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## Missions Institute and the Holy Spirit

Any missionary that reaches the field without attending the IWM Mission Institute is at a definite disadvantage. The missionary suffers, the family suffers, and the work of the church suffers. I believe that and the great majority of those who experienced the field first and returned to an Institute later have expressed that. However, experience has taught most of us that the Institute helps us recognize a problem in our cross-cultural lives when we see it, but only the Holy Spirit can guide us to a right solution.

This is why Acts 21 is part of the Institute curriculum. There we find a real life situation where accepted expectations, human logic, and common sense were not enough. I believe God had Paul's experience recorded in Acts 21 to remind people that easy answers are not always right answers. Some guidance from above is needed! That is why the Holy Spirit was given to the church.

The first verses of Acts 21 tell of Paul's journey back to Jerusalem with some of his associates as they bring the offerings given by the churches in Asia (Rom 15:25-28). Here the Holy Spirit is active in informing the church that Paul will face hardship in Jerusalem (Acts 21:4, 10-11). It is interesting that the church is led by the Holy Spirit to try to persuade Paul not to continue his journey to the city (21:4); but Paul says he is "drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit (20:22). Is this a reminder that people must listen to the Spirit's guidance for them personally, rather than attempt to decide what the Spirit is saying to someone else?

Paul and his entourage arrives in Jerusalem in verse 17; and "all the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed [them] cordially" (NLT). As the story continues, one can read that there were some questions about Paul's mission work; but I believe their joy in seeing him was still real. They even praised God when "Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry" (19, 20).

It is possible for Christians to have differences of opinion and still accept each other as fellow members of God's family and mission.

Then the brothers and sisters brought up their concerns. It is here that people can discover how hard it is to be the right kind of missionary and make the right kind of mission decisions if they rely on their own intuition or wisdom. The people said to Paul:

You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and they all take the law of Moses very seriously. Our Jewish Christians here at Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews living in the Gentile world to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They say that you teach people not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. Now what can be done? For they will certainly hear that you have come. (21:20-22 NLT)

How often is God's mission hindered by false stories about His missionaries? Thousands of believers in Jerusalem had heard erroneous mission reports about Paul. They had been "informed" (NIV); they did not just "hear about it." They were told that Paul was telling the Jews who were scattered around the world outside of Jerusalem that they did not have to keep the laws of Moses anymore.

The rumors were wrong. Paul never considered it his mission to tell Jews that they should stop following their traditional Jewish ways. He believed with all of his heart that they were not necessary laws and regulations for salvation in Jesus; but he did not preach against doing them. In fact, he had Timothy circumcised because it was known that his father was a Jew (Acts 16:13). However, the damage was done by the story; and the folk in Jerusalem were quite disturbed about what Paul was supposedly doing out there in the mission field.

The leaders of the church asked, "What shall we do about this?" (21:22 GW). This was just a rhetorical question, because they already had a plan to calm the explosive situation. They told Paul,

Here's our suggestion. We have four men here who have taken a vow and are preparing to shave their heads. Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, and pay for them to have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws. (21:23-25 NLT)

Some Jewish Christians were making a vow. Since it was customary

for someone to provide the sacrifices for the poor who were taking a religious vow like this, they asked Paul to pay that expense and join in the ritual. This was to show that he really did believe as they did and that he had not thrown out the law of Moses after all.

It is important to realize that the leaders were not asking that the Gentile converts be circumcised. Apparently the Jerusalem believers as a whole were only concerned that the Christian Jews of the diaspora still act appropriately like Jews. James and the other leaders in Jerusalem allowed the Gentiles to be different—just like Paul thought they should be; but they were intent on having the Jews still look like Jews! James made this clear by saying: “As for the Gentile Christians, all we ask of them is what we already told them in a letter: They should not eat food offered to idols, nor consume blood, nor eat meat from strangled animals, and they should stay away from all sexual immorality” (21:26 NLT).

This brings some important mission questions to mind. These are questions without easy answers; questions that God must help to answer as he provides the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our own intuitions, logic, or Mission Institute training is not enough.

The first mission question is this: How far do we go in allowing completely different ways of doing church—and still consider them all to be God’s will? That is the question being faced in this chapter of Acts. How much should the church in Jerusalem look just like the Jewish-convert church in Ephesus? How much should Paul’s way of doing church look appropriate to the believers in Jerusalem?

There was a big difference between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile converts. The average Adventist probably does not think of this often, but it comes out clearly in this chapter. The Jewish Christians circumcised as a sign of obedience to God. The Gentiles did not. Neither did the Gentile Christians follow many of the other traditional practices of the Jewish church.

How do we know how much difference to allow in the church today? Beyond the 28 fundamental beliefs that are core to what an Adventist is, how much should a Middle Eastern Adventist look like a European Adventist or even act like a European Adventist? How much should a Muslim convert look like a Protestant convert even though they have both become Adventists?

A former General Conference officer was speaking at a church in Pakistan one Sabbath during my years in that country. He told the congregation, “It is so good to be able to attend an Adventist Church on Sabbath when I travel. Adventist churches around the world are all alike; I feel at home!”

Is that the way it needs to be? In fact, should it be that way? Which church is the model church? What if in order to be truly Adventist, the services and activities and styles of the Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University had to be like a village church in India? Or should it be the other way around? If the officer had visited a village church that Sabbath instead of an institutional church, he would have seen a very different Adventist Church. We must realize that a lot of what we do is culturally influenced. Our way of doing church might be okay but it is not necessarily what some other church needs to look like! The organ music at Pioneer Memorial Church is great, but so is the worship at the Pakistani church where they sit on grass mats and sing Psalms to the accompaniment of their tablas and harmoniums.

The Sabbath School lessons covering the book of Acts remind us that there should be differences in the way principles are applied around the world.

As a church spreads around the globe it is imperative that Seventh-day Adventist differentiate between principles and applications. A principle holds good at all times, in all places, and under all conditions and circumstances. On the other hand, an application may be temporary and local in accordance with existing conditions. It is definitely affected by time, place, and circumstances. (Neill 1987:103)

Obviously there is a line at some point where an Adventist of any region ceases to act like an Adventist; but I am afraid we use human thinking to decide where that is. Some of us can tolerate anything! Some of us by nature think all spots and stripes should look identical. This chapter of Acts reminds us that the Holy Spirit led the early church to allow the Gentiles believers to look different from the Jewish believers.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were definitely wrong in demanding Paul and the diaspora converts to be like the Jerusalem Church. And it is good to note that the Apostle did not demand the Jewish Christians to be like him!

Question 2: How far should a Christian missionary go in trying to make everyone happy and comfortable by changing to be like the new context? The leaders of the church in Jerusalem, including the Brother of Christ, felt Paul should make it clear that he was one of them by doing what they would do. And Paul listened and "agreed to their request" (21:26 NLT).

I have no doubt that Paul would never had done something that was wrong to do! Since there is nothing wrong in taking a vow or making sac-

rifices in the Old Testament way he did it as a peacemaker. Paul must be commended for understanding that people need to be reached within by incarnationally entering into their lives. It was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Paul wrote,

When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can. In this way, I gain their confidence and bring them to Christ. But I do not discard the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News, and in doing so I enjoy its blessings. (1 Cor 9:20-23 NLT)

The church needs to hear Paul's message today. A strong theme of Mission Institutes held by the Institute of World Mission has been to remind missionaries of this principle. Mission can only be successful when it is incarnational. Paul teaches us to have the spirit of wanting to fit in with everyone as far as possible.

However, should Paul have done all those things they asked him to? Ellen White writes that it would have been better for God's mission if he had not! First of all, the leaders should not have asked him to do this:

They did not stand nobly in his defense, endeavoring to show the disaffected ones where they were wrong, but sought to effect a compromise by counseling him to pursue a course which in their opinion would remove all cause for misapprehension. (White 1889:403)

And then concerning Paul's response, she writes,

He felt that if by any reasonable concession he could win them to the truth he would remove a great obstacle to the success of the gospel in other places. *But he was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked.*

When we think of Paul's great desire to be in harmony with his brethren, his tenderness toward the weak in the faith, his reverence for the apostles who had been with Christ, and for James, the brother of the Lord, and his purpose to become all things to all men so far as he could without sacrificing principle--when we think of all this, it is less surprising that he was constrained to deviate from the firm, decided course that he had hitherto followed. But instead of accomplishing the desired object, his efforts for conciliation only precipitated the crisis, hastened his predicted sufferings, and resulted in separating him from his brethren, depriving the church of one of its strongest pillars, and bringing sorrow to Christian hearts in every land. (White 1889:405, emphasis added)

After reading this, can we ever feel comfortable again with our easy pat answers to mission questions? Should we do all we can to "be all things to all men" whenever we can. Yes! The Holy Spirit guided Paul to write that for our admonition. Are there times that we need to carefully take a stand different from those around us. Of course! When do we do which? That is the question! May we live so much under the power of the Holy Spirit that God can help us to make the right decision each time.

Will we make the wrong choice sometimes? If Paul could, I am sure God would not be surprised if I do! As we listen for the Spirit's leading, it seems we must take the following counsel to heart in all of our mission relationships:

You should each be converted anew and transformed into the divine likeness. You would better err, if you err at all, on the side of mercy and forbearance than that of intolerance. (White 1885:64)

If you err, it would be better to err on the side of the people than on the side where you cannot reach them. (White 1990:12)

Is this not what Paul did? Every missionary should do the same. Some of us are comfortable with the idea that a church plant for Muslim background believers might look different than their church. Others of us might find it hard to accept. Some of us can see a Muslim background believer having some cultural ways of life different than ours. Some of us might find it hard to feel good with Adventists acting differently. We all need to pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us, both those of us adapting freely and those of us not naturally adapting at all! It is God who knows

what is best for mission and for making disciples. Let none of us get in God's way.

### Summary and Conclusion

The story in Acts 21 occurred in the very real struggles of live mission adventure. Not only were there tough issues that needed Spirit guided answers, there were believers from different backgrounds who saw the solutions differently. Since we, too, live and work in a similarly diverse world, this chapter has important lessons for our mission work today.

1. We are reminded in Acts 21 that God allowed (even condoned) different ways of doing things in Jewish and Gentile convert communities.
2. God directs us to allow differences but to always be careful that we are not straying from principle and God's will, always doing things that will bring God glory as we are directed to do (Rev 14:6).
3. God directed Paul to teach us to "become like" those we are reaching to the extent possible without changing the Gospel we are to share.
4. It is the Spirit that will guide us, not our own personality, culture, traditions, likes, and dislikes.

In Paul's story things were not helped much by Paul's choice to adapt to their wishes. He ends up in prisons for a long time. However, the rest of the book assures us that God was watching over Paul. God used human error to bring the gospel to the gates of the Caesar of Rome. God will make good come out of our mistakes! But that does not mean that we are excused from trying to do things God's way.

The Bible has reminded us today that God's way is not a list of exact rules and strategies for every occasion. We need to be much more attuned to the Holy Spirit than we have been in order to make the right decisions for the Glory of God and for the benefit of His people.

### Works Cited

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