



*feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)*

Dear Church Family,

Acts is a story about the spread of the gospel as we read about disciples fulfilling Jesus' prophetic words in 1:8, *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*. But in Acts 15 we encounter a fork in the road with regard to what will be required of Gentiles to whom God had opened the door of faith. There are Jewish believers who assert, *"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* (15:1) and with regard to new Gentile believers, *"It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."* (15:5) What would have been in mind were specifically the dietary laws of Moses. Both food laws and circumcision set Jews apart and made them distinctive from Gentile society. We have a hard time understanding the concern of these people because we are so far removed from the Jewish roots of Christianity. As faithful Jews, they were raised with the understanding that circumcision and following the Law were essential to their identity as the people of God and a necessary expression of their devotion. So it would be natural for them to assume that Gentiles would need to attend to these things.

This was a matter of great debate and dissension that was brought to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. A resolution is presented in three features of the story, a speech by Peter, a report from Barnabas and Paul of their experiences, and a concluding speech from James. Key is the understanding that God had made it clear with His actions that He does not require these things of Gentiles. He had *cleansed their hearts by faith* and taken from among the Gentiles a *people for His name* without circumcision or requiring the law of Moses. Peter says that to require these things would be to put God to the test because it would be ignoring what He had already made clear. Further is the understanding that to require these things would be to trouble Gentiles with a yoke that would be more of a hindrance than a help to them. This is a remarkable perspective for a Jew on aspects of the law. This perspective is not explained here in Acts, but we can draw upon the New Testament for an explanation.

If circumcision and keeping the law of Moses were required, the importance and sufficiency of faith in Christ and His work would be diminished. To use the language of 14:27, when God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, this door did not lead directly to being His people and bearing His name, but rather led into Judaism. It was then circumcision and keeping the law of Moses that completed the work of being God's people. The focus of a new convert would move from wonder and gratitude about what Christ had accomplished for them (full acceptance by God as His people) to the work of becoming God's people through their obedience to circumcision and the other practices of keeping the law of Moses. A focus that would shift from Christ's work being absolutely central to a focus on their own works of keeping the law.

So this decision about circumcision and keeping the law is essential to promoting a gospel that is centered on faith in Christ and what He has accomplished. And this is essential not just to becoming a person who bears the name of Jesus, but to the whole process of becoming a person who bears the name of Jesus (who acts and asks in his name). Anything that shifts our

focus off of Christ and onto anything else, especially our own works or efforts, robs the gospel of its power in our lives. We need to pay careful attention to when our focus becomes more on what we are doing or even not doing than on what we have received in Christ. What is so easy for us to do is addressed by Paul in Gal 3:3, *Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*

So there is agreement that Gentile believers did not need to attend to these matters of the law of Moses. But there were four things that they were told to avoid, *things polluted or sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality*. Scholars are not in agreement on exactly what was being prohibited and why. What was clear to people then is not clear to readers today. I spent a little time on this in the message. My conclusion is that the items on this list are all related to idol worship of the day. But this does not mean that they would have been permitted if they were not related to idol worship. The idol worship was designed to seduce believers into behavior that is itself ungodly and draws them away from God. However, the application today is not so much about determining how the meat we eat has been handled in order to make sure we avoid eating blood. It is being discerning about practices in our culture that are really idol worship (whether we realize it or not) and seduce us into behavior that is a stumbling block to our spiritual lives.

The resolution of the issue of the law of Moses and Gentile believers allows for the missionary work to continue and we see that as the story moves forward. In a second missionary journey, Paul visits and strengthens the church where he has already been and also branches out into new areas of evangelism. And it is the evangelistic efforts that are featured in the story. This is a challenging aspect of reading Acts. We have already spoken about how we are challenged by the supernatural activity in Acts, healing, deliverance, guidance by the Holy Spirit that is more prevalent than we experience in our own lives. Similarly, Acts challenges us in the area of evangelism, spreading the gospel, seeing people hear and receive the gospel message. Our spiritual lives are much more about our spiritual growth in Christ, what we do and experience in church and with other believers. How much of your life is about preaching the gospel and seeing people come to Christ? If your answer is not much, you are certainly not alone. Are you, like me, challenged in this area because we are focusing on a story that is all about God's desire to reach the lost and experiencing Him in that mission?

What are we to do with this? Certainly we can apply ourselves more to evangelism and make more effort in this area of our lives. But the inspiring aspect of the Acts story is more about the activity of the Holy Spirit than the activity of Paul and others. Their evangelism was clearly empowered by the Holy Spirit with powerful miracles (Acts 19:11-12). They were also guided by the Spirit, although often not in straightforward ways. While the leading of the Spirit is mysterious at times, there is still the definite sense that God is with them. This is not something that they are to do for God as much as they are doing it with God or the Holy Spirit. More Holy Spirit power and guidance is something to hunger for in our lives as we face the challenge of evangelism. I felt led to bring two expressions to our celebration of communion, expressions that the Spirit also gave to Monique and Anne for the intercessory prayer time before church. First was a renewed sense of what we have in Christ, all that He has accomplished and given to us. And secondly to express a desire to be a part of God's heart to reach the lost - to witness others being able to celebrate the wonder and power of the work of Christ that we celebrate. These are obviously connected, as our own participation in spreading the gospel will depend upon our own experience of the gospel and its impact on our lives.

Pastorally Yours,

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