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## Maintaining Pentecost

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Acts 15:1-22

*[The Council at Jerusalem]*

*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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;<sup>9</sup> and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.<sup>10</sup> 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?<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”*

*<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me.<sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.<sup>15</sup> This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,*

*<sup>16</sup> ‘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,<sup>17</sup> 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<sup>18</sup> known from long ago.’*

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,<sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.<sup>21</sup> For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”*

*[The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers]*

<sup>22</sup> *Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers....*

The second chapter of Acts is the usual text for Pentecost, but I chose chapter 15. Acts 2 is flashy and exciting. Acts 15 is tedious. Chapter 15 just seemed more like Pentecost in our own era, an opportunity to look at ourselves and reflect on what pockets of people today are being pressured, however lovingly, to be other than themselves, in order to be included in our life together.

Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, agreed with the circumcisers – a name the Jerusalem Jewish Christians would never have called themselves. Circumcision and food laws were the primary marks of Jewishness, the bare minimum of Jewishness in the first century. And those devout Jews, who were now devout followers of Jesus, were – I believe – as concerned with the full inclusion of Gentiles as Paul and Barnabas. But, they could not conceive of any way to include them apart from circumcising them and teaching them to eat kosher.

I am positive they meant well, that they meant for Gentiles to feel included. Just the idea of opening up circumcision and table fellowship to Gentiles was an unusually liberal reading of the Torah by the Jerusalem Jews.

And if history is any indicator, plenty of the incoming Gentiles willingly conformed and were circumcised. But others didn't, probably because circumcision was terrible. But for some – again, with history as an indicator – it meant pretending they were somebody they weren't OR pretending they weren't somebody they were.

Both were right in their own way: the ones preaching circumcision and food laws and the ones defending the Gentiles who were resisting it. So there was a big church meeting – a very unusual meeting, unusual for a church meeting in this way: the people who attended all had the exact same goal. They all came prepared to listen, to have their hearts and minds changed by what they heard and what they saw. Long after-the-fact, I think, Luke wrote about this meeting so the church would have it as a model, a kind of blueprint, for the maintenance of Pentecost.

The Jerusalem Jews were the conservatives – in the best sense of the word “conservative.” They have no doubt about the tried and true value of tradition, of the value of circumcision and food laws, to their community. Particularly in hard times, like exile and foreign occupation, circumcision and food laws were primary marks of Jewish identity and community. They weren't about to abandon that system without serious thought. Paul and Barnabas, for their part, are too open-minded, too desirous of consensus, to be called liberals. *Progressives* maybe? Or *prophetic*? *Prophetic* in that they had seen the power and love of the risen Christ at work in the lives of the Gentiles in the field.

Other than Peter, the conservatives had not. They get to be skeptical. They get to ask questions. It's fair for them to wonder whether such love will have any teeth when the world bears down on them again. Can love mark and bind people together? Doesn't love depend on trust? Isn't love for fools? All fair questions.

Luke says there was “much debate.” Then Peter preached, the gist of his sermon being, *“I was as surprised as any of you to learn of God’s intentions to include the Gentiles. I’m equally surprised to hear myself say so now, but I realize that the law has always been an impossible burden to our ancestors and to us. So why add it to them too? It doesn’t save them any more than it ever saved us. We and they are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else.”*

*And nobody said a word.* They kept silent and they listened. They kept listening when Paul and Barnabas got up to tell the stories of how God had worked in the lives of the Gentiles, stories which changed their hearts, stories that brought to their minds entire passages of scripture in support of the other side’s argument.

I have been in lots of contentious church meetings. I’ve been in one in which a minister read from Dr. Seuss to explain why this church ought not have a female pastor. But I have never been in a meeting in which a minister quoted scripture in support of the *other side’s* position. James quotes the prophet Amos in verses 16-17,

*“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,<sup>17</sup> so that all other peoples may seek the Lord — even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.”*

Such a thing can happen in a church meeting – *when the people in the meeting care more about maintaining Pentecost than they care about being right.*

*Maintaining Pentecost:* letting the Medes and Parthians remain Medes and Parthians upon receipt of the gospel. Not forcing them first to learn Hebrew or Aramaic in order to understand and accept the gospel. But, so long as church people go to meetings more determined to win, more determined to negotiate a good compromise than not, we probably won’t hear anybody suddenly quoting scripture to support their opponent’s position.

James was the one to quote Amos. He also proposed the solution: in verses 19-20,

*“Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,<sup>20</sup> but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”*

It’s tempting to read James’ proposal as a compromise. But I don’t think it was. A compromise is when one party gives up something she wanted and expects the other to follow suit, for the sole reason that the first party already did; invoking the “F-word” of

nice people everywhere. “I gave up something. Now you have to give up something, because that is ‘FAIR!’”

What James, John, Peter, Paul and Barnabas want or feel is of no account here, because they are of no account. What is of account is the gospel, and the church, in the moment and well beyond the moment. They did what they did because it was right – right for the church, in light of the gospel, at the time.

They were so, so brave: letting go of life together as they’d known it so far, to embrace it as they believed God led them now, without as much biblical affirmation as they’d had before, even as they began to see old scriptures in new ways, and with deep conviction that God was active and present among strangers as God had always been among them.

On this Pentecost Day in the year of our Lord 2016, who are the strangers? Who are the excluded? If not actively, then passively? Who do we passively assume will have to change if they are to be completely at home among us? I wonder if maybe that isn’t the best question for our particular church? I wonder if we don’t so much EXclude others, as we SEclude ourselves and our life together? . . . if we don’t call ourselves “*welcoming*,” but arrange ourselves more like a private club, open to anyone able and willing to get through the door all by themselves?

Segregation exists. Not only among us, but within us, when we sort our spiritual life from the rest of life, keep it as private as who we vote for and the balance on our credit cards, so that our prejudice is not particular, but pervasive. Instead of excluding anybody, we ignore everybody: putting the burden on them to do the work of finding us, showing up, coming back – at which time we say, “Oh sure, please do come in.”

That could change, I think, if we wanted it to, if we ever chose to be different, to be actively inclusive. Acts 15 is well after the fact of Acts 2, but no less a miracle. Both were times of joyful chaos – Acts 2 more like a drunken festival, apparently, and Acts 15 like a long but interesting preaching conference. That someone takes years to become inclusive and the process can get a little tedious may make it all the more miraculous. It’s still Pentecost. So long as everyone is welcome just the way they already are.

Would you pray with me?