



Principles of Cross-Cultural/Ethnic Ministry: The Stories of Barnabas and Paul and the Jerusalem Council

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How should a congregation or a church body carry out cross-cultural ministry? Are there practical, biblical guidelines that we can follow?

In this article I propose that we have such guidelines in the opening chapters of the book of Acts. As we trace the story of the Jerusalem church moving into ministry among the surrounding Gentile nations, we have divinely inspired and divinely blessed principles of ethnic ministry. This story is basically the accounts of the partnership between Barnabas and Saul (aka Paul) and of the Jerusalem Council.

A. Principles in Conducting Cross-Cultural/Ethnic Ministry

1. The Story of Barnabas and Paul

a. Barnabas: “Son of Encouragement”

The story of Barnabas and Paul in the book of Acts begins with the sudden introduction of Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37. The previous passage had described the exemplary life of the early church in Jerusalem as the new “light to the world.” Both in these preceding verses (Acts 4:34-35) and in the prior description of the church (Acts 2:44-45), Luke had recorded how these first believers were so concerned for the needy that they willingly sold their ancestral properties so that there would be “no needy person among them.” (4:34)

Peculiarly, Luke then goes on to highlight how one of these first believers, one Joseph from Cyprus, had sold a field to add to the common fund (4:36-37). We get a hint as to why Luke would want to give prominence to this one person’s act when he reports about the general character of Joseph. He was so admired for his generally giving character that the early church had given him the nickname of “Barnabas, “son of encouragement” (that is, “having the character of encouragement”).

Luke goes on to recount in Acts 9 how Saul led the early attempt to eradicate this heretical movement in Judaism. Saul is dramatically met by the One Whose church he is persecuting, and the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith in Saul’s heart. Saul now becomes a bold and convincing evangelist for the faith in Damascus, and he in turn has to flee for his life. However, when he tries to join the fellowship of believers back in Jerusalem, “they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (9:26).

In steps the “son of encouragement.” “Barnabas took him (Saul) and brought him to the apostles” (9:27). Because of Barnabas’ testimony and support on behalf of Saul, the church withdrew its opposition to Saul’s evangelistic activities. However, it appears that they quickly found an excuse to remove him from their midst.

The Grecian Jews with whom Saul was debating “tried to kill him,” so the church immediately sent Saul back to his home territory of Tarsus, for his own protection. Perhaps because of lingering resentment, perhaps because of lingering suspicion, the church managed to free themselves of Saul’s uneasy presence among them. They tolerated Saul only because Barnabas had put his good name behind him, but they were seemingly glad to see him go.

b. Barnabas: Leader of the Mission to the Gentiles

Saul was now gone from the scene, apparently never to be in the forefront again. Barnabas, in contrast, rises in stature and leadership in the early church. In fact, Barnabas now becomes the officially delegated “bishop” for the first Gentile church. Barnabas is the one the mother church entrusts with the leadership and nurture of the fledgling outbreak of faith among the Gentiles in Antioch. God richly blessed his godly leadership there, for Luke records: “He was a good man,

full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord” (11:24).

Barnabas is the great, historic, saintly missionary to the Gentiles. The mother church had sent the Gentiles the best leader they had. The Gentiles had recognized the love of God in him and had responded in large numbers. All of subsequent Christian history would seemingly honor “St. Barnabas” as the mighty founder of the Gentile church.

However, such high status was not Barnabas’ goal or character. Luke records that Barnabas immediately remembered Saul, the convert who had so effectively and boldly witnessed to the faith among his own Grecian/Gentile people. “Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch” (11:25)

Barnabas mentored Saul in Antioch. “For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the (Gentile) church and taught great numbers of people” (11:26). Here and in the subsequent accounts, the primacy of Barnabas is clear, as Luke always lists Barnabas’ name before Saul’s (11:30, 12:25, 13-2-3). When God healed a lame man at Lystra through Paul, the people began to worship Barnabas and Paul as gods. Significantly, they identified Barnabas as the clear leader, thinking him to be Zeus, the head of the Roman pantheon, and Paul to be Hermes, Zeus’ messenger (14:11-12).

c. Barnabas: Advocate to the Mother Church

The Holy Spirit used the missionary effort of Barnabas and Paul to spread the gospel around the Gentile world. Many new congregations were founded. However, there were Jewish believers who felt that these new congregations were not authentically biblical. They were not following the laws prescribed by God in Holy Scripture. They said, according to Acts 15:1: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” These reports back to the mother church in Jerusalem precipitated the first Church Council.

There was a “sharp dispute and debate” between some of the Jewish Christians and these Gentile missionaries. No doubt, the Jerusalem listened with rapt attention when their own highly esteemed leader spoke about “everything God had done through them” (15:4) Their great missionary to the Gentiles had returned with moving stories of God’s blessing, and he had brought along Saul whom they would once again tolerate for Barnabas’ sake.

Peter and Jesus’ brother James spoke up on behalf of Barnabas’ and Paul’s position, and the council of apostles and elders resolved to approve their work. They drafted a letter of apology to the Gentile congregations for the harassment and confusion that some of their congregation had perpetrated. They wrote” “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you...” (15:28).

We will look more deeply into the process and conclusions of this Spirit-guided council. But first we need to reflect on other elements of this divinely inspired story in order to ascertain the principles for ethnic ministry outreach in our own time and place.

2. Principles Derived from the Story

a. Send the Best

When it came time to delegating somebody to work in cross-cultural ministry, the Jerusalem church chose the best. No doubt, they would have loved to keep this “son of encouragement” among themselves. Who would not have loved to have “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” among them, especially one who had the spiritual gift of encouragement besides?

However, the Jerusalem congregation did not think of their own needs and desires. They put the needs of the new Gentile congregations above their own. We see in Acts 13:1-3, that the Antioch church ended up doing the same. They too chose the best to be sent away as missionaries.

Clearly, these early Christians were giving priority to their Lord’s last command: “Go and make disciples of all nations (Greek: “ethnoi” = “people groups”). They must dedicate their best for the most important. They knew what the prime purpose of the church is, and they chose their best to carry it out.

Today also established congregations have the need for strong, respected, attractive leaders. Who wouldn’t want a person like Barnabas to be their pastor or congregation chairman? However, when an opportunity arises to take the Gospel to a whole new people group, do we then think that this work deserves only our best, our most able, our most gifted, our most Spirit-filled?

The first principle that we discern from our study of first century ethnic ministry is that the mother church must dedicate its best leaders for this work

b. Provide a Respected Advocate

Barnabas’ role was key not only in developing and guiding the work in the Gentile world. His role was key also with the mother church. The Jerusalem congregation knew, respected, and trusted Barnabas. They would listen to his testimony. They would hesitate to criticize his policies and actions. They knew Barnabas’ intentions would only be selfless and mission-centered. There is little doubt, from a human standpoint, that the proceedings of the Jerusalem Council would have been very different if only Paul were there to testify.

There will be many controversies and unsettling decisions when the Gospel moves into a new culture. The sending church will often have misgivings because they do not understand the dynamics of this new culture in which the Gospel is taking root. The new congregations seek the approval and support of the mother church. They respect these mothers and fathers in the faith, and they wither under any criticism from them. They need someone from the mother church to advocate and interpret on their behalf.

Every new ethnic ministry needs a Barnabas. They need someone the mother church trusts, especially when they get reports that disturb them. Someone needs to convince the mother church to continue supporting and embracing these new Christians, even when they don't totally understand what's going on. Without a Barnabas to advocate on their behalf, the new ethnic congregations will feel quite helpless and uncertain. Without a Barnabas to trust, the mother church might well prematurely and erringly withdraw crucial support.

The second principle that we derive from this study, therefore, is that some trusted person from the mother church must serve as an advocate for the new work.

c. Identify Ethnic Leaders

It is very striking in the biblical narrative what happens immediately after Barnabas is established as the highly respected and charismatic leader in Antioch. Luke writes: "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul." Barnabas knew that his role must only be temporary and eventually secondary. Real leadership must come from within the ethnic group.

Barnabas knew what this work required. He had seen it in Saul. He had seen Saul capably defend the faith both with Jews and with Greeks. Barnabas knew that Saul would have credibility and persuasiveness that he could never have. He knew that these new believers needed to have someone from among themselves that they could look up to. Only then would they believe that they could lead and promote their own church and mission to their own people.

Saul could provide this most essential ingredient to the health and growth of this new ethnic church. Barnabas never could, for he would always be an outsider. The new believers would respect and honor him, but they could never follow and emulate him. That could only happen through one of their own. In the words of John the Baptist before him, Barnabas knew that "He must increase and I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

It takes a special kind of person to step down so that others might rise. Only persons of such selfless mentality should be in cross-cultural, ethnic ministry. The first responsibility of any missionary from the mother church is to find his replacement, even as Jesus Himself did when He called His disciples.

The third principle is to quickly and selflessly identify leaders from among the ethnic group.

d. Establish a Mentoring Relationship

Simply identifying and establishing the ethnic leader is not enough. The mother church agent must patiently and persistently mentor the new leaders. Luke informs us that Barnabas mentored Saul for a year in Antioch. After the Antioch congregation commissioned Barnabas and others (significantly, Saul is listed last in this group of five) to expand the work in the Gentile world, we can surmise that this first missionary trip lasted at least another year. Therefore, up till the Jerusalem Council, Barnabas had Saul at his side continuously for at least two years.

We know from several incidents and comments in the New Testament, that Paul was not the easiest person to get along with. He was not like Barnabas. He was no “son of encouragement.” Barnabas did not try to make a clone of himself. He simply tried to mold and direct Saul to use his considerable gifts of intellect and passion in the ways that would enable him to be all that he could be in the Lord’s service. Saul was a spiritually gifted evangelist; from Barnabas he needed to learn churchmanship.

Mentoring is a demanding job. It is primarily teaching by example. You have to walk the talk. In the Great Mentor Jesus’ words after He had washed His disciples’ feet on His final night with them: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13:15). Indeed, St. Paul would continue that spiritual mentoring tradition himself with his congregations: “I urge you to imitate me” (I Cor 4:16, also Phil 4:9).

Mentoring is also a selfless activity. The mentor must think only of developing and enabling the mentee. He is grooming his replacement. He expects that this ethnic leader will be different. He knows that the expectations of and requirements for leadership in different ethnic groups are different. All the mentor can do is provide the example of servant leadership. The new leader must be free to apply that principle in the way that his culture fames it. The mentor does not judge; he models and encourages. It’s a difficult, selfless job.

Mentoring affirms the mother church’s approval. Usually the fledgling congregation is hesitant to accept its own leadership. They can easily become dependent on the mother church’s leader to whom they are so grateful and who keeps the support of the mother church strong. The mentor must affirm to the new believers that their leader is as capable and as reliable as the missionary has ever been. He must demonstrate on behalf of the mother church that he totally trusts and embraces their new leader. Only then will many in the new church feel confident that they indeed have a worthy leader from their own midst.

Without indigenous leaders, no church can grow and prosper. No long-term outreach will take place. Therefore, the fourth principle is that the mother church agent must devote much time and energy to mentoring the new leaders that he and the new congregations have identified.

e. Protect the New Leaders

We've recognized several times in the preceding discussions that ethnic ministries are messy. Mistakes will be made. Controversies will take place. Strong personalities will conflict. Even with everyone having the best of intentions, honest disagreements will arise. Easily we can fall into self-pity, judgmentalism, and divisiveness.

The new leaders are as susceptible to these weaknesses as anybody else. In fact, with the typical zeal and impatience of the new convert, these tendencies can be exacerbated. Satan uses these human fallibilities to dishearten and deflate God's People in their mission fervor. When leaders fall short, common people can quickly give up and withdraw. When leaders fall short, the mother church can easily become disillusioned and distance itself.

What is the role of the mother church advocate/mentor in a situation like this? Here once again we can turn to our advocate/mentor par excellence St. Barnabas. (Historically, Barnabas has usually not been given the title of "saint," but his crucial and admirable role in the early church certainly should merit him this title of respect and gratitude.)

Immediately after the Jerusalem Council, Barnabas and Paul resolved to return to the congregations God had established during their first missionary journey. No doubt, this would be a joyful trip because they now had the affirmation of the mother church to convey to their uncertain and hesitant Gentile congregations. Barnabas desired to take along John Mark, probably thinking to mentor him some more.

However, Paul objected because Mark "had deserted them in Pamphylia" (Acts 15:38). Barnabas could have been quite righteously angry and disappointed with his mentee. If anyone should be patient with someone who had made a mistake, it should be Paul, the former great persecutor of the church. Barnabas could very easily have insisted and even abandoned Paul for John Mark as his missionary companion and mentee. In fact, it's possible that this John Mark is the very one that seemingly was a relative of Peter, the head of the disciples, and the subsequent author of the Gospel of St. Mark. If so, Barnabas could have quickly destroyed Paul in the eyes of the mother church – who never really liked and trust Paul anyway.

Instead, this “son of encouragement” quietly and selflessly takes John Mark under his wing and sails back to his homeland of Cyprus to carry out mission work there. He commissions Paul to go on with Silas to carry forward the more dramatic and productive work, for which the church through the ages has honored the Great Missionary to the Gentiles, St. Paul. Barnabas disappears into unknown history, and Paul becomes the great torchbearer for which Barnabas had groomed him.

The fact is, though, that at this critical juncture when Paul showed such poor churchmanship, Barnabas had to protect him. For the sake of the greater cause, Barnabas had to absorb the consequences of Paul’s actions. If Barnabas had rejected Paul at this point, no doubt the mother church would have as well. Instead, Barnabas had to affirm him and his leadership. He had to coddle John Mark. He had to forego the joy of returning and celebrating with the people he loved and who loved him. He had to do this so that Paul was protected from the consequences of his own actions.

The fifth principle, then, is that the mother church’s mentor/advocate will do everything possible to enable the ethnic leader to succeed, even to the point of taking upon himself the consequences of the new leader’s failures.

B. Principles in Evaluating Cross-Cultural/Ethnic Ministry

1. The Story of the Jerusalem Council

a. Issue of Scriptural Faithfulness

We have reviewed the Jerusalem Council above. Now we need to look at it in terms of the principles we can derive from the Spirit-guided event. The apostles and elders met in order to evaluate the new cross-cultural ministry that the Holy Spirit had initiated and blessed. Was this new church a Scripturally faithful church?

Some from the mother church had gone there and told these new Christians that they were not being truly faithful and were therefore not saved. How should the mother church leaders evaluate the reports from Barnabas and Paul? What word of commendation or judgment or guidance should they offer these new Christians?

There was “sharp dispute and debate” (Acts 15:2) and “much discussion” (15:7). Those who criticized these new Gentile churches did so out of well-founded conviction. Holy Scripture was the inspired Word of God, and God had clearly stipulated His will in it. One can only be a true follower of the Way if one leaves the false paths of the past and commits to the path God Himself has stipulated.

b. Issue of Historical Continuity

In addition, the Christian faith did not arise out of nothing. It is a continuation of the revelation of God through all the centuries before. Jesus came as the promised Messiah, rooted in past Scriptural revelation and prophecy. A true Christian church must be rooted in these divinely blessed and mandated traditions.

These members of the Jerusalem church were seemingly not opposed to the Gospel spreading to the Gentiles. What they were concerned about was that this be the true and full Gospel, not some watered down religion of convenience. There had to be a break from the past and an obedience to a new way of life, the life clearly stipulated by God in Holy Scripture and conscientiously developed over the centuries by His People.

Luke identifies them as “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (15:5) The Pharisees were highly devout and sincere believers in God’s revelation. They obediently conformed their lives to the laws that God had set forth in His revelation to Moses. The “new covenant” had to be an extension and expression of the old covenant. The church was not an invention of Barnabas and Paul; it was a continuation of the history of God’s work with His People from Abraham on and now into the Gentile world.

This was the theology and life of the Jerusalem church. There was no attempt to condemn or reject this understanding of the Gospel. In fact, there was sound biblical precedent and admirable godly living to commend it. This was the vibrant church Luke had described in Acts 2 and 4. This church was “enjoying the favor of all the people,” and the Lord was blessing their mission outreach, adding “to their numbers daily” (Acts 2:47)

c. Issue of Ecclesial Recognition

However, the question before the Council was not if the Jerusalem church was faulty. The question was if the Gentile congregations were faulty. Could there be differences on some matters of belief and practice and still a mutual recognition of fellowship? In theological terms, it was the need to identify what matters of church thought and life are “adiaphora,” matters on which there is legitimate freedom in Christ.

The consensus was expressed by Peter and James. As the head of Jesus’ apostolic band, Peter’s conclusion carried weight. Peter pointed out that there was no question if these Gentiles were true believers or not. God had given them the Holy Spirit and He had “purified their hearts by faith” (15:8-9). James was seemingly the head of the elders in the congregation. He pointed out from

Scripture how God had said “the Gentiles would bear my name” (15:17) It was, therefore, firmly established that the Gentiles were fellow believers in Christ.

But how much more than the Holy Spirit and faith did they need to be a true and faithful church? Once again, Peter and James announced the same consensus. Peter asked the party of the Pharisees in the church, “Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?” (15:10) James summarized: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (15:19). In the subsequent letter to the Gentile churches, the Jerusalem Council said they did not want to unnecessarily “burden you” (15:19).

d. Issue of Determining Adiaphora

If these Scriptural laws and ancient traditions were indeed unnecessary adiaphora, what was the essential matter on which there could be no freedom? Peter said the one point on which all must agree is this: “We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are” (15:11). If there is unity on this, there is unity in the one true faith.

In their letter to the Gentile churches, the Council added some lifestyle issues beyond the agreement in faith. They added three elements of Scriptural civil law and one of moral law:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. (15:29)

Even though these matters are called “requirements” in the letter, they are expressed as good counsel rather than as essentials

In fact, St. Paul went on to basically ignore and argue against the civil law requirements that the letter stipulated: Rom 14:13-23, I Tim 4:4, Ti 1:15 (cf. Mt 15:10-11, 16-20, Mk 7:14-23, Acts 10:9-16). He was guided by the Holy Spirit to adjudge these matters as adiaphora. There was nothing wrong with observing them, as they did in the Jerusalem church, but they were not required for salvation. A church could ignore these Scriptural laws and ancient traditions and still be a true church of Jesus Christ. The moral law, however, was a necessary part of the faithful Christian’s life.

2. Principles Derived from the Story

a. Have Open-hearted Debate

The Holy Spirit can guide His People only when they are open-hearted with each other. Consensus, change, and new insights can develop only when the Holy Spirit can work in our hearts through the Word. This Word of God is not in written form, but in spoken form. Fellow Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit, and He will connect us heart to heart even if it is not totally mind to mind.

We are all fallible, sin-ridden people. We get things wrong, even when we are most sincere and well-intentioned. We need the Holy Spirit to bring us to repentance also in our intellectual and emotional life. Therefore, we do not pass judgment on each other's faith or sincerity when we debate. We recognize that many areas are fuzzy and open for legitimate disagreement.

As mentioned above, cross-cultural/ethnic ministry is messy. There will be mistakes on all sides. There is need for repentance on all sides. There is need for patience and dialogue and sensitivity on all sides. Sometimes it takes a prolonged discussion for the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds.

The first principle in evaluating a cross-cultural/ethnic ministry that we derive from the Jerusalem Council, then, is that we expect honest, frank, respectful discussion on determining adiaphora as the Gospel comes to life in new ethnic and cultural groups.

b. Expect Leaders to Keep a Mission Focus

Peter and James guided the debate at the Council to keep a clear focus on the purpose of the church. Some of the members of the mother church were more concerned about defending their personal convictions than they were about facilitating the spread of the Gospel. They saw themselves as the defenders of the faith, the watchdogs of purity in the ranks, the preservers of historic truth. Certainly, there is an important role in the church for such people, but the leaders must have a bigger and greater vision.

The priority of the church as set forth by Peter and James at the Council was the Great Commission. The basis for James' conclusion on the dispute was "that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). He reminded the Council that God has a mission to all the world through them, from time immemorial, that all Gentiles also might bear His Name (15:17)

Likewise, Peter reminded the brethren of his own experience of Gentiles coming to faith (Acts 10): "that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe... and He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us" (15:7-8). Peter recalls for his fellow Jewish believers the lesson that they all should learn from his encounter with the centurion Cornelius, "that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). In the reports of Barnabas and Paul,

Peter points out the obvious: “He (God) made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith” (15:9).

The leaders must lead. They must keep the vision before the people. They must see the world as God sees it, lost and in need of salvation. Others might get caught up in the trivial and the secondary. The leaders must focus on the essential and the primary. The leaders must maintain vision-casting as their primary role in the debate.

Therefore, the second principle in the process of evaluating such a new ministry is that the leaders of the mother church must keep the discussion focused on the great priority of the church: reaching the lost.

c. Apply the Adiaphora Principle Rigorously

The issue of applying the adiaphora principle has arisen repeatedly throughout our discussion. This principle has been used throughout church history, especially in contexts of cross-cultural mission and church reform. Of course, the application of the principle has been a source of great controversy, as different missiologists and church leaders have identified different parts of church life and thought as essential

The classic formulation of the principle in early church missiology is that promulgated by Pope Gregory the Great in his papal epistle of July 18, 601:

The heathen temples of these people need not be destroyed, only the idols which are to be found in them.... If the temples are well built, it is a good idea to detach them from the service of the devil, and to adapt them for the worship of the true God... And since the people are accustomed, when they assemble for sacrifice, to kill many oxen in sacrifice to the devils, it seems reasonable to appoint a festival for the people by way of exchange. The people must learn to slay their cattle not in honour of the devil, but in honour of God and for their own food; when they have eaten and are full, then they must render thanks to the giver of all good things. If we allow them these outward joys, they are more likely to find their way to the true inner joy.... It is doubtless impossible to cut off all abuses at once from rough hearts, just as the man who sets out to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds, but goes upward step by step and pace by pace. (cited in “A History of Christian Missions,” Stephen Neill, Pelican, 1964, pp. 68-69)

In Roman Catholic mission history, this formulation has been a touchstone for all attempts to evaluate cross-cultural/ethnic ministry. Missionaries such as Roberto deNobili in India and Matthew Ricci in China pushed this formulation further than many of their colleagues accepted, for example, and their pioneering

approaches were eventually quashed by the church hierarchy. Evangelicals also have critiqued the results of this approach, as they claim in many contexts (such as Latin America, Caribbean) the local population simply adopts a veneer of Christianity while carrying on pagan practices and beliefs in daily life.

The application of the adiaphora principle was an issue of dispute in the church reform of the 16th century. For example, on the matter of worship forms there were different approaches between Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli. In his reform of the church liturgy, Luther eliminated only the Canon around the Words of Institution in the Mass. This was the only portion of the liturgy that he felt was heretical. The rest may be boring and unintelligible, but it was not theologically objectionable. Luther's missiological approach was similar to that advocated by Pope Gregory: make the people's transition to the reformed faith as comfortable and as smooth as possible.

Applying the adiaphora principle is a very problematic and personal process. People have aspects of church life and things in which they are emotionally and ecclesiastically invested. They have built their whole theology and practice around certain tenets. They fear that if their convictions are diminished as non-essential, all they have stood for will fall. They will lose credibility not only in the new ethnic church but in their own church as well.

Certainly this was a strong current in the Pharisee party's objections to Barnabas' and Paul's approach. Certainly it was part of the shock that Peter experienced when the voice in his vision on the way to meet Cornelius blankly told him: "Kill and eat" many animals that were forbidden by the Jewish rules of kosher (Acts 10:9-16). It was the issue over which people were "passing judgment on one another" in Rome, and Paul had to adjure them to remember that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom 14:13-18).

The third principle in evaluating any cross-cultural/ethnic ministry, therefore, is the rigorous application of the adiaphora principle: what really makes one a true Christian or a group a true Christian church?

d. The New Church Will Do What They Deem Best

As we saw in the above section "Issue of Determining Adiaphora," St. Paul accepted the judgment and counsel of the Jerusalem Council. However, he did not feel obligated to abide by it. He felt led by the Spirit to controvert most of the stipulated requirements. Was Paul being disingenuous and deceptive? Was he led to change his mind after further reflection on the matter? Were his contrary positions ever re-presented to the mother church for their adjudication?

Most likely, the Gentile church grew in such numbers and influence that their opinion and practices simply came to carry the day. Rather than rue the fact that the Jerusalem church became outnumbered and outvoted, hopefully they rejoiced that the Spirit of God was moving so powerfully and convincingly outside the boundaries of the old faith. The decisions about how to live faithfully in their cultural setting needed to be made by them.

Once the mother church is convinced that the new church has the essence and foundation right, they need to leave the rest (the adiaphora) for the new People of God to work out. They too need to discuss and debate open-heartedly among themselves as a faithful community and conclude “it seemed good to the Holy spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28). They alone truly know the inner dynamics, both for good and ill, in their societies, so they alone can make the necessary judgments on what is faithful to the Gospel.

Even when this new People go astray, the mother church does not reject, condemn, or abandon them. They take the approach of Samuel when the People of Israel demanded a king, against his counsel and against the warnings of God:

“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart.... For the sake of his great name, the Lord will not reject his people.... As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right.” (I Sam 12:20-23)

These are fellow members of the Body of Christ because they “believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). We respect them as such. We recognize that they will make mistakes in their Christian walk, just as the mother church has and continues to do in her walk. We acknowledge that it is not for us to judge their faithfulness. It is for us only to pray and to teach, as Samuel said. They are accountable to God, not to us.

The fourth principle, then, is that the mother church anticipate that the new ethnic church will differ on matters of adiaphora, and they will still be respected as truly church.

C. How To Go About It

What does this all boil down to? How should a church go about attempting to be a faithful, obedient tool of the Holy Spirit in founding a new People of God in a different culture and ethnic group? As we look at the above principles, they seem to fall into the following chronology of events:

1. Prayerfully choose and send the best person possible (the most Barnabas-like) to lead this new work.
2. Establish a highly trusted individual or board to supervise this work and keep the mother church informed.
3. Quickly move toward identifying and mentoring ethnic leaders in the new church.
4. The mother church must commit to stick with this new People of God, expecting that there will be mistakes and areas of great debate as they move forward in their own way.
5. The mother church leaders are key to keeping the priorities of God in the forefront of the discussions: seeking and saving the lost.
6. The central point of discernment in the discussions, both in the mother church and in the new church, is on what really matters and what are merely adiaphora as the Gospel takes root and finds expression in this new culture.
7. The mother church will recognize this new People of God as a true church as long as it is rooted in the simple Gospel core: salvation by grace through Jesus Christ.
8. The goal is that this new church develop into a vigorous partner in the global Body of Christ, hopefully exceeding the mother church in growth and influence.

The expectation of the mother church is the same that Jesus had as He looked at His disciples:

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I have learned from my Father I have made known to you.... I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these. (Jn 15:15, 14:12)

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Dec. 17, 2004