

The Sequel

Jesus Continued in the Book of Acts

CROSSING LARGE LINES

The Widening World of Acts 10—15

A Prep Guide for Session Five

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Open – The First “Courageous Conversation”

Throughout the centuries, Christians and churches have often had to ask high-stakes questions with one another about issues on which we’ve disagreed. Church historians have often referred to them as Ecclesiastical Councils, using language that fits post-Constantinian gathering that happened when Christianity had taken a bureaucratic shape. In this American era, on a smaller scale, we sometimes call these sessions “Courageous Conversations.” It could be argued that the most significant Courageous Conversations in church history happened in a Jerusalem house a couple decades after Jesus’ resurrection. It was there and then that leaders had to decide under what conditions the initially-Jewish church would welcome Gentiles into the Way of Jesus. Since most of us reading this handout and attending U.S. churches are ethnic non-Jews, this was clearly a big deal for our ancestors. This week, we stop and replay that conversation, to understand the issue and listen in on the way those first Christians talked together.

Part One – The Issue and Its History

How do new people fit in? This question faces any group. Choirs, basketball teams, theatre troupes, and even school classrooms have to figure out what it means to incorporate new members in a way that both welcomes them and keeps the integrity and purpose of the group intact. You may even have examples from your group of friends or associations. This issue of absorbing new populations most certainly faced the early Christians. The twelve disciples became the many in the upper room, then the 5000 or more who gathered in weeks and months following Pentecost. We know that the Jerusalem church had to develop a team of table-servers who would distribute food without favoritism (Deacons), and had to plan living-room sized mini-churches that ranged through their small city. This must have been difficult for them to discern and carry out, but not nearly as hard as it would become to discern how to welcome Gentiles into the fold.

The History of Jew-Gentile Relations

From the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Israelites who later Jews encountered non-Jews and had to figure out how to respond to them. On a jaunt south Abraham and Sarah engage with

Egyptian officials, beginning an every-generation challenge: how shall the chosen family exist within a larger world of different values and customs. This long history can be divided into four periods.

Stage One: Pre-Abrahamic Humanity in the Bible

In the Biblical story spanning from Adam and Eve right up 'til Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 1—11), there was not yet a “chosen people” or a Jewish people at all. Humanity lived undifferentiated in a vast array of tribes and clans. Characters like that first family, Noah and his family, et al. were simply human.

At this stage, there was also no Law of Moses. In fact, aside from specific commands like, “do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Adam and Eve), “don’t kill your brother” (to Cain re: Abel), “build an ark” (Noah), etc., humanity had to guess at what behavior God wanted from them.

Not surprisingly, with no ethical guardrails, humanity hurt one another. As Genesis 6 has it,

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.

This exasperated God – the Lord even “regretted that he had made human beings” – so God sent a flood, in order to start over with a remnant (Noah’s family). But things did not get better. Humanity continued to do ill and, on top of this, began to plot a unified takeover through the Tower of Babel. In response, God scattered humanity and confused their languages.

Stage Two – A Chosen People with a Defining Ritual but No Divine Law

In response to human waywardness and the new tribal and linguistic division, God devised a reclamation project: work through one family. God called Abram and Sarai (soon to be Abraham and Sarah) to pick up stakes and move to the land we now know as Israel/Palestine. He promised them a large family, blessings, and that “through you all the nations of the world will be blessed.” The true line of God’s family would ultimately run through Jacob.

To this genetic, ethnic definition of the chosen people, God added in Genesis 17 a ritual for the family: all the males would be circumcised. In fact, that circumcision – performed on the male child’s 8th day – would identify the group of families who were in on the covenant between God and Abraham.

Interestingly, God still did not identify a moral structure as a condition of belonging. That may be why, when Abraham and Sarah traveled to Egypt (famine relief) and met their leaders, Abraham

seemed to feel no compunction about lying and calling Sarah his sister, rather than his wife (in order to avoid being killed by powerful men who desired her).

Stage Three – Moses’ Law as a Second Identifier of the Chosen People

An ethical and religious code finally came to Israel about 500 years after Abraham and Sarah moved to Palestine. For 400 of those years, the people had lived enslaved under Pharaohs in Egypt. But, finally, God “heard the cry of my people” and liberated the chosen people from slavery through Moses. It was only after they had been set free and moved out of Egypt that God said, “Here’s how to live...” The famous beginning of the Ten Commandments reads, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.”

What came next was a long list of both religious and moral commands that would define Israel and, along with the ritual of circumcision, distinguish them from the nations around them. Religiously, they would not worship the gods of surrounding nations (like Baal and Asherah), they would not eat certain foods (like pork), they would keep they would worship in certain ways (with a Tabernacle and then a Temple), and they would set aside a day (Saturday). Morally, they would not kill, lie, steal, commit adultery, or covet. An extensive code grew out of this core set of commands.

Stage Four: Gentile Proselytes to Judaism

During some periods of Israel’s history, the people held a loathing and/or disdain for non-Jews. When we reach the period around Jesus’ time, “Gentile dogs” and “Gentile sinners” had become a common way of referring to non-Jews. However, some Jews hoped to invite Gentiles into the covenant of God with Israel. So how did they do that?

Here’s an interesting fact. As much as genealogies are important in the Bible, the two defining markers of what it is to be Jewish – circumcision and Moses’ commands – both deal with behavior, and not genetics. At some point during the Old Testament period – and we don’t exactly know when – ethnic non-Jews began to be drawn to the monotheism, worship, and moral life of the Jews. These Gentiles wanted to join their lives to the ways of the Jews. In order to join the covenant, however, they were required to (1) circumcise the males of their household; and (2) sign on for compliance with Moses’ law. Some Gentiles were willing to take on this formidable life change. They were called “Proselytes”. Another group, who loved the monotheism and the order of life, but did not wish to comply with the demands of circumcision and kosher (or other) law, came to be called “God-fearers”. (We encounter some in the Book of Acts.)

It is important to notice one thing as we prepare to read Acts 15: throughout the two millennia between Abraham and Paul, not a single Jewish author that we know ever suggested, “We should relax the requirement of circumcision!” or “It shouldn’t apply to...” And through that

period, Moses' laws remained binding on all Israel and all proselytes – though they often failed to keep them.

A Brief Early History of Christianity and the Gentiles

An All-Jewish Christianity

This whole history of Jew-Gentile relations didn't matter much at first – either for Jesus or for his followers – because the disciples were all Jews, and the great majority of people they encountered were Jews. Jews made up the entire earliest church in Jerusalem, and indeed we know from Matthew's Gospel and the Book of James that even for five decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, some Jewish-Christian groups continued to observe Sabbath and Moses' ceremonial commands (kosher, holidays, etc.)

The Beginning of Gentile Conversion

When the earliest church moved out beyond Jerusalem, under the pressure of persecution that led to Stephen's martyrdom, they naturally encountered non-Jews who became interested in joining the Way. Some struggled to get their head around including such "Gentile sinners". In fact, Peter himself couldn't fathom it at first. Like ancient Israel, the earliest church had to grapple with the notion of including Gentiles.

However, Acts tracks a change that begins with a dream of Peter that he saw as God's doing. (More on the dream later.) The dream convinced Peter that God wanted the Gentiles in. So he welcomed some Gentiles into the Way, saying, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." (Acts 10.33-34) This perspective spread through the work of other missionaries. In fact, the initial mission to Gentiles became increasingly more successful, as more and more of the churches had a non-Jewish population. When Paul's mission began, this population multiplied, so that in many churches of Turkey and Greece, Gentile Christians far outnumbered Jewish Christians.

The Markers of Christianity

Of course, these Jewish-Christian missionaries kept Sabbath and kosher and observed Moses' commands. They were also circumcised. But at some point, they watched God's Spirit, which had entered and empowered the Jewish-Christian church on Pentecost and beyond, entering and empowering Gentiles as they embraced the good news about Jesus. In fact, the Spirit was showing up in those non-Jewish lives before Peter or Paul or Barnabas could even get the potential converts circumcised.

"While Peter was still speaking these words [of the gospel], the Holy Spirit came on all [the Gentiles in Cornelius the Centurion's house] who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

All of this raised the very important question that would prompt our little Acts 15 gathering in a Jerusalem Jewish-Christian house:

Are the identifying markers of Judaism (circumcision of the males and keeping Moses' law) also necessary markers and identifiers for Christians, too?

Put differently, the question sounds stark:

Do people have to practice Judaism fully in order to become Christians?

This very difficult question struck at the heart of Jewish identity and self-understanding. For hundreds of years, they had been "the people of Abraham's covenant with God on circumcision and Moses' covenant with God on the Law." The specific event that forced the conversation is captured in the first verse of Acts 15: "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (Acts 15.1)

This prompted a debate with Paul and Barnabas and others, who had experienced many Gentile conversions by then. Eventually, the leaders of the church in Antioch chose Paul and Barnabas to go to the mother ship in Jerusalem for a consultation.

Part Two – The Shape of the Conversation

Let's imagine 20-30 Christian leaders jammed into the largest home available among followers of the Way in Jerusalem. Emotions surely ran high, because much was at stake. This issue would dictate the shape of this movement and its relationship to the Judaism from which all or almost all of those gathered had come. Those not directly involved would have chosen sides and made their allegiances clearly known. Close quarters, high emotion, high stakes, partisan passions, and yet Luke reports no violence. How did they pull this off?

The Cast of Courageous Conversationalists

The crew James gathered featured two groups with starkly different beliefs, presumably some other early Christians who had not decided on the issue, and James the brother of Jesus, who presided over the meeting. Here's the cast:

The "Circumcision Party"

These may have been the very same "certain people" who told the Antioch Christians that circumcision and Moses' Law were mandatory for salvation. Luke tells us they were Christians who had been Pharisees prior to conversion. Pharisees, as we learned in our first session, served

the Jewish people as custodians of Moses' Law. They were responsible to keep the people living righteously, according to Torah. Geographically, they live in Jerusalem (or just outside in Judaea), so they are a part of the Jerusalem-centered Jewish Christianity that began at Pentecost.

Peter (Simon/Simeon)

The apostle who (along with John) became central to the Jerusalem church's ministry, preaching the Pentecost sermon and continue to spread the good news about Jesus. His experience of a dream he attributes to God swayed him to welcome Gentiles into the Christian movement. Here he states that his experience has also taught him (and others) that God welcomes Gentiles without demanding circumcision or Moses' ceremonial law. Geographically, Peter may still live in Jerusalem. (It's hard to tell.) He certainly has his spiritual roots there. In Acts 10, Luke pictures Peter as the inaugurator of the Gentile mission.

Paul and Barnabas

These two missionaries have seen Gentiles join the Way of Jesus during their early ministry on Cyprus and in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (town and cities in present-day central Turkey). . As a result of that experience, they have concluded (like Peter) that God does NOT require circumcision and Moses' ceremonial Law as prerequisites to salvation for Gentile converts. Geographically, their home base is the Antioch church, which was a composite of Jewish and Gentile Christians.

James, the Brother of Jesus

The most authoritative leader in the Jerusalem church by now is James. He was not a disciple. He was Jesus' brother. Gradually, his influence had increased, until now he became the decision-maker in matters like this. Geographically, James has left the family home in Nazareth and lives in Jerusalem.

The Whole Assembly

Luke paints a picture of a gathered group – we don't know how large – who may not belong to either group or may be partisan and divided in the room. Think of them as the interested audience. Geographically, it appears that these are hometown Jerusalemites, though Luke is not clear about this.

The Conversation

The former Pharisees and now law-abiding Jesus people spoke first. They had the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) squarely on their side. Hadn't God called all covenant people to circumcise their males since the time of Abraham. While Acts 15 does not record the speeches of the circumcision party, we can imagine that they sprinkled their speech with extensive quotations

from Moses' Law. The impact for people as biblically observant as Paul and the rest must have been powerful. Perhaps they were even a bit shaken when they rose to state their own position.

The apostle Peter spoke next. Peter's words are striking for the utter absence of biblical references. He emphasizes experience.

God, who knows the human heart, testified to [the Gentiles who had come to faith] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

Peter (and Paul and Barnabas) simply told what they had seen and heard: God had given the Holy Spirit to Gentiles before they could ever get around to circumcision or kosher observance. They made the case for a less strict inclusion, and they made it, not on the basis of scripture, but entirely on their experience.

Ultimately, James settled the dispute. He rose to render his verdict to an expectant crowd that hung on his every word. In his ruling, James nodded to each party in some measure: he honored the black-letter scripture of the circumcision party by quoting Isaiah's inspired vision of all peoples coming to receive the healing of God; he honored experience, too, in the end deciding that God's own verdict on the matter had been sufficiently issued when God gave the Spirit to Gentiles apart from observance of circumcision or kosher laws. Scripture framed the decision, but ultimately the early church's future flowed from James' verdict that God was opening the doors wider than before – an insight he accepted because of the missionaries' experience.

James nodded to the circumcision party in another way, too. This was not an "anything goes" pronouncement. Gentiles would need to mind their sexual ethics and avoid meat that had (probably) been sacrificed to idols. In other words, James demands of these Gentile converts a measure of discipline, but not Jewish rituals.

James' answer has three parts:

- Part One – God welcomes Gentiles. Isaiah says so.
- Part Two – God welcomes Gentiles apart from circumcision and Law. Experience says so.
- Part Three – God continues to require of the Gentile converts (and all Christians) both sexual purity and some dietary restrictions.

The vision of James and these first Christians is, therefore, a scriptural, experiential, and morally disciplined sort of inclusion.

Close – The Takeaway

Three insights emerge from our brief time in Acts 15.

1. The Faithful Sort Conflict together.
2. Scripture + Experience = Discernment
3. Discipleship Has Its Demands

There are surely other lessons from this generative episode in early Christian life. What else comes to your mind? I'll see you Thursday evening.