

The book of Acts is all about the Holy Spirit's work of creating and expanding the church, and today's story from chapter 15 is a hinge point, where it's decided to go with the expansion in the most daring way, by jettisoning Jewish identity. Looking back on the debate from 17 centuries of Christian hegemony (especially over Jews), it's hard to appreciate what a big decision this was—and in fact, in next week's reading, we'll get another view of the decision that adds complexity to the picture. But it was a big deal.

The problem was that the Jesus Movement was spreading so extravagantly that non-Jews were joining it in great numbers—and that raised the question of how to integrate them into an essentially Jewish movement. The Torah, the Law, is absolutely intrinsic to Judaism, and if you want to convert to Judaism, which is not a religion that seeks converts, you're welcome but you will need to observe the Law. Even now progressive Jews find themselves negotiating how to be faithful in a largely non-Jewish world, understanding that the Law was given as a gift *because* God loved them—and observance is a kind of spiritual discipline. Law in the first century is often referred to in a sort of short-hand as "circumcision," meaning that male converts should be circumcised, but it included dietary restrictions and Sabbath observance and other behaviors as well. So conversion to Judaism did mean some significant lifestyle changes.

The argument *against* requiring gentiles to convert and observe the Law was not that it was too hard for them or they didn't want to, but that the Holy Spirit was way out ahead of everybody else and it was falling on gentiles who were very much *not* converted to Judaism. In Chapter 10, a Roman centurion named Cornelius was visited by an angel who told him to invite the apostle Peter to his house. While Cornelius' servants were on their way to Peter, Peter had a dream in which God showed him a lot of non-kosher animals and told him he could eat them.

Upon waking up, he got the invitation and went to Cornelius' house and was amazed by the story of the angel's visitation. As he responded to Cornelius, suddenly the Holy Spirit fell upon "all who heard the word," and they started speaking in tongues. So Peter saw that they should be baptized, and he did so. That's the backdrop for this controversy: not that gentile believers are resistant to the Law, but that the Spirit is jumping the gun and pouring out power on them *without* them converting.

In today's story, Peter and Barnabas were in Antioch, which is gentile territory, and some Jewish Christians were telling church members that they had to observe Torah. Controversy ensued, and Paul and Barnabas and some others were dispatched to Jerusalem, the most Jewish city in the world, to hash it out with the apostles there.

Now. Let me review what Law meant to Jews in the Second Temple period, the period after the Babylonian Exile, when Jews once again had a Temple but were always under the thumb of a non-Jewish empire which would frequently try to install statues of the emperor or of Zeus in that Temple. Law was identity, and not only identity as God's chosen people, but identity as an oppressed minority. Jews told stories about Daniel, a devout Jewish man who stubbornly stuck to a kosher diet and refused to worship an idol while serving the Persian king, because Daniel was a role model of resistance and survival. "Just as significant minority identities in contemporary society, such as black identity, or LGBTQ+ identity, or feminist identity, have all been forged in contexts of oppression or exclusion; so the Second Temple Jewish identity was forged in a context of persecution and subjugation.

"This meant that the public inhabitation of that identity - through circumcising your male children, and visibly obeying the Torah laws - was a powerful marker of resistance against

domination.”ⁱ To ask a Jewish follower of the Jewish rabbi Jesus to set aside the Law was like asking an LGBTQ person to set aside their sexuality or gender, or like asking a Black person to set aside their culture of ancestry. That’s why this is such an important controversy in the early church. It would feel like betrayal to just toss away the Law – and yet, what is the Holy Spirit doing, coming to all these gentiles without the Law? I think we have to really honor the council at Jerusalem for even considering the question.

I found a contemporary parallel in a story from the House for all Sinners and Saints, the Lutheran church in Denver that was organized by Nadia Bolz-Weber. You remember that her congregation was and is a group of hard-living marginalized people—sort of a rainbow of people who didn’t fit into “church.” Which is what she was, too. And it just grew like crazy, because it was exactly the church so many people needed. She tells a story that I think says a lot:

"There was a young woman, I took her confession — and it was for real, it was something really heavy — and she was super tense at the beginning, and then she relaxed," Bolz-Weber says. "Then we were kind of laughing, and she goes, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm so glad you're my pastor, because I know you've done much worse than that.' So that's also a service I offer."ⁱⁱ

Anyway, the church and its reputation grew like gangbusters, and pretty soon they were being visited and inhabited by more “normal” people, suburbanites in khakis and button-down shirts—and it worried them. She says:

“I don’t know. I thought it was going to be all marginalized weirdos. Instead, ‘normal’ people started showing up saying, ‘we want to be a part of this.’ I freaked out. I had a hard time welcoming them. I thought, ‘you’re going to mess up our “weird.”’ Ultimately, it allowed me to have compassion for ‘mainstream’ people having a hard time welcoming those on the margins. That was the irony; I had the same instinct in a reverse way. It was so much weirder with everyone together. You look around and go, “I’m really unclear with what all these people have in common.” My instinct towards the purity of weirdness and wanting to maintain that is very related to mainstream people maintaining the purity of their culture. Though, there is historically

harm done by people in the “center” alienating people in the margins, so I don’t want to say it’s exactly the same.ⁱⁱⁱ

As I understand it, the conversation at All Sinners and Saint was as complicated as the council at Jerusalem, but what swayed it was some of the traditionally marginalized members saying, “No, I do want these suburbanites to be here, because they remind me of my parents, whose world I couldn’t inhabit, and I like having them here inhabiting my world.” It was a generous and hospitable move.

As I wondered how the Jerusalem council got their heads around God doing *that new a thing* I wondered if it had something to do with their apocalyptic expectations. The early church did expect the Second Coming ASAP, and perhaps if they thought the world was ending, they could more easily let go of ancient traditions. But then I thought, No, that’s not in the conversation here or elsewhere; they’re not selling their worldly goods and going to stand on a hilltop to wait for Jesus. What I think it was, was what John Dominic Crossan calls “ethical eschatology.” Ethical eschatology means that the end of the world is not the *ending* of the world, but the *purpose* of the world. What God *intends* the world to be for. Why is the world here and why are we here and what are we to be about?

Crossan says:

Ethical eschatology is the demand that God is making on us, not us on God so much as God on us, to do something about the evil in the world. In an apocalypse, as it were, we are waiting for God. And in ethical eschatology, God is waiting for us. That's, I think, what Jesus is talking about in the Kingdom of God. It's demand for us to do something in conjunction with God. It is the Kingdom of God. But it's the Kingdom on earth of God.^{iv}

The council at Jerusalem saw the end of the world in that sense: the Holy Spirit was getting way out ahead of them; God was showing them the realization of the Kingdom of God

on earth, and they dared to step out and do a radically new thing. Over and over, the Spirit calls us to do radically new things. Nadia Bolz-Weber says,

God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and gives away shit for free in a way that doesn't make any sense to any of us. . . . People have experienced marginalization, harm and domination, those are important things to tease through when it comes to 'culture,' but when it comes to religion, all of those things I find meaningless. When we want to arrange this seating chart at God's table, that shit is about us, and never about God.^v

We should be wide awake to new developments, to "giving away shit for free in a way that doesn't make sense," because that is just about guaranteed to be something God is doing in the world. Let's pay attention to where God is pouring out the Holy Spirit beyond the boundaries of the church as it currently defines itself, and then join in with whatever new thing it is that God is doing.

Lord of all,

In Jesus you have made us all sisters and brothers in Christ. There is no distinction between Gentile and Jew. There is no separation that can remove any from fellowship in Christ's community. May our differences enrich our unity, so that we reach out in love to all your creatures and bring about your kingdom on earth. Amen.

ⁱ <https://baptistbookworm.blogspot.com/2021/04/identity-politics-and-early-church.html?m=1>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/20/255281434/pastor-leads-a-new-brand-of-church-for-sinners-and-saints>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://outinjersey.net/nadia-bolz-weber-does-ministry-differently/>

^{iv} <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/john.html>

^v <https://outinjersey.net/nadia-bolz-weber-does-ministry-differently/>