

# **The Surprising Spirit**

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New England Annual Conference

## The Surprising Spirit

### **Justo:**

My father-in-law was an avid reader of mystery stories. He had walls and walls of bookcases with nothing but mysteries. He was the family expert on mystery novels, but we used to make fun of the way he read them. Whenever he got a new book, he would immediately turn to the last chapter, and read it. Then he would go back to the beginning and see how the author got to the intended end.

That is a strange way to read a book. And yet, that is what we would invite you to do today. As we deal with the multicultural society in which we are living, and with our role in it as Christians, we would invite you to begin at the end, and to share in the vision of John of

Patmos: (Revelation 7:9-10)

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

In a way, that is what this entire Annual Conference is about. When we take as a theme for the Conference the promise that "in God's house there are many mansions," we are saying that this is our hope, that this is our future, and that it is out of this future that we will seek to live today.

In a way, that is also what we see the early church doing in the book of Acts. Acts is not really

about the Apostles, but rather about a Holy Spirit who gives the church such hope that it is willing to live out of that hope, to begin experiencing the promise of a multitude whom no one can count out of every tribe, and people, and language, and nation, even in the midst of a broken and often hostile world.

**Catherine:**

With this future in mind, let us hear the famous passage about the church's first Pentecost.

Acts 2:1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and the residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and Proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

**Justo:**

There are at least three points in this passage that merit particular attention in the context of the theme for this Conference. The first is that the passage does not say that all these various people from different parts of the world were made to understand the language of the

Apostles. On the contrary, the text quite explicitly says that they heard each in their own mother tongue. This makes an enormous difference. The language of the Apostles, even though it was also the language of Jesus, is not normative. The first translator of the Gospel into other languages and cultures is the Holy Spirit. In order to become Christians, people of other languages and cultures do not have to become like the Apostles, to speak their language, to adopt their culture. On the contrary, in order to be faithful to the mission entrusted to them, the Apostles have to speak the languages of those who were previously outside.

The language of the Apostles was Aramaic, a language derived from ancient Hebrew, which was by then a dead language. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement in first-century Palestine. But I do know that, if there was, Pentecost is God's unequivocal NO! To any such movement.

**Catherine:**

In the crowd that gathers there are two distinct reactions. One is amazement. Much has happened that is astonishing. Strange noises. Strange events. And now, to top it off, everybody hears what is being said in their own language. It is not surprising that people are amazed and even confused.

What is surprising is that some don't seem to get it. Some don't see any miracles at all. All they can see is a drunken crowd. How can they have missed the miracle?

**Justo:**

This is a second interesting point about this passage. There is a tantalizing possibility here—a possibility that is worth pondering, not now, but on some other occasion: Could it be that the mockers did not perceive the miracle because they were local folk, because they expected to be addressed in their own tongue? Could it be that they were “insiders,” and that what we have here is one more instance of the “insider” being unable to see the wondrous work of God, bringing the outsider in? And, if that is the case, could that also be the reason why it is so often more difficult for those of the dominant culture, for those who expect to understand, really to understand the miracle that God's Spirit is performing among us?

**Catherine:**

A third point is that though this mixed audience hears the speakers, each in their own language, yet they can also communicate among themselves, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” (v. 12). In other words, while the miracle of communication that is described amazes them, they have a basis for communication quite apart from that miracle. What language did they use? Some from other countries may have understood the local Aramaic, but many probably spoke to each other in Greek.

We have so often heard of the parallel between this account of Pentecost in Acts and the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. Their human language was confused and made divisive: here such divisiveness is overcome in the unity the Spirit provides. Clearly the intention is present in Acts

to show that in various ways, the gift of the Spirit, made possible by the Cross and the Resurrection, has begun the undoing of the power of sin over human life. Babel was the result of sin; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal.

There is much more here in this second chapter of Acts, however, than unity in the face of previous divisiveness. Look at the diversity that is assumed and maintained at Pentecost: They all hear in their own language: the variety has not been ended. A new age has indeed dawned, but that does not mean that uniformity has been imposed. Unity has been given and experienced even though diversity has remained.

Nor can we say that until Pentecost, no work toward unity in the human family had been undertaken. There is a great deal of existing unity shown in this passage even before Pentecost occurs.

The logo for AETH features a stylized, multi-colored triangle (pink, yellow, and blue) above the word "AETH" in a large, light purple, serif font.

First, Judaism provided a unity. Through the effects of the Exile and less traumatic migrations, Diaspora Judaism had spread throughout the Empire and beyond. Therefore Jerusalem—especially on feast days—had quite a cosmopolitan mix of Jews from the Mediterranean basin. According to the text, not only had Jews come to Jerusalem, but also proselytes had come with them.

Second, we cannot discount the effects of Empire. Conquest had provided a lingua franca

—Greek, in the eastern portion of the now Roman Empire. As we have seen, those who gathered around the nascent church on that first Pentecost did carry on conversations and were understood in some common language, even if it was not their native tongues. Imperial power had imposed some unity—particularly on those who traveled or had business with people outside their immediate community. Our New Testament is in Greek precisely because of the earlier conquests.

Third, Rome had provided relatively safe roads and made travel by land and sea safer than it had been. This was done for military purposes, but it provided new means of travel and communication. Commerce provided new links among different cultures, even though much of the commerce was of a colonial character. Language, roads, commerce, travel: there were unities existing before Pentecost. Some attained at great human cost—imperial unities we might call them—but links nonetheless across the Babel that human sin had created.

There were divisions and unities in the world before Pentecost. There is diversity as well as unity in the new creation Pentecost exhibits. Diversity may be good; divisiveness is not. Unity is good; uniformity, however, is questionable. The account of Pentecost shows all of these characteristics. How can we distinguish what is unity but not uniformity? How can differences be diverse but not divisive? Is it easy to tell? When I work for unity am I unwittingly stifling diversity? When I work for diversity am I causing division? It may not be easy to separate good and evil in this matter. Do we check motivation or results? Does the good that we would do lead

to evil results in the midst of a world not yet totally transformed? Does the evil that some intend lead to good results they never anticipated? Empire and Pentecost are strange companions in Acts—even here at the beginning of the book.

**Justo:**

It is a dilemma we all know. Even as we study the history of the church, it is clear that mission has frequently been connected with colonialism and imperialism. How are we to deal with this situation? Are we to reject the unity that worldwide mission has brought, because of its connection with colonialism? Are we to bless colonialism and imperialism, because of their connection with the unity we now have?

At this point, there are some insights that we may draw from Christian tradition. First of all, we must put the issue of unity in its proper perspective. Unity is not simply an ecclesiastical project, something that the church does and seeks while the world goes its own way. Unity across languages and cultures is the very purpose of God for all of creation, as John's vision in Revelation clearly proclaims. We the church, as those who know that mystery of the final day, are called to live out of it and witness to it by our own unity. Even now, the God whose mystery it is, continues to work for its fulfillment, and we must learn how to discern the signs of that work of God in our midst.

In some mysterious way, God's purpose of unity was being worked out in the very fact that here

were in Jerusalem “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia,” etc., etc., and in that those people, even apart from the miracle of Pentecost, were able to say to each other, “What does this mean?”

This is not to say that we are to bless all the horrible, cruel, unjust events that bring about this sort of imperial unity. The famous *pax romana* was wrought at the cost of much bloodshed and much injustice, and it is a terribly ecclesiocentric view of history to claim that all the wars and oppressions connected with the Roman Empire were brought about by God simply so that Christian missionaries and evangelists could travel from land to land, and so that Paul's epistles could be safely carried from one corner of the Empire to another.

Here again we may draw from some of the earliest Christian traditions. We in the West tend to see as normative an understanding of creation and of history according to which God's creation, as described in Genesis, was perfect, complete, and finished. From that point on, because of the Fall, all that exists falls far short of that original creation. It is in this context that one hears of speculations as to the great powers of Adam and Eve—speculations that make Superman and Superwoman pale by comparison. From such perfection, there is no direction to go but down, and that is what all of history is—until the final consummation, the great return to the original perfection.

There is, however, another way of looking at these issues. As I read the writings of Bishop

Irenaeus of Lyons, who grew up in Asia Minor, in the second century, what I find is a vision of growth. Growth was God's original purpose from the time of creation, and still is. Irenaeus declares that God created Adam and Eve "as children." They were perfect, yes; but they were not finished. They were perfect just as an infant is perfect. Like the child, they were intended to grow—to grow towards that final unity in which Jesus Christ is the head of all. What has happened as a result of sin is not that growth has been halted. It is not even that growth has been retarded. It is rather that growth has been twisted. There is still growth. Unity is still coming about. But it is coming about in a warped way.

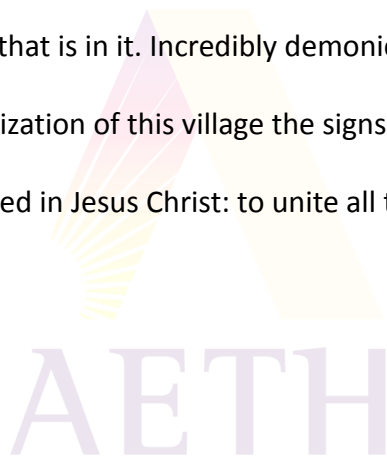
From this perspective, one can look at the imperial unity that to some degree facilitated early Christian expansion and see it for what it is: a unity that reflects, but also distorts, that unity which God intends for humankind.

Returning to Irenaeus, he also declared that falsehood on its own has no power. The power of a lie is in the portion of truth it contains. Today we say that a lie has verisimilitude—in other words, that it has a semblance of truth. It is that semblance that makes a lie believable.

Likewise, one of the elements that give power to our twisted unities, to our oppressive unities, to our unities of privilege, is their aping and mimicking that unity, that Shalom which God intends.

There are many sorts of unity in today's world. We wish we could simply take out a ledger and

write: negative unities in one column; positive unities in the other. But the matter is not that simple. Modern technology has made it possible for us to communicate with people at the other end of the world in a matter of seconds. Beautiful. We have become a global village. Even more beautiful. In that global village, those who are furthest away from the centers of power have lost control over their lives. Not so beautiful. In that global village, goods and resources tend to flow in a single direction, towards those who already have more than they need. Even less beautiful. In that global village, partly as a result of its being a global village, millions are starving. Horrible. In this global village, there are a handful of people who have the power to destroy the entire planet and all that is in it. Incredibly demonic. And yet, somehow, we must still be ready to find in the globalization of this village the signs of God's mysterious purpose, hidden for all eternity, but revealed in Jesus Christ: to unite all things under him as under one head, in a final reign of shalom.



**Catherine:**

At the time of the first Pentecost, the Roman Empire—as a culmination of other imperial forces before it—had created a unity in the Mediterranean world. Its means and intentions were hardly unambiguous or even commendable. It is into this world that the church is born. Judaism at the time did have a cosmopolitan character, as we can see by the various languages and nationalities present in Jerusalem. Yet Judaism was tied to one portion of that Empire and could be considered a “nation” to some degree like other nations within that context.

This new church, however, was going to be different. It is only beginning here, but future years would see the development of a competing unity to that of the Empire—sufficiently clearly stated that the Empire itself would feel threatened. Christians would speak of allegiance to a different lord than Caesar, to a city that was not in Rome’s Empire. They felt themselves citizens of a kingdom that Rome did not rule. Obviously, Christians then had to clarify in what ways they were still part of Rome’s Empire, for indeed they were. The Epistle to Diognetus, probably written in the early second century, shows the complex loyalties:

They [the Christians] dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. ...They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

The laws of the Empire could be obeyed for the most part when this epistle was written.

However, by the third century, the law included worship of the gods of the empire, and

Christians could not do that.

By the second century, even the government of the church—under monarchical bishops—used the imperial government as its model, a clear sign that it was a parallel and competing form of unity. Ultimately, the persecutions of the third and early fourth century came because the Roman Empire saw the church as a rival unity, between which citizens must choose. Rome understood the situation quite well—a fact we often overlook. Nor is it clear that the coalescing of these two unities—the church and the empire under Constantine in the fourth century—permits the peculiar unity that the church seeks to manifest to be seen clearly. In Western

culture, we still live in the remnant of that combination of imperial unity and the unity of the body of Christ. Many assume we live in a Christian culture, and resent the secular influences, as well as the addition of people from other religious groups. Has the imperial form of unity overtaken the church itself? At least, it has made a complex situation even more confusing.

In our own day, perhaps the church can best be described as a “multi-national corporation”—but one that has a very different source of unity and agenda than other organizations that go by that title. However confused the issues are, we need to clarify how our unity, the gift of Pentecost, takes up, but also challenges and evaluates the unities that our world provides.

**Catherine:**

*We would like to divide into small groups of two or three and discuss for the next few minutes: What are three or four of the most important secular sources of unity in our world? In what ways are these warped or demonic? In what ways do they show in some way God's intentions for this world? (5 minutes).*

**Justo:**

*Still in the same groups, let us move the discussion to our own unity here. We do not represent a cross-section of the world, or even of the church. Yet, we do have a sort of unity among ourselves. To what extent is this a unity of the spirit? To what extent is it not? Who is excluded?*

*What does such exclusion say about our unity?*

**Catherine:**

There is another passage in Acts in which differences in language and culture are central. The way the early church dealt with the issue showed that they were living toward the future that John of Patmos described.

Acts 6:1-6

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in numbers, the Hellenists complained (murmured) against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The terms used in this passage need to be clear. There are two language or cultural groups, both of which are Jews. One group is called the Hebrews, the other, the Hellenists. This is the same division we saw in the Pentecost event. The Hebrews are the Jews native to Palestine, whose language is Aramaic. The Hellenists are Jews who grew up outside of Palestine, in the wider Roman Empire. They may have had a native language from their home area, but they were strongly influenced by Greek, Hellenistic culture, and the language they used outside of their home area was Greek. It is also clear that many Hellenists did not understand Aramaic and many Hebrews did not understand Greek.

**Justo:**

Even in the book of Acts, not all is rosy. In this passage, the church in Jerusalem has to deal with the practical and administrative aspects of the growing pluralism that Pentecost had made possible. It is not all that clear what is happening in the early section of this passage. Obviously, there is a problem with one of two groups of widows. Language was a division. The miracle of the preaching at Pentecost had not led to the point that no differences existed. Yet something of Pentecost was still there for what must have been originally an Aramaic-speaking church now included those whose language was Greek. Surely there were some bilingual people among them, and a permanent bridge had been built. But now the community, growing rapidly, included people whose cultural backgrounds meant that they could not easily understand each other. Yet all were part of the same community.

**Catherine:**

The widows—who were they? Not simply all the women whose husbands had died. There may well have been some widowed women who were supported by family or who had some other means of support. The widows meant here were those who had no such support and needed the help of the church. This was common in Judaism: both a general policy of giving financial assistance to widows as a charitable act of a synagogue and a specific policy in Jerusalem to assist widows from the Diaspora to come and finish their days in the holy city. So, there were, even before the time of Christ, Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem, receiving alms from the Jewish community; and these alms were administered by the official religious structure. When

some of these women became Christians, the church continued the same policy of support. Aramaicspeaking widows also became Christians and needed assistance. The church may well have given assistance to a variety of people who needed help. But the widows provided a special case and did so for several decades.

There was no counterpart of widowers. Men had their livelihood whether married or not, but women generally were economically dependent upon their husbands. Being widowed often left them without resources. Furthermore, when the church was in a first-generation situation, the continued involvement in the life of the church on the part of a widow might require that the church support her. The alternative of support by a son or of remarriage might well make it very difficult for them to continue participating in the community of faith if the son or husband was not a Christian. The church therefore supported such women. A few decades after this account in Acts, we know of widows who formed a significant part of the ministry of the church, in return for their support. They visited the sick and taught the women considering baptism.

Exactly the form the support took is also not clear. The NRSV speaks of a daily distribution of “food,” and then indicates that “waiting on tables” was the way this distribution was carried out. There is an ambiguity in the passage, noted in a footnote of the NRSV. The distribution could have been of money—as Judaism practiced—or of food and perhaps other necessities. Later practices included both. “Serving at tables” can mean either assisting in food distribution or working at a money table. It clearly means that the need was for an administrative structure

that would take care of financial concerns—especially in regard to the poor widows or providing food for them.

**Justo:**

It is not at all surprising that a dispute should arise when people of two cultural traditions—both needy—must rely for assistance on a leadership that belongs to only one of those traditions. A major quarrel is not described here—only murmuring—unhappiness, a sense that something was unfair. There is murmuring. And the murmuring is against the leadership, against the twelve. Indeed, a few verses earlier Luke has told us that those who sold properties and brought the proceeds for the relief of the needy “laid them at the apostles’ feet.” The Apostles were responsible for the management of resources, and if there was criticism, it was ultimately directed at them.

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in these brief opening verses. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians are the leadership. That is not surprising: they are the natives of the area. They are the inheritors of the original proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek-speakers are the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists are at a disadvantage.

However, in the world outside Israel, that is hardly the case. There, the Greek-speakers are at home, and the Aramaic-speakers would reveal their more limited cultural exposure. But the

events of this passage take place in Jerusalem --not in that wider world. Here the Hellenists—even though Jewish—are at a disadvantage.

We know that at this time there was an increasing nationalistic feeling among Jews. Thus, as conflict with Rome increased, the Greek-speaking Jews found themselves under suspicion on the part of native Jews as being less firm about strict orthodoxy than those who spoke Aramaic. Any laxity about the Law might hinder God's granting of victory over Rome if it came to actual battle.

It is also clear that these sentiments spilled over into the reaction of many Jews to Christianity. If all Christians were suspect, those of a Hellenistic background, with their Greek names, language, and customs, were even more so.

So, the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation is somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church—and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows do not feel they are being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation—as fairly as the Aramaic-speaking widows are being treated. It is the language and the culture that are the barriers—not their status as widows.

So, what do the Apostles do? They call a meeting of the whole congregation. They did not downgrade the problem. Today some would say that the problem is that some widows do not

know their place. We have already given them something. Something is better than nothing. Let them be quiet and take what is given to them or go away and leave us alone. Today we would speak of “the problem of the widows,” or the “problem” of one ethnic minority or another. But the fact is that, if one reads the book of Acts as a whole, it is clear that the widows were not the problem. The problem was the Holy Spirit, who on that day of Pentecost was poured on all flesh, young and old, sons and daughters, and invited all to join, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.”

The problem is not caused by the widows, or by the Hellenists, or by any ethnic minority. The problem is caused by that subversive Spirit of God, who blows from where the Spirit wishes, and who destroys all our neat patterns and classifications. And, because the problem was caused by the Spirit, the leadership took it seriously and decided something needed to be done. (Note also that the reason for moving them to action was that there was “murmuring.” They did not try to ignore the complaints of those who felt left out. They did not wait until somebody began picketing the church, or even until a caucus was formed.)

The “something” to be done would involve a **new administrative structure**. The Twelve decide that they have the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic— and cannot in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It is important that

someone does that, however, and the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

So, the leadership suggests that the congregation is to choose seven from among its members to carry out such tasks. And here comes the **first great surprise**. Today we have a solution for this kind of “problem.” If we are slightly enlightened, we appoint a token member to the committee dealing with the distribution of resources. If we are a little more enlightened, we set up a quota for such tokens. If we are still more enlightened, we allow those minority representatives to administer that part of our resources that we have set aside for them. But that is not what this congregation does. Those who are chosen all have Greek names (Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus). Some might be natives, but chances are most are not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch—a Gentile who had become a Jew. So, this congregation, where presumably the majority are still Aramaic speaking, chooses leadership that empowers those who had been more marginal.

But there is more. Given the political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation may well have been a courageous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those who might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group. (And we know that it did, for in the very next chapter of Acts persecution will break out against the church. It will break out first of all against these Hellenistic Jews who have

become Christians, such as Stephen. And, if you read the story carefully, you will see that for the first time in the book of Acts the enemies of Christianity were able to gain the support of the people, and to join their efforts with those of the high priests, the scribes and the elders, in order to suppress Christianity.)

You see, the Hellenists were not “respectable folk” in good Jewish society. Some of the more traditional Jews felt that they were not real Jews and should go back home. Some among the more nationalistic feared that, just as God had punished Israel in ancient times for lack of total obedience, so now God was punishing Israel, subjecting it to Roman rule, precisely because these Hellenists, these newcomers, were not as strict as they should be in their religious practices.

One may well imagine the arguments that could have been adduced against appointing them. If the financial resources of the church are put in the hands of these outsiders, giving will surely go down! When you come to church to be fed, both spiritually and materially, do you want one of those people to be in charge of the table? If it were today, we could find a dozen reasons for not taking the radical steps that the early church took. And we would convince ourselves that we were doing it out of love for the church!

The twelve had an alternative. They could have refused to empower the Hellenists. They could have kept the purse strings. But, had they done so, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would

have been undone.

**Catherine:**

The preaching of the Twelve was effective. Growth continued. In the verse immediately after the section we read in chapter 6, we read that even some Jewish priests were added to the community. That may have upset the religious power structures in the city even more.

Then comes the **second great surprise in the story**. Stephen had been elected simply to be a functionary within the Christian congregation. The twelve would reserve for themselves the ministry of preaching. That was the plan of the twelve. But the Spirit had other plans. Stephen was also at work in the city. He was healing and showing great power among the people. He was also at work in the mission of the church. And thus, the great surprise: Stephen, who is not even supposed to be preaching, preaches the longest sermon in the entire book of Acts!

(And at this point one might add, that just as the twelve thought they would keep the task of preaching for themselves, but the Spirit had other plans, it may also be that, even though the twelve said that seven men were to be elected, it is the same surprising and subversive Holy Spirit of God that has led the church in other directions.)

At least one synagogue of Greek-speaking Jews was very upset with Stephen because of his activities. We read, also in chapter 6:

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” (Acts 6:9-10)

Why? Were they afraid that, as a fellow Hellenistic Jew, he could bring questions upon them as well? They may wish to make their orthodoxy clear to the wider society. What does it mean that in their debates, “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which (Stephen) spoke”? Was Stephen making converts at the Greek-speaking synagogues? It was in such places that Paul, in the future, would normally begin his preaching.

For whatever reason, they have Stephen charged, inciting complaints and false witnesses. The vulnerability of the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem is made very clear by this episode. We should hardly be surprised that Stephen is the first martyr.

The chapter concludes with Stephen before the council. Blasphemy is the charge. Changing the laws given by Moses is the charge. The text says that “Gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” This is parallel to the statement about Moses himself in Exodus: “The people of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone” (Ex. 35:35). Stephen was proclaiming God’s word with as much authority as Moses had. This is probably included in the text as a sign that he is orthodox—teaching that which comes from God.

**Justo:**

Given this political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation was a courageous and dangerous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those whose very presence might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group. Had they done so, however, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone. But the miracle continued. The language barrier remained but love and trust found ways to overcome its impact. Love and trust found ways to share leadership and empower new groups within the church. It caused trouble, but the kind of trouble the Gospel is always causing in this sinful, divided world. It presaged the even greater diversity that the addition of Gentiles would make, under the leadership of Paul.

And hence the **third great surprise** in the story. One would imagine that, although the church did the right thing in electing these seven Hellenists, it would pay dearly for that in terms of mission. Today there are some who seem to think that the church has to choose between doing justice and proclaiming the Good News—that justice and evangelism are somehow mutually exclusive, or at least that they are in tension.

But in this story exactly the opposite happened: The empowerment of this new previously excluded group led to mission. As we continue reading the book of Acts beyond this sixth

chapter, we see that at least two of these Hellenists, Stephen and Philip, soon had the opportunity to witness to their faith. Stephen's witness, sealed with his death, is connected in some mysterious way with the career of Paul and with his own witness. And the eighth chapter of Acts tells us of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch and in the region of Samaria.

**Catherine:**

When we know "the end of the story" as proclaimed in Revelation, we can see that here in the earliest Jerusalem church, there are clues that the future is beginning. When my father read the last chapter of a mystery story first, he had a clue as to the importance of particular events earlier in the story that those of us who began at the first chapter did not understand. We can argue about which is the best way to read a mystery, but we do need to understand that Christians have been given the vision of the kingdom so that they can begin to interpret the events through which they live in the light of God's ultimate purposes.

**Justo:**

That is why we chose to begin this study with a reference to John's vision in Revelation:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands...

Reading John's vision of God's future, I feel as my father-in-law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a new mystery novel. Aha! The butler did it! So that is what it is all about!

Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom drawn from all

tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages, where they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom where they shall wear their white robes of victory, and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. That is what it is all about!

Yes, that is what it is all about. Ultimately, it is not about census figures, or about immigration laws, or about the “challenge” of a new multicultural situation. Ultimately, it is about a multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. Ultimately, it is about our standing today before the throne and before the Lamb, as those who rejoice in being part of that multitude that no one can count. Ultimately, it is about the gift of Pentecost, which will allow this church to speak the languages of many tribes, and nations and peoples. Ultimately, it is about this New England Conference of the United Methodist Church being able to say:

After this we looked, and behold, we were part of a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in our hands... And we all cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Amen. So be it.