

ACTS 10-12

This section will build up to a climax in chapter 15. The challenge is to include non-Jews into full membership in the church, a membership based on faith in Jesus as God's Messiah or Christ, repentance and forgiveness in his name (by his death/forgiveness on the cross), and the gift of the Holy Spirit. All of these are interrelated, for it is the Holy Spirit that not only gives boldness in tongue-speaking, but the conviction of repentance, the heart-felt assurance of forgiveness, and the faith to recognize in Jesus God's messiah for the world. The Holy Spirit is also the key actor in the movement of the early church's new insight into the scriptures, namely, that God's will is to fully welcome non-Jews into the fold.

1) Acts 9:32-43 builds up Peter's profile of spiritual authority as someone who follows Jesus' pattern of healing, and even resuscitating the dead. Peter is also a good Jew who prays regularly in the temple and follows carefully all the Jewish dietary and ritual laws as set out in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. But Peter has a vision that will forever change his perspective on being both a good Jew and a believer in Christ.

2) Peter's vision must be based on an inner journey that has been going on for a while. For even before the dream and the gentile visitors come knocking at the door, he is staying at the home of a tanner who works with animal hides. Depending on their profession, many Jews would be considered unclean - Simon the Tanner being one of them. By staying with him, Peter was prepared to contaminate himself as well.

3) Clearly, Peter hears God telling him to consider all food clean, not only that which is allowed by the laws of the Jewish faith. Does this make many of the Old Testament laws relevant for a certain group and a certain time only?

4) Cornelius is a Roman officer in charge of a 100-man unit. As a Roman, he is not only a gentile, but an enemy of the Jewish people in that Rome keeps the Jews subjugated under its rule. But Cornelius is also a very religious man, devoted to the Jewish faith and to helping the poor of the Jewish people. He and his people are humble and receptive to whatever Peter has to say. Humble receptivity is a prerequisite to hearing and absorbing the good news that Jesus' life, death and resurrection are the way God's love has revealed itself in the world. Repentance and forgiveness are established in his name (by his embodied presence and now spiritual presence through the Holy Spirit) not the temple or the Jewish Law. So, does this relegate the Jewish Law to irrelevance? No. But developing clarity as to what was required of non-Jews, was an on-going source of discussion, prayer and debate (as well as conflict).

5) The conservative Jewish element in the Jerusalem church demands an explanation from Peter for his actions. After recounting how it was upon the clear leading of the Holy Spirit (confirmed by the gentiles bold tongue-speaking) that he did what he did,

they are persuaded. But again, it is not clear yet what this will mean in terms of requirements for church membership.

6) The gospel spreads to Antioch - the 3rd largest city of the Roman Empire (Rome being the largest and Alexandria the 2nd largest), with an estimated population of 800,000. There are Jews (Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking Jews) Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) and Hellenists (Greek-speaking Gentiles). The 'Hellenists' referred to in Antioch (11:19ff) are gentiles. It took special believers like Barnabas to associate with gentiles as equal brothers and sisters. The support of the gentile churches for famine-stricken Jerusalem with aid money was an important way to build a bridge, and we know from Paul's letters how important a project this was for him as a key bridge-builder.

We should not think of Jewish dietary and ritual laws negatively as elitist and exclusionary. Even though they could become this way, the threat for the Jews as a small race of people becoming swallowed up by the larger pagan majority was great. And so, maintaining their distinctiveness was essential to maintaining their identity as Jews. The Pharisaic element in religious Judaism was strong on this and more conservative Jewish believers had a hard time being reconciled to the loosening of these identity-defining requirements by Peter and later-on Paul.

This whole debate sets the stage for Paul's struggles between Jew and gentile, a focus throughout the rest of Acts.