

Breakthroughs of the Early Church

1. Breakthrough in Evangelism

When the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples on Pentecost, *“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”* (Acts 2:4) These other tongues were various Gentile languages.

The crowd at Jerusalem on that day came from at least 15 regions; most of them were devout Jews, and some converted Gentiles. All of them were amazed at seeing the disciples using various Gentile languages “declaring the wonders of God”. This action broke the tradition of using Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek as common languages at that time. It was a strong signal of God to the society that God's gospel will breakthrough the limitation of traditional languages and the salvation will spread to all the Gentiles of the world.

2. Breakthrough in Headquarters-Syndrome

The book of Acts has only 28 chapters. But as far as chapter 7, the Church was still confined in Jerusalem, the headquarters city, and had not stepped out of the city gate. It seems as if the Church had forgotten the Great Commission of the Lord (Acts 1:8).

“Headquarters-Syndrome” is a common phenomenon in the Church, especially among its leaders. Everyone prefers to stay in the safe headquarters to give orders, rather than going to the frontlines to engage in combat. This is true for The Early Church as well as today's.

Thus sometimes God has to use certain “extraordinary means” to force His people “out” in order to fulfill His Great Commission. When we do not “move out willingly”, God will “push”, “force” or even “kick” us out.

As shown in Chapters 7 & 8 of Acts, God smites His self-centered Church and servants with persecution, so that the disciples were scattered (Acts 8:1). As a servant of God put it: “If you do not disperse willingly, you will be dispersed forcefully.”

Chinese Christians have inherited an “inward-looking culture”. To engage in overseas missions has never been our preference, nor choice of action. Over the past half of a century, God has used sufferings to scatter Chinese Christians to many parts of the world, much like the Early Church. Yet instead of preaching the word as the Early Church did, Chinese Christians set up their own “safe havens” wherever they went. Sufferings and chastisements have failed to wake us up! Must we

endure more beatings before we are willing to step out for the Lord? Today, the number of Chinese missionaries falls far behind those of other ethnic groups.

3. Breakthrough in Lay ministries

Who were the early Christians that were scattered by persecution, and spread the gospel? Not the apostles but ordinary disciples, the ordinary brothers and sisters of the church, or the so-called lay believers. This fact is what we should take note of.

The “Headquarters-Syndrome” was deeply ingrained in the minds of the apostles (leaders of the Church), so much so that even persecutions and sufferings could not force them out of the Jerusalem headquarters. Those who first went out of Jerusalem for pioneering mission work were not the leaders but the laity!

4. Breakthrough in Vocational Missionary Service

Praise the Lord! One of the lay believers who went out of Jerusalem for missionary outreach was Philip, one of the seven deacons of the Jerusalem Church. (He became the first vocational missionary of the New Testament era.)

Being the scattered, he not only was a pioneer in missions, but also paved the way for the apostles who came out later. He was the first Christian who went down to the city of Samaria where he preached the gospel, performed miracles, and established an effective ministry, resulting in a “*great joy in that city*”(Acts 8:8). When the home church in Jerusalem heard about the news, they sent two apostles, Peter and John to investigate. Only on their way back to Jerusalem, they preached “*the gospel in many Samaritan villages*” (Acts 8:25). May the Lord raise up many more Philips among today's churches!

5. Breakthrough in Cross-Cultural Missions

The Early Church first ministered to people of the same culture in Jerusalem and Judea; then to people in a related culture in Samaria; starting from Acts 8:26, the ministry became cross-cultural.

Philip's witnessing to the Ethiopian eunuch led the angel of the Lord was a cross-cultural ministry. The eunuch was an important government official and a pious God-fearing man. He accepted Philip's message, believed in Christ and was baptized, and became the first fruit of cross-cultural mission of the Early Church.

6. Breakthrough in Jewish Attitude Towards the Gentiles

The Jews, especially the apostles, used to follow strictly the laws of Moses which consider

certain animals, fish and birds unclean (Leviticus 11:2-47). The Gentiles were considered unclean also. But by faith and by the grace of God, Jews and Gentiles alike be cleansed by the precious blood of Jesus Christ and both become the people of God.

This important doctrine of salvation had to be understood and preached by the leaders of the Early Church. God dealt with Peter first since he is the key figure in the first 12 chapters of Acts.

In Joppa Peter had a vision (Acts 10), in which for three times he saw many animals, creeping things and birds which were considered unclean, and heard a voice telling him to kill them and eat. *“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”* (Acts 10:4) It sounded like that Peter was more pure and law-abiding than God. God taught him: *“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”* (Acts 10:15)

It was not until Peter was led to the house of the Gentile Cornelius and saw God's grace coming to this family that it dawned on him: *“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accept men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”* (Acts 10:34, 35) It certainly has not been a simple matter to liberate a Jewish man from his law-keeping tradition, to sharing God's grace with the Gentiles.

7. Breakthrough in Outreach Target

While being thankful to the Lord for the scattered disciples who preached the gospel elsewhere, we are somewhat disappointed in their *“telling the message only to Jews”*. (Acts 11:19) Physically they were outside of Jerusalem, but in their minds they still had not completely shaken off the bondage of the "law".

Chinese churches are in a similar situation today. Certainly, they have sent out missionaries overseas. But after reaching destinations, most missionaries only work among the “Chinese”, or serving the “Chinese” church, almost repeating the scene recorded in Acts 11:29.

Thank God, not all disciples acted this way. In Acts 11:20: *“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.”* Surprisingly, the disciples from some “obscure places” were more open-minded and more understanding of God’s desire than those from the “home base”! They are our models today!

8. Second Breakthrough in Headquarters-Syndrome

The first breakthrough in the mind of the Jerusalem Church was brought about by the success of

Philip's ministry in Samaria; the Church was touched by the news and sent out Peter and John.

This second breakthrough was brought about by the disciples' fruitful ministry in Antioch: "*The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*" (Acts 11:21) Once again the Jerusalem Church was touched and sent Barnabas.

Each time the Lord prompted the Jerusalem Church, but the church seems to have remained passive in missionary outreach.

9. Breakthrough in a Mission-Minded Church(Modality)

From Acts 13 on, Paul became the central figure, and the church in Antioch came out to be the first strong mission-oriented church in the New Testament era, overshadowing the church in Jerusalem. Being newly established and greatly in need of pastors and workers, the Antioch Church nevertheless was obedient to the call of the Lord in not only sending out missionaries but also sending out their best members(Paul and Barnabas)! Oh, may God raise up many Antioch churches among the Chinese Church today.

10. Breakthrough in the Formation of Mission Teams(Sodality)

Philip and the scattered disciples of his time started ministering wherever they went. But beginning of sending a formal mission team by a church was recorded in Acts 13.

When the co-workers of the Antioch church were praying and fasting, the Holy Spirit commanded them to: "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" (Acts 13:2) The co-workers obeyed the Holy Spirit, and having "*fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and sent them off.*"

Two factors contribute to the success of a missional ministry: the calling of God and the obedience of men. God has issued the call to the Church two thousand years ago. The problem has always been men's lack of obedience. The co-workers of the Antioch church (equivalent to pastors, evangelists, elders, deacons, etc., of churches today) obeyed the Holy Spirit without hesitation. None of them raised any opposition, by saying: "Lord, we are a young church. We need to nurture our people first. We will consider missions after we ourselves have become mature." Nor did any one say: "Lord, the church has run out of room. We have a building project next year. Maybe we will consider missions after the project is finished." Certainly, no one said: "Lord, we do not have enough workers ourselves. Maybe after a few years, when we have enough workers, we can organize a missions committee and decide on mission ministry!"

Thank God, the Antioch church obeyed the leading of the Holy Spirit and sent out the earliest and the most effective mission teams in Church history. Their footsteps covered all over the Mediterranean coast regions. Their messages reached the whole world with lasting influence. The teams included Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Mark, Timothy, Silas, Titus, Priscilla, Aquila, etc.

11. Breakthrough in Spiritual Gifts and Training

Of course, gifts from God are needed in missionary work and gospel preaching. Philip had the gifts of preaching the gospel and performing miracles. Barnabas had the gifts of faith and comforting/encouraging others.

Paul's had even more gifts and training. He was discipled by the Old Testament scholar Gamaliel; was gifted in preaching, hermeneutics, theology and apologetics; and had the gifts of writing, mission ministry, church planting, disciple training and celibacy. He was given with almost all kinds of gifts, in one person.

In addition, he was fluent in the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek languages, “a Jew of the Jews” as well as a Roman citizen!

He was such a “rare genius”, originally persecuting the Lord. Yet the Lord called him, tamed him on the road to Damascus, and then used him as no one before, making him the major Church leader.

O brother Paul, how we respect you and admire you. You indeed were fit to say: “*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.*” (I Cor. 11:1)

Here, we may have realized that God gave the two key persons in the Old and New Testament, Abraham (Father of Faith) and Paul (Father of Mission), the same command – world evangelization! To the former, He said: “*All the people on earth will be blessed through you.*” (Genesis 12:3), and to the latter, “*This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.*” (Acts 9:15) Thus we see that “world evangelization” is the unchanging will of God throughout the Old and New Testaments.

12. Breakthrough in the Tradition of Circumcision

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and the people of Israel, setting them apart from all other peoples. (Genesis 17: 9-13)

Circumcision is an outward mark on a man's body signifying his inward faith and change of life.

Thus Paul said: *“nor is circumcision merely outward and physical ... and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”* (Romans 2:28-29) And: *“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation.”* (Galatians 6:15)

The Church at that time however, did not fully understand this important truth. When Peter returned from the house of Cornelius, he was rebuked by the church: *“You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”* (Acts 11:3) Peter then explained to them how the grace of God came upon Cornelius’ family, and said at the end: *“who was I to think that I could oppose God?”*(Acts 11:17)

Hearing the testimony of their leader and seeing the manifestation of God's will, the Church finally realized: *“they had no further objections and praised God, saying: ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.’”*(Acts 11:18)

Circumcision has become unnecessary not only for the Jewish Christians but also for Paul's Gentile coworkers, such as Titus. (Galatians 2:1-5)

This was a momentous event. The Church began to understand the essence of the Law and to have a broader mind.

13. Breakout from Synagogues

Before the beginning of New Testament church on the Pentecost, there were only Jewish synagogues. The Lord Jesus often entered into synagogues to preach.

Shortly after the Jerusalem Church on Pentecost and the establishment of the church in Antioch (Acts 11), there were no other churches. Thus Paul and Barnabas went mostly to the synagogues to preach during their early missionary journeys.

As the number of believers increased, Paul of course did not want to send them to the synagogues (nor were the synagogues willing to accept them, unless they accept Judaism). Thus, Paul established churches for the believers to help them grow. *“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord.”* (Acts 14:23) They also visited them repeatedly.

Today's Chinese churches need to recognize that God wants us to plant "churches" everywhere, not only “Chinese churches”. Yet some Chinese churches are somewhat like “Jewish synagogues” in their ministry guidelines and mindset (closed and exclusive). Thus some people who are aware of

this problem suggested recently that perhaps Chinese churches should omit the word “Chinese” in the name and open services to other races. This suggestion is a sign of maturity, something worth deliberation.

14. Breakthrough in Division of Labor

Paul and Barnabas had a meeting in Jerusalem with James, Peter and John. The meeting was congenial and they reached a consensus. They divided the labor in the task of world evangelization: Paul and Barnabas to work among the Gentiles, while James, Peter and John among the Jews. (Galatians 2:7-9)

Thank God, under His repeated instruction and guidance, the leaders of the Early Church finally accepted “world evangelization” and the concept of “Great Commission” were finally clarified.

Yet, this division of labor was far from being balanced: The Early Church had 12 apostles and 3 leaders (James the brother of Jesus, Paul and Barnabas). Between them, 13 would work among the Jews (estimated at 3 million), only 2 among the Gentiles (estimated at about 900 million).

In any case, the direction for the gospel ministry was set, and the work of world evangelization definitely commenced.

15. Breakthrough in Jewish Traditions

As recorded in Galatians 2, when Peter first went to the Gentile church in Antioch, he mingled with the Gentiles, eating meals and fellowshiping with them. But after the arrival of some people from the Jerusalem Church (from James), he changed his behavior: “*He began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray*”! (Gal. 2:12, 13)

This incident shows how enormous the pressure of the Jewish tradition was, even those two apostles could not completely withstand. It shows that breaking through the bondage of tradition requires courage and sacrifice. Peter was publicly rebuked by Paul as a result.

Paul stated further in Galatians 3:28: “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*”!

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! This is the true “Liberation Theology”! The Book of Galatians is the best and most accurate text for the “Liberation Theology” – freedom in Christ! Christ has freed us from all unbiblical concepts, traditions and doctrines.

16. Breakthrough in Cooperation between ministers and laity

In Old Testament times, there was a clear distinction between the priests that served in the temple (Levites) and ordinary Israelites. Ordinary Israelites could not perform priestly functions. Any transgression would bring severe consequences, as in the case of King Uzziah (II Chronicles 26:16-23).

But in the New Testament era, this separating wall is demolished. 1 Peter 2:9 said: “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.*” God has made every Christian a priest (“the Priesthood of the Laity”), i.e., every Christian has a priestly responsibility – to lead people to Christ.

Paul followed this teaching. A clear example is his coworkers, Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:1-4). This couple was tent-making ordinary Christians, or “laity”. They deeply love the Lord and His servants. Paul referred to them by saying: “...*my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me,*” (Romans 16:3-4a). They also knew God's word so well that they even instructed evangelist Apollos (Acts 18:26). And they hosted a church in their house. (I Corinthians 16:19)

Paul accepted this couple of devoted “lay believers” as his co-workers. He trusted them, stayed with them at Corinth, and worked with them as tentmakers. What a marvelous example of partnership between full-time and part-time workers!

17. Breakthrough in Denominational Leadership

Jerusalem Church was in reality the “mother church” of the Antioch Church, which in turn, was the “mother church” of many other new churches, though not in name. For example, when a doctrinal conflict arose in the Antioch Church they sent delegates to the “mother church” in Jerusalem for advice. (Acts 15) Also, at the end of their missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas reported not only to the Antioch Church but also to the Jerusalem Church.

In today's terms, the Jerusalem Church with their apostles and elders functioned much like a denominational headquarters. Their judgements and decisions were authoritative.

We are particularly pleased with the Jerusalem Council as recorded in Acts 15! They cordially received the representatives of the “daughter church”; the apostles and elders “met to consider this question” carefully; they listened to Paul and Barnabas patiently; Peter and James, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and based on personal experience and the words of the prophets, made a wise and proper proposition, which gained acceptance of the congregation. What a wonderful

decision! What a wonderful council! What a group of wonderful denominational leaders!

In addition, they wrote a letter to the “daughter church” and sent Judas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch and to help deliver the letter. No wonder the Bible recorded, *“The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.”* (Acts 15:31)