

Now What?

Acts 15:1-21

The Nature and Purpose of the Church - Studies in Acts

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

When we were stationed at the Air Force Academy many years ago, one of the members of our Bible study group was also the Chairman of the Department of Economics. One night he told us of an encounter he had at the Base Exchange. He needed a weed wacker and people told him that, "Hey, they have really good weed wackers at the Exchange, why don't you go over and get one there?" So he headed over there only to find that the shelves were empty. He found the person who stocked the shelves and he said, "Hey, do you have any weed wackers back there?" The guy went and looked and there was not a weed wacker in the store. The stocker said, "Why don't you go talk to the manager?" So Jim went to the manager and the manager verified, "Well yes, we had those weed wackers and boy, they sold like hotcakes. We quickly exhausted our inventory." So Jim asked the manager the next logical question, "When will you have more in?" Here is what the manager of the store said to the Chairman of the Department of Economics: "Oh, we won't be selling that anymore. Too many people wanted it! The demand created so much work that we decided not to carry it anymore. All that paperwork!"

Jim thought that the issue that this success raised was, "How can we keep weed wackers in stock?" But the manager thought the issue was, "How do I manage my workload?" The store had a product that had sold far beyond their wildest dreams and they had to ask the question, "Now What?" Unfortunately, their answer was "not much."

Well, as we read through the Book of Acts we begin to realize that the Early Church is beginning to experience this incredible response to the Gospel in places they never thought it would happen and they have to ask themselves, 'Now what?' Let us pray.

Lord God, we ask that in this moment, you will do for us, what you did for those early disciples. We ask that you would speak to us the truth we need to hear, so that we can live faithfully before you and with one another. We depend on your Holy Spirit to make your truth known through your Word and in faith; we give you thanks for doing just that. Amen.

The last thing that the twelve disciples heard from Jesus was this: "Go into the world and make disciples of all nations." All nations. By this time, fifteen years have passed and the Gospel has spread throughout the known world and most of the converts were Jewish people living outside of Palestine. Now remember, at this time there were more Jews living all over the Mediterranean basin than there were Jews living in Palestine. This is because the kingdoms of Judah and Israel had been sent into exile and into captivity. When the time came time came that they were released and could go home to Palestine, many of the them chose not to, and so there was this diaspora and Jews just started to live all over the Roman Empire.

Well, this is what is really cool about how God takes something that is very bad and bends it to the good. Because these Jews were all over, there were synagogues in almost every city. So, as Paul and his colleagues made their journeys throughout Greece and Asia, there were synagogues there. They could meet with the Jewish community and they could open up the Scripture to them and say, "Here is what we have experienced about Jesus Christ and the Scriptures show us how the one we have been looking for, all those promises that God made to us, they have been fulfilled in Jesus." So, there were many converts and churches were established across the Empire. But since most of the converts were already Jewish, there weren't very many questions that were raised about Jewish practices and rituals. We can see that the Gospel, the Church, is moving in a geographic direction that Jesus had indicated to move from Jerusalem outwards but it hasn't crossed too many religious boundaries yet, but now it's on the verge.

The Gentile explosion began with Cornelius, who was a Roman centurion. He decided to follow Jesus

when the Holy Spirit sent Peter to him to tell him the story of salvation in Jesus. And it continued as other believers began talking to Gentiles about Jesus as they traveled throughout on commerce, trade and other work. By the time we get to this place in the history of the Church and in this in chapter in Acts the conversion of the Gentiles has reached a critical mass. People are noticing that the message of Jesus has gone far beyond the walls of the synagogue and they had to ask, 'now what?' For Jewish believers faith and practice were integrated. For the Gentiles-- not so much. For Jewish believers, faith and practice could not be compartmentalized. But for the new Gentile believers, in their former lives, religion and the rest of life did not necessarily have to have a connection. How in the world are these two groups going to live together in the same church? What is at stake here? At first, it seems like the question, 'Who's in and who's out of the community?' Some are claiming that you have to be marked as Jewish before being truly Christian, but others disagree. And it seems like we are teeing up for a major conflict. But the question is not really about who's in or who's out. The question is more basic. It is: what saves us? What saves any of us...Jew or Gentile? Now, I really love this passage because it works on so many levels. There are so many ways that you can look at it. You can look at it because it gives us a theology of salvation. It also shows us how to do theology as the church. It demonstrates for us that our faith and way we live our lives are interwoven. And it also demonstrates in the story the remembrance that God is faithful to his promises.

Well, this council is determined to find the will of God regarding the nature of salvation. And although it looks like it could degenerate into a partisan brawl, it doesn't. They listen to one another. They hear the testimony of the amazing things that the Holy Spirit is doing among the Gentiles. It's undeniable. The Gentiles are repenting and they are turning to the living God.

Then the council looked at Scripture. And they realized in a moment, this is what God had said all along. What happened? God had actually said in the prophets of old that the Gentiles would return to Him and stand before him as Gentiles among all the nations gathered in that final kingdom. The promise had been written so long ago that it hardly seemed possible that it could happen now. But it was. The Spirit and Scripture were not pointing the council to something new and innovative in this new circumstance. This is important. They were pointing back to a promise that had been forgotten.

So, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the support of Scripture, they came to the conclusion that salvation is God's gift. It is not earned by anything that we do. It is grace plus nothing. You can't in the common jargon, 'plus up' grace with religious ceremony and requirements. As time went on, it became clear that this was a hard pill for the Jewish side of the community to swallow. Surely salvation can't actually be free. Don't I contribute anything? What are those ritual practices for? The Jewish community would say, and understandably, 'We suffered and fought and died to keep the rituals of the faith alive so that we would be identifiable as God's people in the midst of a pagan culture and now you are telling me it doesn't contribute anything to salvation?' For many, the thought that the symbol of faith would no longer be required was too much to take. And we see throughout the book of Acts and in the letters of Paul that there is a group that is always pushing to make salvation a matter of grace plus something else. But for those at this council, the discovery of "Grace Alone" brought great joy. The good news of Jesus had spread like a California wildfire. It had drawn in outsiders in a way that caused everyone to realize that God had done exactly what he said he was going to do. God was on the move. Just like he promised. But, now what? How do we live together, such disparate groups in a way that demonstrates that our salvation is by grace alone, and yet have that life together result in a manner of life that is worthy of the Gospel? Well, let's refresh our memories on their instructions and this comes to us from verses 19-20 in Acts 15. James said this:

"Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God 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."

The behaviors that they asked the Gentiles to abstain from are those that are connected with the worship of idols. They are saying that it is important to give up anything that is connected with the worship of anything other than the one true God. Do not, brothers and sisters, do anything that leads others to think that you are worshipping idols. An idol is anything we give ourselves to; anything that consumes us and pushes God out of the center of our lives. And the council is saying to all believers: You are followers of the one God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ, so let your life show forth Jesus, not any false gods. .Now, this

might seem a trivial matter to us two thousand years after the fact to be concerned with whether the meat we are eating was prepared at a meat packing plant or at the temple of a pagan god. But back then to eat meat offered to idols meant that you were identified as belonging to the cult that worshipped at that pagan temple. It was actually a case of 'You are what you eat.'

Well, it is not so hard for us to think of identity in our menus, is it? Now, if you like your hotdog with mustard, bright green relish, sport peppers, onions, celery salt and tomatoes on a poppy seed bun, you're from Chicago or you have a passing relationship with that city. But if you like thin crust pizza, chances are you are not from Chicago; you are from New York. Grits...the South, and don't you dare go south on I-95 and ask anyone to put sugar on your grits like it is cream of wheat! What we eat tells us something about who we are. And the council wants to make sure that in the behaviors of the believers, the message of "Grace Alone, Christ Alone" is the only message that is conveyed. How the believers lived, what they ate, how they conducted themselves in all their relationships, all these things were related to what they believed and the Gentiles who had been nurtured in a pagan culture needed to hear this; that faith and life go together. You don't put your faith in a little compartment in your soul, take it out on Sunday, nourish it with a worship service, put it back in and close the door and then go about your merry way for the rest of the week. And the Jewish Christians had to be reminded that while their rituals were real reminders of the work that God had called them to do, they weren't what saved them. Only Jesus did that. In both cases a form of idolatry was being addressed. In one case it was the idol of self. I am free to do what I want. In the other case, it was the idolatry of religion. If I don't keep these rules, God will get made at me.

The last time I preached, I told the story of one of my grandmothers. Now it's time to tell you of the other grandmother, and then I think I am out of grandmother stories. This grandmother, Grandma Toms, enjoyed ill health until she died at the age of 81. What I remembered of the time that she lived with us was that she'd come down the stairs every morning and we'd say, "Hi Grandma, how are you today?" and then we'd have to be ready to hear the answer. And she'd go through her litany of ailments and then she would get to the end and then she would always say, "And I hope I am good enough today to be saved." What seemed to be an expression of humble spirituality was really the idolatry of worry. The more I listened to my grandmother, the more I realized why my father became a Presbyterian. The message of "Grace Alone" was really good news that lifted the burdens of trying to be good enough for God.

The question for each of us today is the same one that faced the Jerusalem council. What saves us? Sometimes we are like the early church that had forgotten the promises of God and we try with all of our might to hold on to those things we think matter. We have forgotten that it is the gift of God that is eternal life through Jesus Christ. And when we forget that, then we try to earn that eternal life, perhaps by some form of righteous behavior that starts out on a high level of intention of living a moral, righteous, ethical life. We get so weary though, that often we just end up settling for, 'Well, at least I am better than they are.' We have forgotten that God has promised to make us new creations in Christ, and so we live in a continual state of dissatisfaction. We try to makeover ourselves, makeover our homes, and when that doesn't work, we try to make over other people. That always makes us all happy.

Our amnesia has exhausted us and our work has not given us what we had hoped for. That is why the liturgy of the Eucharist always calls us to remember. To remember that the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus. To remember that Jesus saves you and He does so freely and without condition. Salvation is not on your to-do list, for you or anyone else.

We all know the Statue of Liberty's words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." But someone said that to us long before Lady Liberty. Jesus said to us, "Come to me. All you who are weary and are bearing heavy burdens. And I will give you rest." I want you to hear those words from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*:

"Are you tired? Are you worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

That's the gift Jesus by grace is holding out to you. Now what?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.