

The Acts of the Apostles was written to be the second half of the gospel of Luke. Together they form a whole: framing our understanding of Jesus, the Church and us. The story (told by Luke) doesn't end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather it's a climactic twist, a new beginning, a denouement of our expectations of God and how God moves in the world. The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the birth or emergence of the Church from the remnant of disciples who experienced Jesus as resurrected, and filled by the revolutionizing power of the Spirit of God went out through the city, the region and to the ends of the Earth to tell the story of Jesus. Their retelling of the story included the paradox that we – through the Spirit of God, as the Church (the gathered community of those who find faith and life in Christ Jesus) – enter into this story, we are protagonists, not spectators, in the story of what God is doing in the world through the power and person of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Acts has no real narrative end. Rather it continues in you, me, and us, today.

certain individuals came down from Judea :: The story picks up in Antioch (the 3rd most important city of the Roman Empire after Rome, and Alexandria [Egypt]). It was also a major center of the early and emerging Church. It's where Paul and Barnabas have been sharing the gospel in the immediate context of this story – see Acts 14. These “individuals” seem to be some form of itinerant, traveling preachers who preached a different version of the gospel in which Gentile (or non-Jewish) believers in Jesus were to first become Jewish (through circumcision and following the Law of Moses) before becoming Christian. They didn't rule out universal salvation, that's to say that non-Jews (or Gentiles) could know and be known by the God of Abraham and Sarah. For they adhered to the foundational promise of God's covenant in Genesis 12:3: “I [Yahweh] will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” But they did believe that there was more to do. In the letter to the churches of Galatia, which we call Galatians, Paul talks about this false doctrine of these itinerant teachers and the events related in our chapter of Acts 15, specifically in Chapter 2 in the books of Galatians. Read the entirety that pastoral letter of advice to get a better feel of the whole situation.

Unless you are circumcised ...you cannot be saved :: This teaching isn't one of rejection or outright exclusion of Gentile believers of Jesus. Rather it's an argument focused around inclusion into God's covenant, that one must do to the Jewish action for being included in that promise. We easily forget that circumcision was a big deal. While it's common in our nation among non-Jews, in the Roman Empire it was not a common custom. Jesus himself, like all good Jews, was circumcised. See Luke 2:21.

NO SMALL DISSENSION AND DEBATE :: this is a traditional way in Antiquity of politely saying that it was a really heated argument. Biblicists assert that this is one of the most important chapters in Acts as it raises the foundational question of the early Church. Does one have to first become Jewish to become Christian? Or are they distinct?

believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees :: here we see the diversity at the root of the emerging Christian community. The Pharisees were a sect in Judaism that was centered on the radical and total observance of the Law of Moses in life as an identifying factor, declaring that the person worshipped Yahweh. The Law was seen less as a set of rules than as source of life, a promise of blessing.

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 5.14.2017

Acts 15:1-18

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹ Then **certain individuals came down from Judea** and were teaching the brothers, “*Unless you are circumcised*” according to the custom of Moses, *you cannot be saved.*” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had **NO SMALL DISSENSION AND DEBATE** with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the **believers**.

⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some *believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees* stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, **Peter stood up and said** to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now 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? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God

Peter stood up and said:: Peter has recently gone through a conversion experience himself in his encounter with the Jesus believing Roman named Cornelius in Acts 10. This experience changed his perception on the identification of the Way of Jesus specifically with the ethnic group of the Jews. He speaks here invoking the authority of both scripture and personal experience.

placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke :: scholars suspect that even some mainstream Jews of that time experienced the Torah, obeying the Law of Moses as a heavy yoke and burden. This could specifically refer to the commandment to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem for the high holy days, which would have been prohibitively expensive for those who lived far away such as in Galilee. Jesus himself talks about such a yoke and burden, comparing his Way to the Law in Matthew 11:28-30, saying: ²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” It would seem then that this teaching about circumcision and the Law went against the very teaching and words of Jesus. That’s what this first Apostolic Council of the Church concludes.

Verse 16 is a direct quote of Amos 9:11-12 from the Septuagint, the Greek Translation of the Old Testament. It’s from a passage that talks about the restoration of the true people, the intended kingdom of Israel.

¹¹ On that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old;

¹² in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,
says the Lord who does this.

¹³ The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.

¹⁴ I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.

¹⁵ I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

Amos 9:11-15

first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.

¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ *‘After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David,
which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,*

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.’

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

***What strikes or shimmers for you in this passage?**

***This is the first encounter in the Church of divisive disagreement. How did they solve it? How do we solve disagreements and debates in our church life – or in your life experience? Are such disagreements an unavoidable part of life? Why do you think so?; Why not?**

***The underlying question of this story is innovation and adaptation. How do we interpret the teaching of Jesus in terms of contemporary life and issues. For the early Church this involved around identity as the people of God, meaning the God of Abraham and Sarah: Yahweh. The God of the Torah Law. For some then, no longer following the Law taught by Moses was a question of heresy, of anathema, or no longer being faithful. What are the issues or debates that we face today that are understood by some as defining us, or others, as Christian or not Christian?**

***How do you identify yourself as a follower of Jesus? What does that mean? What words do you use? Do you use the term “Christian”? Or do you use other words? If so, why?**