

The Jerusalem Congregation—Full of Surprises

By Armin Gesswein

This is a day of discovery. Not only are we going higher, we are digging deeper. By digging deeper at the same spot, archaeologists sometimes come up with some rare finds.

This is also often the case when we dig down again in the same Scriptures. Take, for example, the Book of Acts. Many are digging there and are speaking and writing about the “early church.”

There are many possible titles for this book. The simplest of all is the book of the church. We open it and there it is, the church. We also see Jesus at work, shaping it all up, building it.

When Jesus said He would build His church He used the plain word *ecclesia*, well known in the Roman-Greek world. With it He at once brings us to the point. Scholars tell us the word means, assembly, congregation. This points up Christ’s new plan: the gathered-people-of-God and their action in assembly.

In a nutshell, the definition is the action of God in and with and on and through His assembled people. It is so plain that we almost miss it: assembly action. This is now the dimension of God’s power and working and we must come to grips with it. We see it when we read chapter one. Suddenly it is right there in full view. The Jerusalem church—the “first church.”

We are in for many surprises when we visit this congregation.

At least five are very striking. They arouse us into quite an awakening!

Surprise Number One:

It happened in Jerusalem, of all places!

We thought Jesus was through there. They crucified Him in Jerusalem. He said, "Your house is left unto you desolate." Jesus had finished with old Jerusalem; nothing more can happen there, we thought.

Would you believe it? Right there, in the hardest place in the world, He builds His church.

This fact should be a tremendous help to those who are at work seeking to plant churches in hard places. A fresh look at Acts 1:8 tells us there are plenty of these: "Jerusalem . . . all Judaea . . . Samaria . . . uttermost part of the earth." They were all hard places.

"This is a hard place," said a pastor when he met me at the plane. He did not know I had heard that also in the last place I had ministered. There are enough of these to go around!

Did you think it would have been like that?

Surprise Number Two:

It was a small congregation!

There were only "about an hundred and twenty" (Acts 1:15). Our first reaction could be: "Lord, is that all? What can You accomplish with such a 'little flock'? Is that the final result of Your earthly ministry?"

In fact, one might even be tempted to say, "Couldn't You do

better than that?" Or, "What chance has a little group like that in so tough a city as Jerusalem? This doesn't look reasonable!"

It is indeed strange—in light of what we now know about churches, many with thousands of members. Yet many large congregations never awaken their communities for Christ.

Surely this should encourage any small congregation. There is no sin in starting small; the sin is in staying that way!

The point is, here was a congregation that really assembled! No member missed a meeting. It is rather ironic that this Jerusalem congregation, which was such a model in constant assembling, later drew God's earnest warnings in the letter to the Hebrews, not the least of which was not to forsake the assembling together "as the manner [habit] of some is" (10:25).

In the beginning and just after Pentecost they never missed a meeting. Later they began to slip and members would skip meetings. By the time the Book of Hebrews was written, members had made this a habit. They had forsaken not so much doctrine, but assembling. The Book of Hebrews flashes most of the warning signals for our present-day congregations—the danger points where backsliding sets in.

But the question lingers: did you think it would have been like that?

Surprise Number Three:

How large that congregation became—and how powerful—and so suddenly!

All at once—in one day, the day of Pentecost—"about three thousand" people were converted and added to them as members. Would you believe it? We never in the world would have

believed that if it were not written so plainly! And these were all Jews, mind you! Which adds to the miracle. What power!

Certainly there is some new and surprising arithmetic here! A 120-member congregation becomes a 3,120-member congregation in a single day. Every convert is accounted for and they all "stick." Instead of going off on tangents and in different directions, they all immediately become part of that Jerusalem congregation. And, what is more, they become like the first members. That is, they become the same kind of Christians, at once.

How can 120 members absorb 3,000 new members? And in a single day?

This should answer a sensitive question being asked today as to which is better, a small or a large congregation. Here we have the story of a small congregation that suddenly became a large one. God evidently loves both.

Surely this is good news: God has a wonderful way of enlarging your congregation. And we must very prayerfully and diligently search the Scriptures to find that way.

Did you think it would have been like that?

Surprise Number Four:

The members all came from Galilee! A Jerusalem congregation, whose members were all from Galilee! "It just can't be," you say. But it was (see Acts 1:11; 2:7).

Galilee was a little over sixty miles north of Jerusalem. All these Galileans were now in Jerusalem. They were never very popular in the city of the great Temple. Their speech was poor. Their worship was not "pure."

The plot thickens! To think that our Lord would take those northern Galileans, plant them in old Jerusalem and found His church with them! It looks like a first-class mistake: building a Jerusalem congregation out of Galileans, and right in the heart of Jerusalem, at that! It just is not done that way! Or is it?

G. Campbell Morgan had a great saying about the Book of Acts. He called it a record of "the glorious regularity of the irregular!"

Once again we must ask the question: did you think it would have been like that?

Surprise Number Five:

Jesus builds a prayer meeting!

This could well be the greatest surprise of all! When Jesus builds His church He builds a praying congregation. Every single member was a praying member. A strong praying member. An intercessor. A real priest.

In this Jerusalem congregation we do not read of a "church within the church" (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*, as it is called). All the members were together. All were "with one accord in one place."

Nor do we read of "the church prayer meeting," as today. The church was the prayer meeting. The entire assembly was at prayer.

With us it is not like this. Most of us would not want to belong to a church which does not have a prayer meeting. Neither would we all want to go to prayer meeting. We now have "praying meeting members" and other kinds of members, a sort of double standard of membership. And this is not being changed, not even challenged!

On the contrary, more than one good evangelical congregation is right now wondering what to do with the weak, sick prayer meeting. What is the answer?

If the prayer meeting were optional we could simply forget it. But it was not optional for these Jerusalem members. Voluntary, yes; optional, no, because Jesus had commanded them to stay in Jerusalem together. The word for "commanded" (Acts 1:4) is no easygoing word. It is a military term: He charged them. We must come to terms with this word of God.

A good part of the problem with the "dear old prayer meeting" is that we have not seen it as part of the doctrine of the church. That is where we are hurting today. We are low on "church truth." I mean not in the dispensational sense but in the plain and practical sense of the ecclesia, the assembly, the congregation.

This Jerusalem congregation furthered not only smaller "koinonia groups" (though I am sure they had plenty of these, too, for they went from "house to house"), but the entire congregation was a koinonia (fellowship).

A Model Congregation

The fact is, this Jerusalem congregation, this "first church," this "mother church," is a model. And it challenges every phase of our assembly life today.

I have read portions of the Book of Acts hundreds of times and some portions more than a thousand times. Finally it hit me: What is the story of this Jerusalem church? It is the story of one small praying congregation of about 120 members in an upper room in the city of Jerusalem which got on fire for God and went on to change the world!

That says it! What a revealing and revolutionary discovery!

If you were to ask me what is the greatest discovery I have made regarding the truth of the church, I would have to say it is this: When Jesus built the church, He built a praying congregation!

To put it even more plainly: When Jesus built the church He built a prayer meeting! This is the prime truth. The prayer meeting had priority in the Jerusalem congregation. We must rethink this whole matter with deep concern and with earnest prayer.

The penetrating question still is: did you think it would have been like that?

—Armin Gesswein (1908 -2001) was a pastor and prayer leader who impacted pastors. Armin was used of God in a tremendous move of His Spirit in Norway in the 1930s. He later became a personal intercessor for Billy Graham and developed much of the early prayer emphasis of Graham's Los Angeles Crusade. Armin founded the Revival Prayer Fellowship and was cofounder of Colleges of Prayer, which today trains nationals in prayer in more than 30 nations.

This is taken from his classic book, *With One Accord in One Place*, which sold more than 50,000 copies in the late 70s and early 80s. A new edition of the work has recently been released. To purchase, click below.