

The Defender of the Gentiles

Whether the circumstance is a family custom, a club organization or programming, a civic tradition, or a church, any change faces the considerable barriers of tradition, interpretation and pride. Jesus' teachings and actions generated controversy among the Jews, so we should not be surprised that the early church struggled with change, particularly when there was longstanding division between Jews and Gentiles. Because of the Holy Spirit's leading and God's grace, a crisis was averted and the gospel spread throughout the empire. We can learn from this crisis that became a key turning point for God's people.



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The gospel has been spreading beyond Jerusalem, to Antioch, to Ethiopia, to the coastal regions of Judea and beyond through the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul. The two pioneer missionaries returned from that first trip to Anatolia and called the Antioch church together to report the exciting news of what "God had done with them, and how God had opened the door of faith for the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

There was great celebration, then growing concern and "no small dissension and debate" with Barnabas and Paul on one side and "certain individuals" who came from Judea on the other side (Acts 15:1-2). The Jerusalem fact-finding delegation plainly voiced their concern: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (v. 1). Understand that the delegates from the mother church were not opposed to Gentiles coming to Christ, because they understood that God's plan from the beginning was for Israel to bless all people with God's love and forgiveness. But, they maintained, "there is a right way" to become a child of God and that way is to observe the laws and rituals.

This element of holding on to the old established ways appears several times in Acts, including when circumcised believers found fault with Peter because he visited the home of the Roman

centurion Cornelius, where that Gentile was saved (without circumcision) and where Peter actually shared a meal (Acts 11:1-18)! It was very difficult for those earliest Jews who believed in Jesus to give up their strict heritage and ideas. For them, circumcision was the symbol of God's covenant; they knew that Jesus himself had been circumcised eight days after his birth (Luke 2:21). The delegation from the Jerusalem church cannot imagine how a Gentile believer could experience all of God's blessings without keeping the laws and rituals. The church was facing its first great threat of division and had to confront it head on, which meant a meeting in Jerusalem.

Barnabas and Paul led the delegation from Antioch. They face opposition from some Pharisees – respected theologians – who have accepted Christ yet still insist you must be circumcised to be a true Christian. Paul, also a Pharisee, understands but does not agree with their thinking. Barnabas had gone from Jerusalem to preach in Antioch so he is already known and respected in Jerusalem. In the ensuing debate Peter shares his experience in the home of Cornelius the centurion. Barnabas and Paul share their compelling story of sharing Christ with Gentiles.

The argument to accept Gentiles without the entanglements of the law is straightforward. First, the evidence of the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles at their conversion cannot be ignored. Second is the truth that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, whether we are Jew or Gentile (v. 11). After thorough debate and sharing of experiences, James, the greatly respected leader of the church, steps up to offer his decision based on what they have heard and what Scripture says. Referencing Amos 9:11-12, James reminds them all that the prophet points to the restoration of the true people of God and the inclusion of "Gentiles over whom my name has been called." There is no mention of Gentiles being required to observe the laws of Israel or be circumcised.

In a spirit of reconciliation and to help avoid future conflicts on this same topic, James suggests the church adopt

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an inclusive spirit and that Gentiles respect some traditional customs. James lists four sensitive ideas: 1) abstain from eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods; 2) avoid incestuous marriage; 3) do not eat the flesh of strangled animals; and 4) do not consume blood (vv. 20-21). These are all connected to idol worship and immorality and are included in Leviticus 17-18. These are not unduly harsh expectations, but their observance will alleviate the current tensions as well as help missionaries like Barnabas and Paul when they are traveling to pagan cities across the empire where there are both Jews and Gentiles to whom they are witnessing.

Having lived outside the United States and been a guest on mission fields I know how important it is to respect different customs and religious traditions if you wish an open hearing of the gospel. This text marks a critical crossroad for the early church. There was no foreign or domestic mission board to set policy or design programs, no operations manual. There was the example and teachings of Jesus ... the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit ... and the God of grace who can transform a life into a witness for the gospel.

Just as God worked through very different personalities, such as Barnabas, Paul, Peter, and James, so God can work in our lives. We face the same kinds of obstacles as the early church. Traditions can block openness to the Spirit's leading and close our hearts to opportunities. Set programs cannot foresee or solve every problem. Feelings can get in the way of understanding and compassion. I marvel that the Jerusalem church did not die an early death. The life and power that kept it alive and brought the gospel to the ends of the earth did not come from one church or person, but from so many, named and unnamed, that listened to God's Spirit and loved Jesus above all else. Barnabas and Paul were both like that: both secure in God's grace, and both willing to be the presence of Christ in Jerusalem, Antioch and across the empire. May we be shaped by the same kind of love and openness.