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Responding to his voice

Roger Karban | Apr. 20, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Practically none of our Scripture writers take pen to papyrus unless there are problems in the communities for whom they write. Surfacing these problems is one of the main tasks of biblical exegetes. There never was a ?golden age? of faith; each generation of believers had difficulties putting their faith into their everyday lives, difficulties that continue to pop up generations and centuries later. That?s why people of faith eventually saved these particular writings. They helped them understand the implications and pitfalls of their own faith.

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 13:14, 43-52
Psalm 100
Revelation 7:9, 14b-17
John 10:27-30

Luke, the author of today?s Acts passage, faced a unique problem. His Christian community was going down a road Jesus? first disciples could never have foreseen: Lots of non-Jews were becoming followers of Jesus. A religious movement that began in the early 30s as 100 percent Jewish was quickly becoming 100 percent Gentile by the mid-80s.

Sabbath of the Christian Scriptures frequently remind us that the historical Jesus had no intention of founding a church as we know it. He simply was a reformer of Judaism, prophetically taking his people back to their roots, forming meaningful relationships with Yahweh and the people around them. As an itinerant preacher, Jesus proclaimed God?s kingdom and that God was working effectively in everyone?s daily life. But to experience God on that level, all people must go through a process of ?repentance,? a complete turnabout in their value system. What they once thought important is relegated to the background while what they once kept on the periphery is now front and center. People are more important than rules and regulations; relationships are more important than sacrificial obligations.

The historical Jesus was a Jew; all his followers were Jews. Even when a few non-Jews eventually showed an interest in some aspects of Jesus? message, those first followers presumed Gentiles would first have to convert to Judaism before they could convert to Christianity.

Then the unexpected happened. Going against the majority practice, Paul and his followers saw no necessity for non-Jews to become Jews before they became other Christs. His reason: We don?t follow the historical Jesus; we?re disciples of the risen Jesus. The risen Jesus is a ?new creation,? someone who has left behind the limits that restrict all human beings. As Paul reminds his readers in Galatians 3, the risen Jesus is just as much a

Gentile as a Jew, as much a slave as a free person, even as much a woman as a man. In the problem at hand, if the Christ living among us isn?t limited by Jewish faith and culture, then why should his followers be limited to that faith and culture?

Confronting an anti-Christian Jewish accusation that Jesus, from the beginning, planned to destroy Judaism by eventually breaking down the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, Luke believes and teaches that Jesus originally intended to convert only Jews to his reform movement. Only after the majority of the chosen people refused his invitation did the risen Jesus extend it to Gentiles.

Paul is given the honor today of stating Luke?s thesis on Gentile conversions: ?It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you [Jews] first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, ?I have made you a light to the Gentiles that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.? ?

Luke?s message is clear: If Jesus? original plan of evangelization isn?t working, we?re not going to stand around with our hands in our pockets crying all day. We?re going to explore Plan B. The author of Revelation agrees or else he could never have foreseen ?a great [heavenly] multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue.?

By the time John writes in the mid-90s, the only action that counts for salvation is how someone responds to the voice of the Good Shepherd. ?I know them,? the Johannine Jesus proclaims, ?and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish.? One is now expected to respond to Jesus as one responds to God: ?The Father and I are one.?

Going against centuries of Catholic tradition, the majority of Vatican II bishops presumed development in theology. They were convinced Jesus didn?t hand the whole package to his disciples at the Last Supper, but that through the centuries Christians have had to adapt the life and message of Jesus to their everyday lives. Christian faith is mobile, not static. If we don?t appreciate this aspect of our faith, we?d better start arguing about the need for Christians to convert to Judaism.

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