
Growth Through Controversy

SCOTT HOEZEE

Every now and then, I have run across people who survey the sometimes troubled landscape of the contemporary Church, and who then say: Ah, if only we could be more like the early Church. If only we could be the kind of church you read about in the book of Acts. But to that I have been known to reply: We already are like the book of Acts. We have disagreements, theological disputes; we end up having to convene meetings of synods and general assemblies to study and settle our arguments; and indeed, it is all there to see in Acts. Then, as now though, one of the sticking points is how best to bring the Gospel to folks who do not always look or act like the Christians we already know. Acts Chapter 15 is a classic case of the early Church's growing pains in such areas. Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder this bracing story. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now in program number four of a six-part series for Epiphany; and mostly we have been looking at how the revelation of Jesus Christ began to spread far beyond Jerusalem and Judah and Israel only to the ends of the earth. So, we have mostly been in the book of Acts in this series, and we are going to remain in the book of Acts, as we see how the Gospel got brought to all nations; and one of the leading figures in that, of course, as we saw in the previous program, was the former persecutor, Saul turned Paul.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; we are sort of tracing the movement outward...literally physical movement as persecution breaks out when Stephen is martyred for his testimony to Christ. Ordinary Christians sort of leave town for their own safety, and they go first to Judea, the area around Jerusalem, and then Samaria, a little bit further afield; and then pretty soon they are moving up the coast, and they reach the great city of Antioch in Syria. So, we have been following that outreach, too, and one of the themes, I think, that is emerging from this study is how difficult it is to break out of your comfort zone—out of your own home—out of your own individual shell—out of your social and racial group...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

To break out with the Good News of Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for the apostles, their growth edge here in the middle of the book of Acts, which is where we are, is in figuring out what to make of the fact that the Holy Spirit is moving into the hearts of all kinds of non-Jews...people who have never been Jews, and that is going to lead to the main thing we are going to look at in this program, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15; but lets just recall something else. We have looked at it

before on *Groundwork*, but that kind of sets the stage for this with one of the original apostles, Peter; and we remember that once upon a time Peter happened to be in the city of Joppa, which is in Acts Chapter 10. What is significant about Joppa is it only comes up one other time in the whole Bible, and that is in the story of Jonah, because Joppa is the city to which Jonah fled because he did not want to obey God's call to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh. Jonah was not worried he would fail; Jonah was worried he would succeed. He was worried he would preach repentance and they would do it...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then they would have to join Israel's members-only club, and he did not want that; so he was hiding out from preaching to the gentiles in Joppa; and now that is where Peter is.

DAVE BAST

And so, Peter is kind of staying there in Joppa. He is staying at somebody's house, a guy named Simon the tanner. He is relaxing—he is resting. Interestingly, we have seen quite a bit of Peter in the early chapters of Acts, especially prominently on Pentecost...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he seems to be the main character through many of these early chapters, but Peter is going to drop gradually from view and be supplanted by Paul, so the last time we will see him in the book of Acts is actually in Acts Chapter 15, which we will deal with a little bit later in this program; but meanwhile, in Acts 10, Peter is staying there in Joppa, and it is almost dinnertime, and he is relaxing on the roof—he is kind of snoozing—taking a bit of a siesta—and he has a vision—he has a dream; and in the dream, God shows him a huge sheet that kind of comes down from heaven filled with every kind of animal under the earth, and the voice says to him: Peter, hey, you are hungry. Go ahead, take an animal here and kill it and eat it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The problem is, is Peter had always kept kosher. He had always followed the food laws God laid out in the Old Testament, so no lobster, no ham, no bacon for a good Jew like Peter, but here on this sheet there are like lobster thermidor with a side of brussel sprouts sautéed in bacon and God says: Bon appétit, Peter...you know...eat up; and Peter says: By no means, Lord. For I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice said to him again a second time: What God has made clean, you must not call profane. And this happened three times, and the thing...the sheet...was suddenly taken up to heaven. Now, while Peter was greatly puzzled as to what to make of this vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. So, in a coincidental, non-coincidence...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is saying to Peter: Expand your horizons; and at the very moment Peter is saying: I wonder what *that* means, some non-Jews...these Italians that are dispatched by a man named Cornelius show up and invite Peter to come and stay with Cornelius, and Peter is going to connect the dots here.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and the point is, in that great line that you read, Scott, do not call unclean what God says is clean; and that is not talking about food...not primarily. That is talking about people. What the message to Peter is: There are no unclean people in God's eyes; and the great problem that developed with Israel with the Jewish

people over the centuries...they had their struggles...they finally kind of came back after the exile and were faithful...more faithful to the Lord, and had put their idolatry away, but they grew so inward that they saw outsiders...gentiles... as dogs, as unclean.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, you could come into Israel, and Peter knew this; but in the Old Testament...you can quote chapter and verse on this...if you were somebody from Moab or Phoenicia and you wanted to become a member of Israel...you are a foreigner...okay, the Bible lays out these steps. If it is a male, he has to be circumcised, they have to learn the law, they have to try to keep the law, and follow the cleanliness rituals, follow those very food laws...no more ham...if you had ever had ham in your life, well, if you want to be in Israel, no more ham...no more pork; and so, the early apostles maybe were not opposed to having the Gospel of Jesus Christ come to the gentiles, they just were sure you had to become a Jew first. So, become a Jew, follow the laws, and *then* we will baptize you. So, first become Jew, then become baptized into Jesus; but now God is saying: I am not going to wait for that; and Peter goes to Cornelius's house—to this Italian's house—and tells them about Jesus, even though Peter is not crazy about being there; and all of a sudden, Pentecost happens all over again.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is no reason not to baptize them; and Peter is flummoxed. He is left to think: But they did not become Jews first. I thought God wanted them to become Jews first before they got baptized, but God did not wait; maybe we are not supposed to wait either.

DAVE BAST

So, they are faced with a bit of a conundrum...a problem: What do we make of this? What do we make of this experience that the gentiles, too, have received the Holy Spirit and have clearly been converted and brought close to God and made part of the people of God without observing the law? Well maybe they need to take it on afterwards then. That could be another possibility; and of course, that is going to be puzzled out by Paul in the letter to the Galatians. So, the early Church has a difficult issue that they have to resolve, and the question is: How are you going to solve this problem? How are you going to resolve it? Is the Holy Spirit just going to sort of reveal it to Peter or to somebody else, who then tells everyone, or will it take something more in the line of thinking together and talking together and working it out? That is where we will go in just a bit.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are right smack in the middle of the book of Acts, looking at some of the growing pains the early Church experienced. The big surprise for the apostles was that God was pouring out his Holy Spirit on non-Jewish people, and they became believers and were baptized; but the apostles kind of thought that they should have become Jews first, and then would get baptized, but the Spirit does not wait for that. So, they are confused, so what do they do? Well, somewhat surprisingly, in Acts Chapter 15, they call together a really big meeting. It is almost like the first synod or general assembly of the Church; and let's hear that now from Acts 15.

DAVE BAST

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissention and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church

and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them, ⁵but some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter, ⁷and after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the Good News and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith, he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus just as they will.”

DAVE BAST

So, here is the crux of the matter. The question is: What is the relationship between the Gospel and the law—the Jewish law? And specifically...not so much the moral law—the Ten Commandments—which are universally valid for all people, regardless of what religion they belong to—but the ceremonial law...the specifically Jewish law that identified the Jewish people as part of the covenant? Circumcision was the act, the rite by which one entered the covenant and became part of the covenant people of God. The debate was, as you pointed out, Scott, earlier...the default position of most Jews was: If you want to get close to God and become part of the covenant and you are a gentile, well, you can. You become a proselyte; you get circumcised, you undertake the whole law. Most gentiles did not want to do that so they remained in the position of the God-fearers, who liked the God of Israel but did not want to undertake the law. Then comes this outreach with Cornelius, where they are clearly brought into the people of God, but now there is a further debate: Well, maybe now they should take the law on themselves. Maybe they should get... So, that is what the Church is puzzling over.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And puzzle they do. It is so interesting just to read this chapter, where they are...I mean, how many times does it say here: dissension, debate, argument. They really are genuinely wrestling with this; and of course, as we mentioned, I think, in the previous part of this program, Dave, we have to remember looking back at this that for people like James and Peter and John and the like, you could quote chapter and verse on all of this stuff. This is all in the Old Testament. This is the Law of God in Leviticus and elsewhere. It has been this way for 1500 years or something, but now, a new day seems to have come; and the God they worship is not waiting to do those very things. So, let's have a little sympathy for them. This is a major change. It is what we sometimes today call a paradigm shift. It is the same God and it is the Messiah of God that that God brought as the fulfillment of the covenant, and yet, something new has happened; and so, they are starting to think: We are going to have to change our minds about something really central; and that is not easy to do. None of us find it easy to say: You know, what I believed my whole life was maybe wrong, but at best, it was incomplete. That is hard to do.

DAVE BAST

I also think we need to recognize that something critical is at stake here. The Church could very well have gone off the rails at the Jerusalem Council, if they had decided the other way. If they had agreed with these people who were arguing: Unless you are circumcised according to the law of Moses, you cannot be saved, that would have created a very different kind of Christian faith. In fact, it would have been no Christian faith at all. So, for example, Paul in the letter to the Galatians says of people who are teaching that: This is another gospel—this is counterfeit. These people are condemned. You cannot accept that point of view and remain Christian. So, the whole ballgame is in play here in Jerusalem...Acts Chapter 15 at the Jerusalem Council.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You cannot overestimate or exaggerate how central this is, because, as Peter says in verse 11, the last verse we read a minute ago: We are all going to be saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus; and that is...you know...the huge debate in the rest of the New Testament: Is it grace or works? Are we saved sheerly as a gift of God because Jesus died on the cross and did something we could never do, or do we chip into our salvation? Do we help move it along, you know, Jesus got it started but we have to finish it with our moral living? This is very central. It becomes the key theme for Paul in almost every one of his epistles, but here you have Peter saying: Look, if we are going to be saved by grace, then we cannot put the yoke of the law on their necks. We never really liked the law that much. We could not get saved by it. We never kept it ourselves, why would we want to ask them to do it? We are undercutting the grace of God here, and that is maybe why God is not waiting. What Jesus did on the cross and through the power of his resurrection changed the world, and it is even going to change our old ways of doing things. So, if we are going to keep step with the Spirit, that is what we have to do, and that is what James, who seems to be the leader...concludes with.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right, exactly. I was just going to say Peter's speech was great, but James' speech clinched the deal. That was the real climax, and James, of course, is Jesus' brother, and has become de facto the leader of the Jerusalem Church. He is the most respected. He was respected for his sanctity. He kept the law, certainly, as a Jewish Christian, but he speaks at the very climax of the Jerusalem Council, and he says this: ^{13b}“My brothers, listen to me: ¹⁴Simeon (or Peter) has related how God first looked favorably on the gentiles to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the Prophets... Very significant; James will appeal back to the Old Testament scripture to justify... As it is written: ¹⁶After this I will return and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen. From its ruins I will rebuild it and I will set it up. ¹⁷So that all other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the gentiles over whom my name has been called. ¹⁸Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago. (And here is his conclusion—James' conclusion.) ¹⁹Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is the landmark decision, Dave, that has made the Church what it is. If they had gotten this wrong, as you said, the Church today would look very, very different; but James makes the decision and it is going to seem right to everybody, and that is the way it is going to go; but there is something else. Before we conclude this program, there is a very surprising element lurking in the background of this text, and we will take a look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and we have been looking, Dave, at Acts 15 in this program; what is called the Jerusalem Council, and we just heard James, who is the head of the Jerusalem church. After all the deliberations and arguments and study committee reports, if you will, he makes the decision that, no, we are saved by grace alone. Gentiles do not need to become Jews before they are baptized. They do not need to become like Jews of old after they are baptized.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just leave them alone. God is doing a new thing.

DAVE BAST

But you said just now there is a surprising thing...one more surprising thing here, and what is it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we just said, this is one of the most vital, long-lasting decisions the Church has ever made, but the way they came to that decision is quite amazing because, really, what you have in Acts 15 is perhaps what we could call the first committee of the church. They decided this by committee and deliberation and argument and counter argument. There is a part of you that wants to say: What?! These are the apostles. This is the generation... Look at all the powerful, stunning stuff—miraculous stuff—that happens all through Acts; and when they come to the biggest decision of them all, it is comes about through committee work?!

DAVE BAST

Right; or a debating society. It is like, you know, the halls of congress, where it is one party against the other; but that is how it played out in Acts 15. I think back, in our last program we spent quite a bit of time—most of our time—in Acts 13, and how Paul's first missionary journey was set up, when the Holy Spirit spoke to the church in Antioch and said: Set apart Paul and Barnabas for me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

And we do not know how that happened, and it sounds kind of supernatural, like somebody had a revelation; but here in Acts 15, when it is the most crucial decision the Church faces in the whole of its first century probably, we are told that it was not supernatural, it was not... The Spirit guided, surely, but he did it through the arguments of human beings.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that, I think, is a point that is incredibly instructive. Incredible stuff happens all over the place in this book, and yet here it comes about through the ordinary...we would say, ordinary process of human deliberation, but I think that should be encouraging for us. Today we do not get too many miraculous appearances of Jesus or sky writing or a thunderous voice telling us what to do. Most of the time in the Church even today we have to sit down and do committee work and do the work of the church council or the church board or session, and we believe the Spirit is working through that. So, you said a minute ago, it was not a supernatural thing that happened, and yet we say: Well, it was a supernatural thing; it was the leading of the Spirit, it just came through very natural means.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I do not think we should necessarily romanticize Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council. It was a wonderful act of God and a work of the Spirit to bring this unanimity about as a result of the arguments and the debates and the speeches that Peter made first, and then James made afterwards. Significantly, Paul does not make a speech here. He and Barnabas clearly were advocating for their position, and Acts says that they reported what was happening—they told the facts about the gentiles—but it is Peter and James, the conservative ones, they clearly identified with the Jewish wing of the Church, whose speeches made the difference; but not to romanticize this. This is not to say that there have not been church councils that got it wrong...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

There have been. We think of the time of the Reformation, for example; and it is not to say that there were not dissenters. There were splinter groups who disagreed with Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council and went their way and became kind of little Jewish enclaves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is some evidence, I think, too, that even Peter will eventually...and Paul talks about this in Galatians in particular...that despite his speech here, and despite James' decision, that there will come a time when Peter is a little bit fearful of the Jews who are disagreeing with him, so he draws back from some gentiles. When Paul gets wind of that, he rebukes him and so forth. So, it took a little while, even for the apostles for this to all settle down; and as often is true in the Church, you know, sometimes the good things we do we do not still do perfectly right. You know, one step forward, two steps back sometimes.

DAVE BAST

Well, and as you said, it is hard to change.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is hard to give up your settled convictions about what ought to be and how the Church ought to look; but to me, the critical point here is to appeal to scripture and to base your convictions and your decisions on what God has written in his Word. So, James quotes Amos...the prophet Amos...at the decisive moment, where God clearly had said that he was going to bring in the gentiles, and that is the theme that runs throughout...from Genesis 12, as we have seen, right through the end of the Old Testament. So, when we are called upon to decide difficult things, whether it is in our own church, in our own family, in our own personal lives, look to what scripture clearly says on these matters to make your judgment.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think, too, another thing, Dave, that we can take away from the way by which the Spirit worked in Acts 15 is to recognize... We said at the beginning of the program that, you know, sometimes people say: If only we could be like the early Church; and you know, you want to say: Well, we are. We are still struggling. We have struggled with many, many issues over time: Justification in the Reformation era; slavery; the place of women in the Church. There are all kinds of things with which we have struggled, and had to put our heads together; and sometimes, as you said, Dave, we got it wrong, and we would undo it later; but the point is, God is in the midst of all of that, and that should be good news for all of us. God is in the midst of our churches, even in committee work sometimes, believe it or not, God is in the midst of his Church, and he will continue to guide us by his Holy Spirit; and for that we can be profoundly thankful.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study Paul's approach to missions and evangelism in Acts Chapter 17.

Go to our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest scripture passages and topics for future *Groundwork* programs.

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