritual “ruts” to reach out to people who have different ways of thinking.
8. Think about some co-worker or friend whose ideas about our church or even about God are quite different from your own. What would it take for you to reach out to that person and try to convince him or her of the truth about God?
9. Read 1 Corinthians 9:22. Paul was committed to the idea of reaching out in every feasible way to attract others. But that did not include compromising the message of the Gospel! How did Paul feel about the core of the gospel message? Read Galatians 1:8,9.
10. In several places in the book of Acts, we see illustrated that when given the opportunity, Paul would go to a new city, visit the Jewish synagogue, accept an invitation to speak to the Jews there, and begin his ministry to them. Considering the prejudices of the Jews, it was essential that Paul took that approach before he tried to reach out to Gentiles. (See Acts 9:19-22; 13:14-16; 14:1,2; 18:4) Should we make allowances for people’s prejudices when spreading the gospel? For which prejudices should we make allowances? And what allowances?
11. Notice that often in Paul’s sermons to Jewish groups, he would start with the founding of their nation at the time of the Exodus, then follow down through King David, and then jump to David’s “Descendant,” Jesus of Nazareth. But to pagans not familiar with the Jewish history, he would speak about the God who is Creator of all, the Giver of life, the One who provides the means by which we support our lives and nourish our bodies.
12. Following the times of persecution at Philippi, Thessalonika, and Berea, Paul “escaped” to Athens more or less alone for a short period of time. While walking through the marketplace and the city streets of Athens, he saw a statue to an “unknown god.”

THERE were many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundred years before this, a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city which nothing could halt. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god it was sacrificed to “The Unknown God.” From this situation Paul takes his starting point. There are a series of steps in his sermon.

(i) God is not the made but the Maker; and he who made all things cannot be worshiped by anything made by the hands of man. It is all too true that men often worship what their hands have made. If a man’s God be that to which he gives all his time, thought and energy, many are clearly engaged in worshiping man-made things.

(ii) God has guided history. He was behind the rise and fall of nations in the days gone by; his hand is on the helm of things now.

(iii) God has made man in such a way that instinctively he longs for God and gropes after him in the darkness.

(iv) The days of groping and ignorance are past. So long as men had to search in the shadows, they could not know God and he excused their follies and their mistakes; but now in Christ the full blaze of the knowledge of God has come and the day of

excuses is past.

(v) The day of judgment is coming. Life is neither a progress to extinction, as it was to the Epicureans, nor a pathway to absorption to God, as it was to the Stoics; it is a journey to the judgment seat of God where Jesus Christ is Judge.

(vi) The proof of the pre-eminence of Christ is the resurrection. It is no unknown God but a Risen Christ with whom we have to deal. (*Daily Study Bible*, article on Acts 17:22-31)

13. Notice that Paul's speech moved from the common and familiar to the new and unknown.
14. How can those lessons be applied to us in our day—trying to reach out to people who are wholly unchurched? Is it appropriate to “water down” some of our distinctive doctrines in order to attract people? Why? Or why not? Which doctrines is it appropriate to “water down”? Why?
15. Paul set for himself a goal of speaking only of “Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) and doing so only in new or “unentered” cities. Why do you suppose he chose that particular approach?
16. Do you think Paul made a mistake in speaking about Jesus rising from the dead in his Athenian sermon? It obviously was something that the audience found quite surprising. Such a group of philosophers would immediately have questions—even doubts—about the possibility of such an occurrence.
17. Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8. What do you think was being said about those Thessalonian believers? It seems that the Thessalonian believers did not just accept and believe the Christian message; they “had to” share it.
18. Do you believe that as you are being “fed” on a weekly basis in your church group, that you must “go forth” and spread what you have received? Why? Or why not? Will the gospel ever be finished if we leave all of the evangelizing of others to professional pastors? Why is it that so few Seventh-day Adventists, particularly here in North America, are actively “witnessing”? Are we afraid or even embarrassed about what people might say to us or about us?
19. What doctrines or teachings of your denomination are you afraid to speak about to members of other churches even though you may believe them? Why? Have you given serious thought to reaching out across cultural and language barriers to others?
20. How do you think God would want us to reach out to the secular society surrounding us in North America today? What approach would you take in trying to reach them? Do you feel comfortable speaking about God? About Satan? About beings living in other parts of the universe? About the miracles in the Old and New Testaments? About the miraculous birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?
21. Should those of us who espouse the “larger view” reach out to others in the Adventist church? What unique features of our beliefs might help us or hinder us in spreading the good news to others? What approach might we take in sharing our views with other Seventh-day Adventists? Should they be our first mission field?

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