

Small Group Study

Our Vision

To know God and enjoy Him forever.

Our Mission

To build a Christian community by making fully devoted disciples of non-religious and nominally religious people



Discussion

Power with Purpose: Showdown at the Jerusalem Council

Scripture

Have volunteers read the following scripture:

Acts 15:1-11 (NLT)

1 While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.

4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. 5 But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

6 So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. 7 At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: "Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. 8 God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. 10 So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? 11 We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."

Ice Breaker

Use ONE of the questions to help people open up and to focus your meeting. It is very helpful to go around in a circle with the leader going first. (Remember if you have new members or guests you should take time to introduce everyone.)

- 1.** Tell us about a time when you got in a big disagreement with someone. How did it turn out?
- 2.** What are some traditions or customs that you and your family have?
- 3.** If you knew you were going to lose some part of your body and you had a choice in the matter, which part would you choose to lose?

Introduction

Acts 15 describes the most important meeting the early church had. The future of the church was at stake—was it to be a Jewish group, or would it allow gentiles?

If gentiles could enter the church without following Jewish laws, the church would attract more gentiles, and

eventually gentiles would be the majority. The church would no longer be a sect of Judaism, but a distinct faith. Let's see how the council of Jerusalem developed.

The council comes in the center of the book of Acts. Luke's book begins with the Jewish church, dominated by Peter in chapters 1 to 5. The book ends with Paul's mission to the gentiles, in chapters 16 to 28. Chapters 6 to 15 form a transition, alternating between Jewish and gentile growth.

Chapter 15, the council of Jerusalem, forms the climax of the transition between Jewish and gentile evangelism. In the story flow, the council forms the decisive step that propels the gentile mission into dominance.

Paul and Barnabas had returned from a successful missionary trip in gentile areas. They told the church in Antioch how God had "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Thus the stage is set for chapter 15.

"Some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (15:1). They were saying that circumcision was required for salvation. They probably thought the question was simple: Christians should obey God, and God had commanded circumcision. If people want the blessings of Abraham, they should act like children of Abraham, and that meant circumcision for gentiles as well as for Jews (Gen. 17:12).

Paul and Barnabas had a different opinion: "Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently." (Acts 15:2). How was the argument to be resolved? "Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question." In this way the church could have unity.

So "the church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted." (v. 3). Luke is letting us know that most Christians supported the gentile mission.

"When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them." (v. 4). What God had done was part of the evidence. The miracles and conversions supported what he was saying.

Then they debated the question: "But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, 'The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.'" (v. 5). We saw in verse 1 that they believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Here we see that they also believed the laws of Moses were required. Circumcision was the first step in the process—they believed that Christians must keep all the laws of Moses.

What were these laws? Were they biblical laws, or merely the traditions of the elders? In every other New Testament mention of the "laws of Moses," the biblical books of Moses are meant (Luke 2:22; 24:44; John 7:22-23; Acts 28:23; 1 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 10:28). Luke could have said "traditions," but he did not. Anyone who knew the teachings of Jesus would already know that these extra-biblical traditions were not required of anyone. They did not need to debate about Jewish traditions.

Just as circumcision was biblical, so also were the laws of Moses. The claim was that gentile believers should be circumcised, and then, as part of the covenant people of God, obey the laws of the covenant. One of the laws of Moses was that males were to be circumcised.

Today, we might explain that Jesus instituted a new covenant, and that the Jewish believers were God's people not because they were Jewish, but because they were believers. Membership in the new covenant is by faith, not by ancestry. But the Jerusalem council did not approach the question from this perspective. Let's see how they did it.

"So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue." (v. 6). Perhaps dozens of elders were involved. "After a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: 'Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe.'" (v. 7).

Peter reminded the people that God had used him to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his family (Acts 10). As far as we know, Cornelius was not circumcised, but Peter did not use that precedent as proof. Rather, he focused on the theological foundations of how a person is saved—by believing.

"God knows people's hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith." (vs. 8-9). God gave the Holy Spirit to this uncircumcised family, purifying their hearts, pronouncing them holy, as acceptable to him, because of their faith.

Peter then began to scold the people who wanted the gentiles to obey the laws of Moses: "So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus." (vs. 10-11).

Peter's point is that the yoke of Moses was a burden that the Jewish people were not able to keep successfully. Those rituals showed that, no matter how hard people worked, they could never be perfect. They showed, for anyone who ever wondered, that works can never lead to salvation. Salvation is attained in a different way—by grace. We can't earn it, so it has to be given to us.

Since the law of Moses cannot bring us salvation, there is no need to require the gentiles to keep it. God gave them the Holy Spirit and showed that he accepts them without all those rituals. Both gentiles and Jews are saved, not by works, but by grace.

Questions

1. Why were the men from Judea teaching that one had to be circumcised to be saved?

2. Read Galatians 2:11-16:

11 But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. 12 When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile Christians, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. 13 As a result, other Jewish Christians followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

14 When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?"

15 "You and I are Jews by birth, not 'sinners' like the Gentiles. 16 Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law."

Why would Paul and Barnabas be opposed to the men from Judea teaching that one had to be circumcised to be saved?

3. What did the Pharisees fail to understand regarding salvation as far as the law was concerned?

4. What does Peter say is evidence that the Gentiles may receive Christ just as the Jews may?

5. What is the "yoke" referring to in verse ten?

6. Forcing the new believers to become Jewish culturally could be considered bad contextualization of the gospel.

Read the following excerpt from an article titled, "Putting Contextualization in its Place".

Contextualization is one of the hottest topics in missions today. Simply put, contextualization is the word we use for the process of making the gospel and the church as much at home as possible in a given cultural context.

American Christians have a tendency to think of contextualization as something missionaries and overseas Christians do "over there," and then they worry about how far non-Western churches go in their contextualization efforts. However, every Christian alive today is actively involved in contextualization.

Every American Christian worships in a contextualized church. As much as we like to think of our churches as "New Testament churches," there actually are no New Testament churches in existence today. Our cultural context is dramatically different from the world of the New Testament, and as a result, any modern church would look bizarre and alien to a first-century Christian.

This is true at every level. The first century church met in places like the Temple porch in Jerusalem, the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus, or most often in private homes. There were no church buildings during the New Testament period. Our buildings, with their modern construction materials, their style and appearance, and their electronic gadgetry, would look like they had come down from outer space if they were plopped into a first century setting.

Our seating arrangements, with people sitting on pews or chairs rather than on the floor, and with unrelated men and women sitting side by side, would seem strange (and perhaps a bit scandalous) to a first century Palestinian believer.

The programs that make up so much of modern church life – Sunday School, Youth Group, RAs and GAs, Awanas – all came into being in recent centuries, and were unknown to the early church.

The music we sing is based on a totally different tonality from that of the ancient Mediterranean world, and it uses very different instruments. (The piano was not invented until the modern era, and the organ was originally a Roman circus instrument, considered unfit for Christian worship.) Our music would have sounded strange and unpleasant to them, and vice versa. (It should be noted that all Christian music, at some point, has been "contemporary Christian music," and that even the most traditional songs today were probably regarded as risqué by somebody when they first came out!)

The language we speak did not even exist in biblical times. English as we know it developed during the Middle Ages, centuries after the New Testament was completed. First century Christians worshiped in Aramaic, Koine Greek, or Latin. And the social customs and cultural practices of the first century church were much closer to the modern culture of the Middle East or Central Asia than to contemporary North America.

Our culture is radically different from the culture of the New Testament, and, as a result, our churches are radically different from New Testament churches. In countless ways, every believer alive today, whether in North America or South Asia, contextualizes the gospel and the church. The question is not whether we're going to contextualize. The question facing every believer and every church is whether we will contextualize well. Anyone who fails to realize that they are doing it, and who fails to think it through carefully and biblically, simply guarantees that they will contextualize poorly. Syncretism can happen as easily in Indiana or Iowa as it can in Indonesia. (*Note: Syncretism is the blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions.*) (Read the rest of this article here: <http://xrl.us/be43md>)

Think for a moment about this, and answer the following questions.

- If you were to attempt to contextualize the message of the gospel to another culture or socio-economic group, what aspects would remain unchanged and what elements would you seek to "contextualize"?
- And what would be a bad example of contextualization of the gospel to that people-group?

In answering these questions, you might even pick a group to talk about. Some examples of other cultures or socio-economic groups: abused women, orphaned children, inner-city gang members, prisoners, homeless, native americans, atheistic western europeans, Haitian Voodoo practitioners, etc.

7. Take time in your group to pray for those friends, relatives, associates, neighbors, and kids you know that don't know Christ. Also pray for those who are on the front lines in missions--those people all around the world who are working hard to see people come to Christ. Pray especially for our missions team that is in Ecuador this week. Those from our church that are there are Tim Dykes, Sarah Molina, Austin Bennett, and Sheri Bennett.

God bless,

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