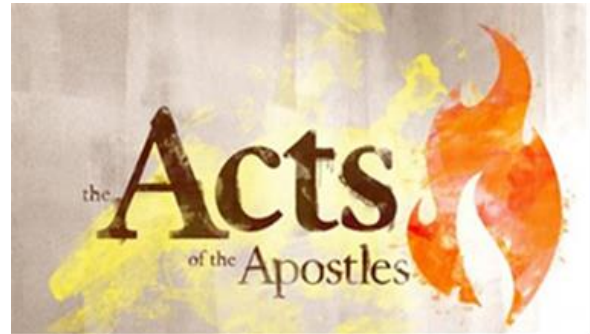


## ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – PART 16

### The First Church Business Conference

#### Acts 15

The movement was becoming more and more Gentile due to the continued opposition by the Jewish elite and the amazingly positive response of the Gentiles. That said, there were many Jews in the now-mixed assembly, and many were leaders, especially the few Pharisees who followed



Jesus. The theological direction was moving away from Judaism, but it was a slow drift. At this moment, the Jerusalem Church (we will begin using the “church” word) was controlled by complete Jews who began to insist Gentile believers go through the motions of becoming Jews (something that began when Gentiles converted to Judaism). This would require circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic law, especially the dietary restrictions.

This “you must become a Jew to follow Jesus” thing was not popular. From almost 2000 years of historical perspective, we can poke all kinds of holes in that theological model, but honestly I can see why complete Jews might have felt this way. God formed Israel to be his holy and priestly people. This was not, however, a sign of exclusivity. This was a call to action. It was a job description to be played out over hundreds of years. And, they were to be different (physically, spiritually, dietary laws, etc.) and in and through their difference they were to take the Most High God to all people (the world was greatly polytheistic). This grand plan didn’t fully pan out in all the ways it was designed. Israel became more and more exclusive for more and more reasons. Gentiles did not measure up. They were not seen as worthy and as such not eligible. Imagine it being said: *They will ruin our church!*

Paul and Barnabas stood in opposition to the demand that to follow Jesus Gentiles must first convert to Judaism, be circumcised, and keep the Law of

Moses. Taking this bold stand while in Antioch was easy and wholly ineffective. The real issues, the actual “heavy lifting,” would play out in Jerusalem.

Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem for a meeting that would one day be required study for seminary students. As the meeting began they reported on their first missional journey, highlighting the large number of Gentiles who committed to follow Jesus. In a jiffy the believers who were Jews and Pharisees spoke up in what was nothing more than a point of order and a bit of posturing: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and be required to obey the full law” (V.5).

This possibly contentious issue (and one that would shape future Christian theology and practice) led to, wait for it, *A Committee Work Session!*

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe’” (vv.6-7).

In verse 9 Luke quotes Peter: “He made no distinction between us and them.” Think about it, let it sink in, process it. Much like Paul was saying in Galatians, God sees all people equally, I repeat **all** people are the same. Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans are equal. Sounds right to us but this was groundbreaking for the mid-first century church.

But, and there’s always a but, the Pharisees weren’t “there” yet, at least not until James spoke up. James (yes, that James) the leader of the Jewish wing of the Jesus movement. When he spoke in affirmation of Peter’s words the assembly listened and the decision was made.

### **Welcome All Gentiles... but**

Gentiles were to be seen as equal and have full access to God’s love and salvation without first needing to become fully Jewish. This was huge but it came with caveats: “Abstain from meat sacrificed to animals, all sexual misconduct and eating anything strangled or with any blood” (v 20). *So...we are equal but...?* Actually, it could have been much different. Aside from dietary restrictions they were to be, well, non-pagan in their sexual practices and give up their affinity for

idols. Easy-peasy. They were lifelong pagans who had been heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman world, but the reality of Jesus and the Spirit in their lives allowed them to do just that, rise above and beyond their pagan instincts.

## Next

The next outcome was the creation of a group of emissaries to take the good news (not the actual Jesus *Good News*, but excellent news nonetheless) to the other assemblies. Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Judas were chosen to deliver the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. Again, the door was wide open for Gentiles to find Jesus, which they did.

## Takeaways

1. It is clear Gentiles were becoming the future and the numbers were there, but prominent Jewish-Jesus believers still held the prime seats at the table. The “meeting in the middle” arrangement was as healthy an outcome as there could have been. The future was moving away from Judaism and the Pharisees (of all people) recognized it. The takeaway is simple: The Kingdom’s work is progressive. Not one of us controls it. A church can participate and engage the Kingdom, but no church calls the shots. Never will. Shouldn’t. The Kingdom does not revolve around us, we revolve around the Kingdom.

Enough said. I’d just ruin it if I continue.

Amen and Amen.

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