

Acts, Jews and Gentiles, and Reconciliation

By Dr. Randy Colver

Acts was written by Luke, a close traveling companion of Paul, and an eyewitness of many events recorded in this book. Roughly the first half of the book follows the events in the Jerusalem church and in the life of Peter. The latter half of the book recounts Paul's apostolic efforts during three journeys in and around Asia Minor and the Grecian peninsula, and Paul's final visit to Jerusalem.

What we must note is that Acts not only traces the movement of Christianity out from its birthplace in Judea into the Mediterranean world, but also *the parallel/progressive movement of Christianity out from its Jewish roots into the Gentile world*. In fact, Luke seems to deliberately record the events that argue for the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's plan. The following is a quick overview emphasizing this point.

We see the Gentile, "God-fearer" Cornelius and his household converted in Acts 10 through Peter's preaching. In this whole episode, Luke records how Peter sees a vision from heaven demonstrating to him that he "should not call any man impure or unclean" (vs. 28)—meaning Gentiles. While Peter explained the gospel to Cornelius and his household, "the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (vs. 44). The astonishment of the Jews derived not from the fact that God pours out His Spirit, but from the fact that these Gentiles were uncircumcised. Up until this point, circumcision marked off the people of God. Now the Spirit had marked these Gentiles as God's people without circumcision. The Holy Spirit had confirmed—with profound definiteness—that Gentiles were included as God's people.¹

Nevertheless, preaching to the Gentiles immediately brings criticism down on Peter from the Jews who had not witnessed the outpouring on Cornelius' household (Acts 11). Peter explains that the Holy Spirit "came on them as he had come on us at the beginning" (vs. 15, referring to the outpouring at Pentecost in Acts 2). There was no disputing the fact that the Spirit had fallen on the Gentiles without requiring them to first become Jews. For the moment the debate was put to rest, but Jewish scruples and racial prejudice are hard to eradicate. The issue would appear again at the Jerusalem gathering in Acts 15.

Not long after this the church in Antioch commissions Paul, along with Barnabas, to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1ff; cf. 26:15-18) and they begin their first apostolic journey. Their evangelistic work, though often finding opportunity to begin at the local synagogues, soon faced rejection by the Jews:

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you [Jews] first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" —Acts 13:46-47

Paul echoes this same sentiment later in Acts 18:6.

The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 addresses the Jew/Gentile setting and fits within Luke's continued narrative recounting the difficulties surrounding the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. At stake was not only how the gospel was to be presented to the Gentiles—would they have to jump through all the hoops of Judaism?—but the very gospel itself, which is not dependent on works (Eph.

¹ God marked the Gentiles by His "eschatological Spirit," thus demonstrating that He included them with the Jews as members of the new age.

2:8-10). The disagreement between Paul and the Judaizers resulted in the meeting at Jerusalem with the apostles and elders (Acts 15).

Paul and Peter recount how God confirmed the Gentiles as believers through many signs. Finally, James quotes Amos 9:11-12 to affirm that God promised to include the Gentiles in the people of God, "...that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and *all the Gentiles* who bear my name."

The conclusion of the council sought to respect both Jews and Gentiles, thus preventing any hindrance for members of either group to come to Christ (Acts 15:19-21). The spread of the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles was taken into account and balanced, especially with respect to the sensibilities of the Jews. This event constitutes a significant turning point for the whole issue. The result is that the apostles accommodate the scruples of the Jews while removing the barrier of circumcision for the Gentiles.

In summary, Acts demonstrates that God moved to reconcile Jews and Gentiles into the one community of faith. Reconciliation requires respect for one another's scruples and customs without placing undue demands on one's freedom. Nevertheless, Acts records that the Church affirmed the equality between Jews and Gentiles so that the gospel would not be impeded.