

Freedom from Expectations

I'm thinking about telling pastor that I'm going to submit my resignation as head deacon," Denzel told Anthony.

"No! Why?" exclaimed the young deacon.

"I know times are changing," Denzel said, "but some things should be sacred."

Denzel was talking about the pastor's and deacon board's decision to no longer lay out the communion plates in the front of the church in the shape of a body, with a white cloth draped over it. In the past two years, Central United Tabernacle had mushroomed in size. The church was changing to accommodate its growing membership numbers. The deacons had proposed to pass out prefilled communion cups before the worship service on First Sundays, and the pastor had agreed.

"My father help build this church," Denzel said. "He would be appalled if he knew this was going to happen."

"I know I'm not as old in Christ as you are," Anthony said tentatively, "but I don't understand the necessity of having the communion trays at the front of the church."

"Christ died," Denzel almost bellowed. "There should be a body represented."

"But isn't what's important the fact that we are observing this holy sacrament?" said Anthony. "That we are doing what Christ told us to do? That we examine ourselves and partake in the Lord's Supper until He comes?"

1. *What traditions do you have at your church that are very important to you?*

2. *Are these traditions important to our salvation, or are they simply deeply engrained in our churches?*

3. *If some of these traditions prevented people from becoming followers of Jesus, what are some ways we could change them?*

Controversy Regarding Expectations

Acts 15:1-3, KJV

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

Acts 15:1-3, NIV

¹Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.

As Paul and Barnabas finished their first missionary journey, they were met with a controversy. “Certain people” (vs. 1) came down from Judea, the region where Jerusalem was located, and were teaching the Gentile Christians in the Antioch church that circumcision—becoming part of the Jewish covenant—was essential for salvation. They were like the Judaizers who “bewitched” the Galatians (Gal. 3:1).

Understandably, these very different doctrinal positions created controversy and sharp debate in the church. The outcome would influence for the future whether salvation would be understood as a free gift or as something to be earned through performance. It would determine whether the church would be limited to Jews and those

who adopted Jewish rules, or would be expressed in many different cultures and traditions without hindrance.

Not able to resolve this issue, the Antioch church sought the input of the apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem. As their delegation headed to Jerusalem, they stopped along the way to visit other believers, who were very glad to find out that Gentiles were being saved.

4. *What controversial issue was being debated in the church?*

5. *How did the church try to resolve this issue?*

Debate over Expectations

Acts 15:4-5, KJV

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

Acts 15:4-5, NIV

⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

When the Antioch group arrived in Jerusalem, the church there and its leaders welcomed them. The delegation reported "everything God had done through them" (vs. 4). This appears to be something of an informal opening session to what scholars call the "Jerusalem Council," which convened to consider the circumcision issue. After Paul and Barnabas finished reporting, some from "the party of the Pharisees" (vs. 5) said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant that God

gave to Abraham (Gen. 17:9-11). Some Jewish converts to Christianity couldn't see how a relationship with their God would be possible without this sign. Paul's writings in the New Testament explain that our hearts are circumcised as a sign that we are dedicated to God (Rom. 2:29).

When the pro-circumcision group made their appeal to the apostles and elders, they clarified that not only did they think the Gentiles must be circumcised, they also must keep the law of Moses. This is consistent with Paul's warning in Galatians 5:3 that anyone who allows himself to be circumcised will be obligated to obey the entire law of Moses.

6. *How did the church in Jerusalem react when guests from Antioch arrived?*

7. *Which Jewish group was the origin of the believers who wanted to practice circumcision?*

8. *What did they want Christians to do in addition to circumcision?*

Freedom from Expectations

Acts 15:6-11, KJV

6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even

Acts 15:6-11, NIV

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He did not

as he did unto us;

9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Peter, having changed his mind to follow the plan that God had designed for Gentile inclusion (see Acts 10), was the perfect person to argue for Gentile inclusion. He said that during the conversion of Cornelius and his household, God showed no distinction of persons and gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, with obvious manifestations of the Spirit's power much as the apostles had received. The only prerequisite for receiving the Spirit, then, is faith.

Finally, Peter argued that circumcision and the yoke of the law cannot save. He referenced both their ancestors and their present reality in his case against their use of the law. It isn't that the law is bad, but it was unable to save even the Jews from their sins. Peter's conclusion? Salvation does not come to anyone, Jew or Gentile, by observing the law. Salvation comes only through the grace of Jesus. Burdening new converts with Jewish traditions will serve no purpose whatsoever.

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9. *How did the Jerusalem church reach a decision?*

10. *What was Peter's main argument for accepting Gentiles without circumcision?*

11. *What did Peter conclude is the basis for salvation?*

Postures of Prayer

Growing up in a Christian family, attending church since birth, I knew how to pray the right way. You fold your hands, bow your head, and begin with the words, “Dear God,” “Heavenly Father,” or something like that. You say some good things about God, and if you do it in King James language, all the better. Then you ask for something from God: bless me, bless my family. In prayer we should always remember someone who is in the hospital and needs healing. And if you want your prayer to get through, it must end with “In Jesus’ name I pray, amen.”

I also was told the “wrong” ways to pray. I was sure making the sign of the cross or using a rosary as an aid to prayer is superstitious. Meditating is an Eastern religious idea that will open you up to demon possession. Raising your hands in prayer seems like you think you’re holier than everyone else. Praying with your eyes open and face to heaven is presumptuous. And don’t call God “Daddy” when you pray.

So I recited my prayers in the formal language and cadence of a legal document, my eyes averted from heaven, as I side-eyed the people around me to see how they were praying, judging those who weren’t doing it right. It wasn’t until I prayed with an open heart that I imagined I saw Jesus right there in front of me, the Father standing behind Him. And the Holy Spirit within me, understanding that I did not know how to pray, prayed for me. And the Trinity locked arms around each other in a group hug, with me, deaf and blind and scared, safe in the center of their love.

12. *What traditions of prayer were you taught or have you developed yourself through the years?*

13. *What is your attitude toward people who pray in other ways, including those of different theological convictions than you?*

14. *How does having other ways of praying help us understand that sometimes traditions are just that—traditions, not Scripture?*

Required or Optional

Praying is required. The posture you pray in is optional. Sharing communion is required. Whether you eat wafers or part of a loaf of bread is optional. Christians have even fought wars over such practices while forgetting that what we do should glorify God, not fit our manmade traditions.

► *List two things you or your church does that other Christians might look down on you for doing. Next, write out what you think Jesus would say to you about those things. Would He participate in them with you? How would He respond to you participating in them?*

Two things other Christians might look down on you for doing:

What Jesus might say to you about these things:

KEY VERSE

And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

—Acts 15:8-9, KJV

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.”

—Acts 15:8-9, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of November 6 through November 12

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. 1 John 4:7-13—Let Us Love One Another.

Tue. 1 John 4:14-21—Perfect Love Casts Out Fear.

Wed. Deuteronomy 10:12-22—Love and Serve the Lord.

Thu. Galatians 5:1-6—Faith Working Through Love.

Fri. Matthew 22:34-40—The Greatest Commandment Is Love.

Sat. Leviticus 19:9-18—Loving Deeds.

Sun. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Romans 13:8-10—Fulfill the Law through Love.