

The Book of Acts: Embracing All Nations

By David Feddes

In the book of Acts we see God's grace embracing all nations in Jesus Christ. That did not happen in just one moment. It was a process. It involved a lot of different crucial actions by the Holy Spirit and by the church, and it brought with it a number of challenges. It is not always easy for very different nations and very different cultures to want to reach out to each other. It is also sometimes very hard for people with such cultural differences to get along in the same church. The book of Acts shows us some of those things and it shows how God's Holy Spirit kept pressing his people to reach out farther and at the same time to be more closely united with people of various nations.

Jesus gave his marching orders in Acts 1:8. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). He told his apostles that they would have a message that would be going far beyond their own nation.

On Pentecost, he gave the first taste of that with a tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. As the apostles began to speak, people heard them in various languages: "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues" (Acts 2:11). God was speaking to people from all sorts of different languages.

When Peter preached that day and explained what was happening, he quoted from the prophet Joel who had said God's message: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). Peter went on to explain that this promise of the Holy Spirit for all kinds of peoples is "for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). It is very clear from Jesus' marching orders and from what happened on Pentecost that the gospel is going to go to the ends of the earth and the Holy Spirit is going to be given to people from every nation.

Culture clash in church

This did not always lead to an easy path. Even before the church had many non-Jews in it, it faced some challenges over cultural differences. Acts chapter 6 says, "The Grecian Jews among them"—Jews who were more influenced by Greek background and spoke the Greek language—"complained against the Hebraic Jews"—the ones who were more native and accustomed to Israel and to speaking more in Aramaic or Hebrew—"because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1). These were different shades of culture.

It is interesting how the church responded: seven Spirit-filled men, all of them with Greek names, were chosen as leaders to handle this problem. One of those was Philip the evangelist. It is no accident that seven people with Greek names were chosen as participatory leaders to make sure the Greek-speaking people among them got a fair shake.

Today, different cultures can still experience practical problems in the church—and not just people from entirely different nationalities. Sometimes there are generational differences of culture. A church which has some first-generation immigrants and then a later generation that grew up in the country to which they immigrated can be quite different in culture and in tastes. It can be a real challenge.

In the United States it was a big challenge for German-speaking immigrants to deal with what happened when their English-speaking children grew up and were filling the church. Among Dutch-speaking immigrants the same issues arose. The same has happened among Chinese or Korean immigrants where you have what you might call the immigrant and native speakers, and then the people who are more accustomed to the new land they are in.

You can get culture clash in the church, and we need to realize and face the fact that this can happen and then seek the Spirit's wisdom. One thing necessary is to make sure that the leadership is not just of one background. Here they chose people with Greek names to help participate in leadership.

Scattered to Samaria

Jesus had said, "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). But they did not exactly leave town and head for the ends of the earth, at least not until they were driven out of town. Stephen was murdered by a mob. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. (Acts 8:1-5)

This was a major moment. For centuries Jews and Samaritans despised each other. The Samaritans traced their descent to some of the ten scattered tribes of Israel, but had intermingled with other nationalities. Their religion too had gotten mixed up. They thought they were being faithful, and they could not stand the Jews who looked down their noses at them, and the Jews did not like the Samaritans. Among the Jerusalem church you will notice nobody volunteered to go to Samaria, but in the persecutions they had to flee in various directions. The Spirit drove Philip there and the gospel was spread in Samaria, and they embraced it.

Gospel for Africa

God also had Africa targeted. Acts chapter 8 says, "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza'" (Acts 8:26). Notice how Philip is important here: he is God's ambassador to Samaria. Later on, Peter and John follow up and the Holy Spirit comes on the Samaritans. Now the Lord calls Philip to carry the gospel to an African person. Philip was one of those with a Greek-sounding name who was there to help settle some of the cultural clash going on in the Jerusalem church. He was one God chose to reach people of a rather different culture among the Samaritans, and now God had Philip meet up with an African.

"So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it'" (Acts 8:27-29). The Spirit was the one leading the gospel to this African person.

He was a eunuch, which means he had been neutered from being a male, and he worked for a queen. He was a very powerful man who had somehow come to know about the God who is worshiped in Jerusalem. But at the Jerusalem temple, foreigners were not allowed into the inner court. He went there seeking this God and even had a scroll of the Scriptures, but he had not yet found what he was looking for.

Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. I cannot help wondering if Isaiah the prophet was especially attractive to him and that he had read the scroll more than once trying to understand it. Here are a few excerpts from Isaiah chapter 56: The Lord says, "Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' And let not any eunuch complain, 'I am only a dry tree.' For this is what the Lord says: 'To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off'" (Isaiah 56:3-5). It is sad for a eunuch never to be able to have children, and yet God says, "I am going to give him an eternal name."

And if he is a foreigner, he is going to be welcomed by God: "And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him... these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:6-7).

You can see why the scroll of Isaiah would appeal to a foreign eunuch who was seeking the one true God. But when Philip came upon him, he was not reading that part—though it may have been attractive to him. He was reading another part.

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture from Isaiah: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth" (Isaiah 53:7-8). The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about—himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus: that Jesus was the one who was led to the slaughter, that he was wounded for our transgressions and died for our iniquities, as Isaiah put it. Philip told him the good news of salvation through the blood and resurrection of Jesus, which could come to all people, including foreigners.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" He gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and

the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. Scripture tells us that the last thing we see of this eunuch is that he went on his way rejoicing. Then the Lord led Philip somewhere else to continue his testimony.

Philip helped resolve a difficulty in the church at Jerusalem. He carried the gospel to Samaria. He connected with an African who then headed home rejoicing over the gospel and undoubtedly told more people about Jesus in Ethiopia, where he was an important government official.

New vision for a new covenant

Meanwhile, Peter had come to know that the gospel is for all nations, but he needed clearer convincing. He had been used by the Lord to lay his hands on people in Samaria and bring the Holy Spirit in his ministry there, so Peter knew what Jesus wanted—and yet the Lord wanted to make it even clearer.

One day as Peter was taking a noontime nap, he fell into a trance and had a vision. In the vision a sheet was being let down from heaven. In the sheet were various animals that under Old Testament Jewish law no Jew was permitted to eat. In the vision Peter was told, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." But Peter said, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice from heaven said, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:13-15). God's message was twofold. One: the old dietary laws and the special laws for the Jews as a separate people were no longer required or binding. Two: even more important, the thing those laws symbolized—a separation from other nations—had also been dropped, and other nations were to be included. Jewish people previously would not eat or share a meal with non-Jewish people, but Peter was about to have a major change in his life because he was about to receive an invitation to go into the household of a Gentile and share a meal and time with him.

On the other end of the equation was a man named Cornelius, a Roman soldier. This was a major move because Roman soldiers had been occupying Jerusalem. They were agents of a foreign power, and you can see why Jewish Christians would not be eager to be friends with Roman soldiers. Yet the Lord had prepared Peter through a vision, and now the Lord communicated with this Roman soldier Cornelius—another man, though non-Jewish, who was seeking to know the one true God and knew that the one true God had worked especially among the Israelites.

Cornelius saw an angel appear in his house and say, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:13-14). God was setting up this meeting to spread the gospel from a Jew to a Roman.

Just a little aside here about the work of angels in missions: we might overlook it, but the fact is that God uses his angels to expand missions. He is using people these days from every tribe and language who know the gospel to spread it widely, but he also uses non-humans to spread his gospel. Of course, it is all the mighty work of God's Holy Spirit, but the angels are a part of this. Remember, it was an angel of the Lord who told Philip to go to the place where the Ethiopian was. Now it is an angel who tells Cornelius, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter."

Revelation 14:6 says, "Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language, and people." The angels are involved in spreading this gospel to all nations. As Hebrews 1:14 puts it, "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Hebrews 1:14). Not all of us have a vision of an angel telling us to go meet with someone else, but it is a tremendous encouragement to know that God's angels are always at work—that while we are doing our evangelism and outreach on the ground, the angels are at work in the air, doing their work mostly behind the scenes, assisting us in the international spread of the gospel. What a blessing!

At any rate, after Cornelius had the vision from the angel to call for Simon, and Simon Peter had his vision, Peter came to Cornelius's house. He said, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). While Peter was still speaking these words and telling them the gospel of Jesus, the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message. The Holy Spirit shows no favoritism. He brought the gospel to this Roman soldier, who would naturally have been an enemy of Peter, and brought them together in one Spirit with one Savior as part of one body—the church.

Scattered among Greeks

We read earlier that the gospel spread because of persecution. They had been sitting in Jerusalem, but persecution drove some to Samaria. Now we read about another effect of that same persecution: "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:19-20).

They had been scattered by persecution. At first, where they went, they found their fellow Jews and told them the good news about Jesus—which was certainly worth doing. But then some others said, "We should be telling more than just our fellow Jews. Maybe the Spirit scattered us for this very purpose." Notice here in Acts that the Spirit used that persecution in Jerusalem to scatter Christian Jews, not only among the half-breed Samaritans, but also among the Greeks.

You read about that tragic—or at least what seems to us tragic—story of Stephen and realize it was not so tragic after all. Stephen saw heaven open and Jesus at the right hand of God. His face was like the face of an angel, and he was full of joy. The man who was overseeing Stephen's execution—Saul—became a Christian and the mightiest missionary. The persecution Saul instituted, and that continued after the execution of Stephen, scattered Christians to spread the gospel into Samaria, into Greek-speaking parts of the world, and into various Roman colonies. So do not think that God is defeated when one of his great spokesmen is murdered. God is always in charge and accomplishing great things.

Accepting cultural variety

One of the challenges as Samaritans came to know Jesus, as Greeks came to know Jesus, and as some Romans and people of other nationalities came to know Jesus was: What do we do with cultural variety in the church? In particular, what do we do with the question of God having

chosen the Jews and given them a special law to govern their lives prior to the coming of Jesus? There were some Jewish people who thought Gentile converts needed to become identical to Jews and live by the Old Testament Jewish law. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

The rest of Acts 15 tells us about a leadership meeting in Jerusalem. There, the Holy Spirit guided those present to accept Gentile Christians without requiring them to become like Jews. The men and boys did not have to be circumcised. They did not have to follow a special diet or observe the other regulations God had given for the life of the Jewish nation prior to Jesus. With the coming of Jesus, all of those signs and symbols had been fulfilled, and the barrier between Jews and other nations had been broken down. God guided the council of Acts 15 to welcome people of all nations without forcing them into the same exact cultural practices.

Still today, the Spirit guides us to accept others without forcing our culture upon them. This has often been a hard thing for missionaries and for people in receiving cultures to understand at first—that you do not always have to dress exactly like the people who brought you the gospel, eat exactly like them, or have all the same cultural patterns. The gospel comes into your own culture and transforms it from the inside out. God lets his good news and his way of life take shape in a variety of cultural forms. The Holy Spirit guides us to accept other cultures and cultural expressions without forcing our culture on them. Acts 15 is one of the great declarations of that—led by the Holy Spirit.

Facing prejudice

As the book of Acts continues, that does not mean all prejudice dropped away. Those to whom the gospel was being brought still had their racial prejudices. That is one of the sad things about human sin: we do not like strangers; we cannot stand people who are different than we are; we tend to despise those outside our cultural group. For example, in the city of Philippi—a Roman colony with many Greek-speaking people—Paul and Silas were accused of wrongdoing. The real motive behind the accusation was that money was drying up because they had driven a spirit out of a fortune-telling girl. But the public charge was used to stir racial prejudice: "These men are Jews, and they are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (Acts 16:20-21). They were accused of being far too Jewish, and Jewish people were a culture that many in Philippi did not like.

If Gentiles—people who were non-Jews—were prejudiced against those who were Jewish, there was also prejudice in the other direction. Paul, hated for being Jewish by some non-Jews, was also hated by Jews for being too friendly with non-Jews. A Jewish mob in Jerusalem, according to Acts 22, wanted to kill Paul when they thought he had brought a non-Jew into the temple. When some Roman soldiers arrived, order was restored somewhat, and the crowd settled down. Paul was given a chance to speak. They listened to Paul speak for a while about Jesus and even about the resurrection—until Paul said that Jesus had told him, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21). That was too much for his Jewish listeners: "The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!' As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air..."

(Acts 22:22-23). All this happened simply because a Jewish man said God wanted the good news to go to Gentile, non-Jewish people.

This wickedness of prejudice exists among many who are not born of the Spirit of God, and even among those who are born of the Spirit it is often a lingering sin that needs to be overcome. The apostle Paul, of all the apostles, thought most deeply about this because he was in a special way the apostle to the Gentiles, called directly by God to bring this about.

One race: the human race

When Paul preached in the city of Athens, he made it clear that there is one race—not a whole bunch of different races—one race: the human race. We all come from Adam, one man, and we are all, at the end of time, going to stand before another man who is also the Son of God, the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

Paul proclaimed, "**From one man he 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. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him... now he commands **all people everywhere** to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:26-27" (Acts 17:26-31).

It does not matter what culture you are from—you originally came from Adam. It does not matter what nationality you are or where you live on the earth—all peoples everywhere are called to repent because all peoples everywhere are going to stand before the throne of Jesus. God has proved this by raising Jesus from the dead.

I am not from a Jewish culture, but Jesus is for me. There are many others who are not from Jewish culture, but Jesus is for them because Jesus is the one—Jewish by birth—who came for all people to die on the cross, rise again, and transform life. We come from Adam. We are headed toward a meeting with Jesus. This is for all peoples, and we are all one race: the human race. The apostle Paul made that very clear.

Not for Jews?

At first, Paul had to make it clear that the gospel was not just for Jews but also for Gentiles. Unfortunately, over time, Gentiles sometimes became too anti-Jewish, and other circumstances developed in which Christianity came to be perceived by some Jewish people as not really being for Jews. Today, some Jewish people think that Christianity might be okay for Gentiles, but that it is impossible to accept Jesus as Messiah and still remain a good Jew.

The reality, however, is that Jesus and his whole family were Jewish. All of Jesus' apostles were Jewish. All the New Testament writers were Jewish. God still has his remnant of people who follow Jesus and are Jewish. I spent some time in Israel with a group called Jews for Jesus, and God uses some Jewish people in mighty ways as testimony for him. The gospel of Jesus is for all. The Holy Spirit, given by Jesus, is for all, and this includes Jewish people, not just non-Jews.

Not for India?

In India, some say, "Hinduism is really the proper religion for people from India, and Christianity—it's new to India—it doesn't really belong here. It's opposed to our culture. Let other people be Christians if they want, but it's really not for us in India." Sometimes there can be fierce persecution of people who follow Jesus.

The reality is that the apostle Thomas went to India. For almost 2,000 years there have been Christian people in India. That part of the story is not in Acts, which mainly follows the expansion of the gospel westward—though on Pentecost there were people from various eastward regions as well. The Bible does not follow all those trails, but church history tells us that Thomas went to India.

There are monuments and markers in India indicating the presence of Christianity there for a very long time. The great bishop Pantaenus of Alexandria in Egypt moved from Africa to India about 1,800 years ago. A bishop from India attended the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. So Christianity is not some brand-new thing in India brought by recent missionaries—it has been there a very long time.

The same could be said for China. We have strong evidence that in early centuries people in China had become Christians and that the message of Jesus had spread eastward into China.

Not for Africa?

How about Africa? Sometimes there is a perception among some African-Americans that Islam was the original religion of Africans and that Christianity was the religion of European and American slave owners and segregationists. Therefore, to be true to African roots, some say you should become a Muslim and reject that "slave-owner, white-man religion" of Christianity.

The reality is that Christians were in Africa 600 years before Muslims invaded Africa. Besides, Muslims profited from the slave trade as well. I am not excusing what some calling themselves Christians—maybe even some real Christians—did in the slave trade. But many peoples of the world favored slavery, and the greatest opponents of slavery were raised up from among the Christian church.

To think that Christianity is not for Africa is false. In Acts we read how that African "went on his way rejoicing" shortly after the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In the churches of Africa, some of the mightiest thinkers lived in North Africa—the great Augustine, the great Pantaenus, the whole school at Alexandria. These were some of the greatest Christian thinkers in history.

So let us not say Christianity is not for Africa. Today, too, Christianity has swept across Africa in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a wonderful thing that many Africans from all sorts of tribes and nationalities have come to Christ. It is important for Africans to realize that racism is not just white versus black. Sometimes one tribe or ethnic group will hate another—both are black, but they have ethnic differences. The gospel of Christ calls us to embrace and love one another.

Racism and missions

There has been a problem throughout the centuries of resistance to missionaries based on racism. Sometimes people in supposedly Christian churches, even major leaders, have been so racist that they did not think the gospel should go to certain peoples.

Charles Kingsley was a great intellectual, highly educated, chaplain to the queen in the late 1800s, canon of Westminster, and a Cambridge professor. He also happened to be in love with the theory of evolution. His notion of evolution meant that black people had not evolved as far as white people and did not have the divine spark in them. Therefore, he thought they were not worth spreading the gospel to because they could not be spiritual. Here is what he wrote: "The Black People of Australia, exactly the same race as the African Negro, cannot take in the Gospel. All attempts to bring them to a knowledge of the true God have as yet failed utterly ... Poor brutes in human shape ... they must perish off the face of the earth like brute beasts." What a sickening and horrible thing to say.

Sadly, even some who were godly missionaries had a trace of superiority and racism. But let's listen to a missionary who had it right. John Paton said, "What I have seen here would shatter to pieces everything that the famous preacher had proclaimed... Had Christ been brought in the same way in other places, equally blessed results would as surely have followed, for He is the same yesterday, today, and for ever." Paton knew that Christ was meant for all nations. He carried the gospel to one group of people with black skin, and he knew that black skin is not a sign that you cannot have the Holy Spirit or that you are somehow subhuman.

These are not laughing matters still today, where racism and a sense of superiority exist. We may laugh with scorn at the folly of racism, but we must not take it lightly.

Professor Tite Tienou, a mission professor and dean at Trinity International University—one of my PhD professors—says, "The twenty-first century is the century of global Christianity. Since God expects all Christians to be about advancing his rule in the world, mission today must become the responsibility of the global church. People of color now represent the majority of Christians in the world... Making the case for Christianity on the basis that it is a worldwide global religion can, especially in Africa, erase the stigma of Christianity as a white man's religion." Professor Tienou himself is from Africa and yet teaches at one of the most important evangelical universities in the world. There is a great exchange of people from various nations teaching one another the ways of the Lord.

Samuel Escobar says there is a new global mission. In fact, he has written a book about it, subtitled *The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*. No longer is it just a case of missions being a few nations sending out Christians to many other nations. Now those who once received missionaries are sending missionaries, sometimes even to the very nations from which they once received missionaries. There may be missionaries from Nigeria in Ukraine, missionaries from Portugal or Brazil going to other countries, missionaries from Korea—a nation that once had almost no Christians—now sending missionaries to many nations of the world. *The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone*--this is what the Holy Spirit, whom we see at work in Acts, has continued to do in our own day.

The Embassy of God, the largest church in Ukraine, a country largely made up of Slavic, white-skinned people, is led by a Nigerian pastor. The world's largest church is Yoido Full Gospel Church, led by Pastor David Yonggi Cho in South Korea. Again, we see that the Holy Spirit does not show favoritism. His work is going to the ends of the earth all around the world.

Global Christian correction?

Sometimes this means that nations which have had Christianity for a while, and think they know better, must pay attention and listen to people from other nations. In the United States and in Europe, some church leaders have begun to fall away from the Bible.

Leaders such as John Shelby Spong did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus and yet remained a church leader and an important bishop. This is terrible. He also taught falsehood not only about what Jesus did or did not do, but also about what is acceptable moral behavior. He said marriage is no longer the only place where sexuality is to be expressed, and he approved of a variety of other sexual arrangements.

Spong said that bishops from Africa and Asia are "'just one step up from witchcraft.... Scientific advances have given us a new way of understanding homosexual people. In dealing with the Third World this knowledge hasn't percolated down... If they feel patronised that's too bad.'" Spong said this in response to African and Asian church leaders who were saying, "We were taught in the Bible that homosexuality is wrong, and so we teach against it." Spong dismissed Africans who told him he was a heretic and a liar, refusing to heed global Christian correction.

But others have listened. Sometimes the Anglican and Episcopalian churches have had their strongest witness coming from Africa back toward the United States and England. Ugandan Archbishop Henry Luke Orombi said, "It's a human failure to understand God's primary design and His calling on us... We tell them it is sin. We don't want to call it anything else. The problem in America and the Western world is they don't want to call it sin. They want to give it another name. We don't want this."

Another African leader, Dr. David Githii, moderator of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, said, "How can they bless what God has called sin? The Bible does not allow this. My people will not accept it... When your missionaries came to our land, they brought us God's Word and told us it is true. Have you forgotten God's Word? Do you no longer believe it?" That is the testimony of godly people in Africa back toward Europeans and Americans who have forgotten God's Word.

The Holy Spirit who led in Acts and sent the gospel first to Africa is now sometimes sending the gospel and true biblical teaching back from Africa to those who need to hear it. This is all the work of the one Spirit who calls us to be one great international, global fellowship—learning from one another, receiving the gospel from one another, and spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Baptism without barriers

It is all symbolized and sealed in baptism. The Ethiopian's great question was, "Why shouldn't I be baptized?" He had heard the good news of Jesus, believed it, and was filled with joy. Why shouldn't he be baptized? He was baptized.

When Peter was witnessing to the Roman Cornelius and his household, he said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47). If people have been baptized by God's own Holy Spirit, who are we to withhold water baptism from them? The church has learned to practice baptism without barriers.

The apostle Paul spoke of this clearly in his letters: "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26-29). You might not have come from Abraham physically, but you are Abraham's seed because of faith in God's promise and because of what Jesus Christ has done.

"You are baptized into one body. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

"You have taken off your old self and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:9-11).

Ephesians 2 perhaps states this most clearly: "Jesus has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... through the cross... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Ephesians 2:14-19). In chapter 4 Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:4-6).

That is the great reality we see traced out in Acts: God includes one nation, then another, then another, teaching them to live together, work together, and spread the gospel together. And it is still happening today. Praise God!

The Book of Acts: Embracing All Nations
By David Feddes
Slide Contents

To the ends of the earth

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Spirit for all

We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues. (Acts 2:11)

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams... The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call. (Acts 2:17,39)

Culture clash in church

The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1)

Seven Spirit-filled men with Greek names were chosen as leaders to handle this problem, including Phillip the evangelist.

Still today different cultures experience practical problems in church.

Scattered to Samaria

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. (Acts 8:1-5)

For centuries Jews and Samaritans despised each other. Nobody volunteered to go to Samaria, but the Spirit drove Philip there.

Gospel for Africa

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an

important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. (Acts 8:26-30)

Future for foreigners and eunuchs

Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely exclude me from his people." And let not any eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree." For this is what the LORD says: "I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (Isaiah 56:3-7).

Prophecy Explained

"Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture [from Isaiah 53]: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. (Acts 8:30-38)

New vision for a new covenant

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:15).

Roman sends for Jew

Cornelius saw an angel appear in his house and say, “Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.” (Acts 11:13)

Angels expand missions

- An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road.”(Acts 8:26).
- As angel told Cornelius, “Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter.” (Acts 11:13)
- Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people. (Revelation 14:6)
- Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14)

Spirit Without Favoritism

“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right...” While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. (Acts 10:34, 44)

Scattered among Greeks

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. (Acts 11:19-20)

The Spirit used persecution in Jerusalem to scatter Christian Jews not only among half-breed Samaritans but also among Greeks.

Accepting cultural variety

- Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1)
- *The Holy Spirit guided a leadership meeting in Jerusalem to accept Gentile Christians without requiring them to become like Jews.*
- Still today the Spirit guides us to accept others without forcing our culture on them.

Facing Gentile prejudice

“These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” (Acts 16:18-20)

Facing Jewish prejudice

A Jewish mob in Jerusalem wanted to kill Paul when they thought he had brought a non-Jew into the temple. They settled down somewhat when Roman soldiers moved to restore order. Then they listened to Paul speak for awhile until he said that Jesus had told him, “Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!” (Acts 22:21-22)

One race: the human race

From one man he 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. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him... now he commands **all people everywhere** to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:26-27)

Not for Jews?

Perception: Christianity might be okay for Gentiles, but it’s impossible to accept Jesus as Messiah and still remain a good Jew.

Reality: Jesus and his whole family were Jewish. All of Jesus’ apostles were Jewish, and all New Testament writers except Luke were Jewish.

Not for India?

Perception: Christianity is new to India and doesn’t really belong there.

Reality: The apostle Thomas went to India. For almost 2,000 years, there have been Christian people in India. Bishop Pantaenus of Alexandria moved from Africa to India about 1,800 years ago. A bishop from India was at the Council of Nicea in the year 325.

Not for Africa?

Perception: Islam was the original religion of Africans. Christianity was the religion of slave owners and segregationists.

Reality: Christians were in Africa 600 years before Muslims invaded Africa. Muslims profited from the slave trade.

Racist clergy

The Black People of Australia, exactly the same race as the African Negro, cannot take in the Gospel. All attempts to bring them to a knowledge of the true God have as yet failed utterly ... Poor brutes in human shape ... they must perish off the face of the earth like brute beasts. (*Charles Kingsley, chaplain to the queen in the late 1800s, canon of Westminster, Cambridge professor*)

Mission Wisdom

What I have seen here would shatter to pieces everything that the famous preacher had proclaimed... Had Christ been brought in the same way in other places, equally blessed results would as surely have followed, for He is the same yesterday, today, and for ever. (John Paton)

The twenty-first century is the century of global Christianity. Since God expects all Christians to be about advancing his rule in the world, mission today must become the responsibility of the global church. People of color now represent the majority of Christians in the world... Making the case for Christianity on the basis that it is a worldwide global religion can, especially in Africa, erase the stigma of Christianity as a white man's religion. (*Tite Tienou*).

- Embassy of God, the largest church in Ukraine, is led by Nigerian Pastor Sunday Adelaja.
- The world's largest church is Yoido Full Gospel Church, led by David Yonggi Cho

Global Christian correction?

Liberal American Bishop John Shelby Spong said bishops from Africa and Asia are "just one step up from witchcraft.... Scientific advances have given us a new way of understanding homosexual people. In dealing with the Third World this knowledge hasn't percolated down...If they feel patronised that's too bad."

It's a human failure to understand God's primary design and His calling on us... We tell them it is sin. We don't want to call it anything else. The problem in America and the Western world is they don't want to call it sin. They want to give it another name. We don't want this. (Henry Luke Orombi, Archbishop, Church of Uganda)

How can they bless what God has called sin? The Bible does not allow this. My people will not accept it... When your missionaries came to our land, they brought us God's Word and told us it

is true. Have you forgotten God's Word? Do you no longer believe it? (Dr. David Githii, Moderator, Presbyterian Church of East Africa, 4.2 million members)

Baptism without barriers

- Ethiopian: "Why shouldn't I be baptized?"
- Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26-28).

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:13).

You have taken off your old self ... and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Col 3:9-11)

One family

Jesus has destroyed the the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... through the cross...For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household... There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 2:14-19; 4:4-6)