

“The New Antiochian Practice”

Acts 11: 19-30

Rogation Sunday B, Boise, 2021

The name for this Sunday comes from a Latin word that means “asking.” “Whatever you ask [the Father] in My Name, this He will do” [Jn 14: 13b], Jesus tells His disciples at the Last Supper. In the portion of that long discourse that we have for our Gospel today, He also tells them, “You did not choose me, but I chose you . . .” [15: 16a]. Divine predestination is a mystery. Those who try either to explain it or explain it away usually end up the distorting Christian message. We are well aware that we are here now, to worship God, because we choose to be. We have the freedom to spend our Sunday mornings doing other things. Yet, if we believe the words of Our Lord on this subject to be true, we must also accept that we believe and follow Him because He chose us. And such is the primary reason. When we hear the Messiah calling to become His disciple, we know that a refusal of the call would be fatal, death to the soul.

The account we read from The Acts of the Apostles shows us how, by God’s providence, some evangelists of the Jewish church in Jerusalem were led by circumstances to open a new way for non-Jews to be brought into the Kingdom. The storyline here begins with the deacon Stephen’s martyrdom. We don’t read about the martyrdom now, because we are saving it for the Feast of St Stephen on the day after Christmas. We will be able to observe it with a Eucharist this year, because we will have a place to do it. Stephen if you can remember, was, like Philip, one of the original deacons, all of whom were “Hellenists,” or Greek-speaking Jews. Our reading today informs us that a persecution of the Jewish Christians followed Stephen’s stoning, and that some of them fled Jerusalem because of it. They shared the Gospel in the new places where they settled, but only with other Jews. Some Greek-speaking Jews who had moved to Jerusalem

from Cyprus and Cyrene, and accepted the Gospel after hearing the Apostles preach, fled to Antioch in northern Syria, which today is on the Turkish side of the border. And it was there that something new occurred.

This subset of Greek-speaking Jews, moving back into the Diaspora, began preaching to Greek-speakers who were not Jews. “And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” A congregation forms, the first to include Gentiles. This was about the same time that Peter baptized Cornelius in Caesarea. But here in Syrian Antioch we have enough Gentile believers to change the character of the local church and the way it went about its mission.

First you need to understand that the Jews have always accepted converts. St Luke refers to “proselytes” who were present to hear Peter preach at Pentecost. But a “proselyte,” the way he is using the term, was someone who was a Gentile and then became a Jew, which for a man or boy required circumcision. Both male and female proselytes observed the other practices of the Torah to the extent they were able outside of the Holy City. Now proselytes were fully accepted as Jews both inside and outside Jerusalem, and there is no reason to think that those among them who became convinced that Jesus was the risen Messiah and joined the Church did not continue their Jewish practices.

But these new Greek-speaking Christians in Antioch were not Gentiles who had become Jews. They were Gentiles who remained Gentiles and were accepted as such by the Jewish Christians who welcomed them into their fellowship. Men and boys were baptized without having to be circumcised, and none of either sex was asked to change his or her diet or do any of the other things that the Torah required of the Chosen People. By their faith in the risen Messiah, these Gentiles joined the remnant of Israel without the external observances of an Israelite. And that, of course, is what we do today. But if we read on in The Acts, we find that, for many in the mother church back in

Jerusalem, the new Antiochian practice was a bridge too far in the campaign to make disciples of the nations. Weren't the Greeks and Romans and Persians also to learn the ways of God set forth in the Torah?

But when the Apostles themselves hear of it, they send liberal-minded Barnabas to Antioch. When he witnesses how the Gospel is spreading and bringing the Gentiles into the Kingdom, he goes to Tarsus and brings back Saul with him; for the two have met earlier in Jerusalem. Saul, who as you know later took the name Paul, then learns of the new practice in Antioch, and after the congregation sends him and Barnabas on a mission to Cyprus, they take the practice to other towns. As I'm sure you know, St Paul goes to great lengths in his Epistles to defend Christianity without Torah observance, as he spreads the Faith far and wide. When the Apostle states in Galatians that we are "justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law" [Gal 2: 16], he means specifically the performance of works ordered by the Torah. Of course, Anglicans extend the principle to other kinds of work also.

There is one other thing we must not miss in our first reading today.

For a whole year [Paul and Barnabas] met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Why did they choose that new name for themselves several years after the Church was brought to life by the Spirit at Pentecost? The original Jewish community of believers thought of themselves as Jews who saw the fulfillment of the promises in the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants in the sacrificial death and glorious Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. They were Jews who were asking other Jews to join them in proclaiming that message, so that God's blessing could now go out to the other nations, bringing them under the Messiah's just rule and preparing them for His visible Return to judge the quick and the dead. But now that the community in Antioch had all these

uncircumcised Gentiles among their number, they looked around and said, “‘Messianic Jew’ no longer describes who we are. We need a broader identity. How about “Christian?” “Christ is the Greek word for messiah; so let us make ourselves known as Christians, or followers of Christ, the Anointed One.

History is a good thing to know, and if you are a Christian, then I have been talking about your history. But here is my final query: Will knowledge of the history we read in The Acts, along with my commentary on it, make any difference in how we practice the Christian religion today? Does it not call in to question the common assumption that Christians are Christians and Jews Jews? As you are probably aware, more than a few are experimenting with the option of practicing both Judaism and Christianity together in their “Messianic congregations” today. St Paul would have condemned any claim that such was the preferred method, but he himself behaved religiously as a Jew when among Jews, so as to gain a hearing. The both-and option may, for all I know, play a part in fulfilling the prophecy Paul makes in Romans 11 that, in the end, the biological descendants of Abraham will profess that Jesus is Lord, and thus “all Israel will be saved” [Rom 11: 26a].

That is one thought. But let us not overlook the millions of Jews who, in the past two millennia, have joined ordinary congregations, which do not make available the both-and option. After all, most Jews in our country today eat pork and shellfish. I have, in some of the congregations I’ve pastored, had parishioners who were Jewish and attended a synagogue in their youth. Just a few days ago, a friend of mine in the parish in which I was confirmed, 39 years ago, called me and said that they have a young woman attending who is Jewish. My friend’s wife was able to say to her, “I’m Jewish too, and so is our rector!” She did not say, the rector and I were Jewish: rather, we are Jewish.

Friends, in sharing the Gospel or inviting someone to church, the shoe is now on the other foot. If we know a Jew who is seeking truth and not attending a

synagogue (and most Jews today do not), then invite him or her to our Gentile congregation. If the person joins, it will no longer be purely Gentile. We will be like the congregation in Antioch we read about today, in which the members first called themselves “Christians.” What’s more, given St Paul’s prophecy concerning the days before the Messiah’s Return, by making such an invitation you could be an instrument of its fulfillment. For the purpose of the Gospel is to bring persons of all nations together to praise God and His Anointed along side Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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