

# ACTS

## THE STORY OF RACIAL RECONCILIATION

### INTRO – UNDERSTANDING THE RACIAL DIVISION IN JEWISH CULTURE

To understand the development of racial reconciliation in Acts, we need to understand the the Jewish “caste system” that had been deeply ingrained in the eleven apostles. In their system, there were three levels to the racial ladder:

1. **Jews** – Obviously considered the highest as God’s chosen people. However, among the Jews there was racial elitism. “ ‘Pure’ Jews born in Palestine were better than foreign-born Jews. Jews of Greek descent were looked down on by Jews of Hebrew descent, and the two groups even worshipped in segregated synagogues.”
2. **Samaritans** – In the Jewish minds, Samaritans were a very long way down the racial ladder from them. There was a deep hatred of Samaritans. As ½ Jews, they were looked at as people who betrayed the “elite” Jewish race, by compromising their faith and culture and intermarrying with Gentiles. The hatred between these two groups was almost 1,000 years old. Samaritans had their own temple, and accepted only the first 5 books of the Old Testament. Around 120 B.C. some Jews burned down the temple of the Samaritans. It was a bitter hatred.
3. **Gentiles** – these uncircumcised heathens were most despised by Jews. A Jew was forbidden to talk, eat, or associate in any way with a Gentile. John Stott says, “By choosing and blessing one family, he intended to bless all the families of the earth... The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as ‘dogs,’ and developed traditions which kept them apart.”

With this understanding, let’s now start the incredible story of God breaking through some of the most hostile racial barriers the world has ever seen, to bring all the nations of the earth into relationship with himself!

### ACTS 1 – JESUS’ VISION FOR ALL NATIONS AND THE DISCIPLES REACTION

Acts 1:6 – As Jesus prepares to depart from earth, his disciples, still engrained in their Jewish elitism ask Jesus, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus’ answer in verse 8 is another attempt (Mat 28:19-20) to give them a vision beyond their own culture and tells them that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes, so that they can take his name to not only Israel, but to all ends of the earth.

*As we will see, the disciples did not respond to this command very well. They stayed in Jerusalem only preaching to the Jews. But before I criticize their hard hearts and unwillingness to obey this command, I see how difficult it is for me to be excited and motivated to go outside my culture and reach people unlike me. And if it is hard for me when I don’t suffer from the deeply engrained hatred of other people like these disciples, I often wonder what must have gone through their minds and hearts when they heard this command from Jesus? I wonder if they just wrote it off as impossible, if they were afraid, or if they just let it pass over in the name of Jewish purity. **What is very intense is that the Jewish Christians first reaction is very similar to the people in Genesis 11, who***



*hear a command from God to spread throughout the whole earth, but out of fear, cling together and try to make a name for themselves, create their own distinct identity. Same sinful reaction!*

However little the disciples wanted to act on Jesus' command, we can make no mistake that Jesus had plans for his kingdom. Specifically, he had plans of growth. In one sense, this is what Acts is all about, the church's growth. And so throughout the book, Luke writes six summary statements about the church's growth – each statement following a landmark event in the early church. And we will see that much of the church growth came after "faithful responses to cultural injustice."<sup>1</sup> *A principle we need to realize and let the first church show us, is that as we pursue racial reconciliation, we will see fruit, God will bring more people into his kingdom.* We want to keep our eyes open for these summary statements so we can understand the key events.

## **ACTS 2 – PENTECOST AND THE REVERSAL OF THE BABEL JUDGMENT**

Acts 2: 4-12 – The account of Pentecost is truly a landmark event in the history of the church. As the faithful were huddled in a room receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the very first manifestation of the Spirit was the speaking in foreign tongues! Physical healings weren't first, prophecy, knowledge. Nothing was manifest in this inaugural outpouring than the speaking of foreign tongues. Through Jesus' death, through the outpouring of the Spirit, the age long curse of Babel had been broken. The great judgment of God from Genesis 11 that built up the thickest walls between people, was now broken. And as you look on the attached map, you will see that the languages spoken that day, at least the ones that Luke mentions, are really representative from all the surrounding nations. While the disciples don't realize the full implications of this yet, an objective reader will see that this event marks the beginning of God bringing all people into unity with him, and each other.

After Peter capitalizes on this miracle with his famous speech, Luke writes his first summary statement about church growth: Acts 2:47 "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

After the day of Pentecost, the first church started booming. Many converts added daily, great community being lived out. But, the church was still for Jews only, no effort had been made to take the gospel to non Jews. But eventually, in the midst of this great, flourishing community, racial tension amongst the Jews surfaced.

## **ACTS 6- INJUSTICE IN FOOD DISTRIBUTION LEADS TO GOSPEL GOING TO ALL NATIONS**

Acts 6: 1-6 – The Greek Jews complain to the apostles that the Hebrew Jews are neglecting their widows in the distribution of food. Now most people would say that the best way to handle this problem would be to as quietly as possible put the fire out. Don't let it become a big issue. But the apostles acted in great faith, seeing the situation as a grave injustice. They immediately summoned the whole church and picked seven men to oversee the distribution of food. Luke shows us how important the apostles viewed this decision of leadership in that the leaders had to meet the qualifications of being "full of the Spirit, and of wisdom." But most impressively, the seven men who were chosen were



all Greek Jews! The apostles saw this as a cultural breakdown and made sure that the Greek Jewish widows would not experience this neglect again. By doing this, the apostles made a big step in restoring trust with the Greek Jews. In summary, the apostles didn't overlook the complaints of the minorities!

This event, while seemingly small on the surface, is huge in the grand picture of things. It is the first cultural barrier that the gospel has to get through, and the apostles broke through it faithfully. And God was able to move powerfully because of it as in verse 7, Luke gives us the second summary statement: And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

#### **STEPHEN'S BOLDNESS AND ENSUING PERSECUTION**

Appointing these seven Greeks did more than just bring justice to the food distribution. These minority Jews, growing in confidence because of the support of the church begin to lead the church into obeying Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 to take his gospel to all nations. Immediately in verse 8, Stephen begins to preach boldly and perform great miracles through the Spirit. Stephen boldly preaches that Jesus will move beyond the traditions of Israel and be accessible to all people. His passion sets off the Jewish leaders and they bring him to trial. Their accusation is: "... for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

Stephen is stoned to death for his convictions and his death produced a great persecution against the church. (Acts 8:1). Luke tells us that the disciples were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria. This persecution is exactly what is needed for the gospel to go forth to all the nations. Now, Jewish Christians are forced to go to the surrounding nations, and can no longer stay in their ethnic comfortability. Stephen's faithfulness to the call of reaching all of the nations is the catalyst for this.

#### **PHILIP'S GREAT VISION. BREAKING DOWN THE JEW-SAMARITAN WALL**

Philip, one of the seven Greeks appointed to administer the food distribution, ends up in Samaria as a result of the persecution. There could have been no better person to land in Samaria, and Philip, a minority Jew who experienced the hurt of Jewish cultural elitism, and someone who has been in a role of advocacy for minorities. Because of this, Philip has become a changed man and does not withhold the gospel, but preaches freely to the Samaritans. (remember the racial hatred between Jews and Samaritans) What does God do with his risk and efforts to love cross-culturally? "And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip... (8:6)."

News of Philip's efforts reached the church in Jerusalem (8:14). Can you imagine what the Jewish Christian must be thinking? Whatever it was, they sent their top leaders, Peter and John to check up on things. It is interesting to note that John was sent, when he was the disciple who wanted to rain fire down from heaven to destroy a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). Peter and John come down and end up praying the Holy Spirit into the Samaritans, and end up catching Philip's vision. For, both of them on their way back to Jerusalem end up preaching the gospel to many more Samaritan villages! (8:25).



God wasn't done with Philip, and Philip wasn't done with spreading the gospel to the whole world. On the way home to Jerusalem with Peter and John, God has Philip go off and meet up with an Ethiopian Jew who has just finished worshipping in the temple, and is headed home. Philip, not holding any distinction, teaches the man about Jesus, baptizes him, and sends him back to Ethiopia, to take the gospel to his country!

After a return to the persecution in Jerusalem, and the great story of God's knocking Saul off his horse, and subsequent conversion, we get another summary statement from Luke: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied (9:31)." For the first time, in his summary statements, Luke includes the church in Samaria. **God brings fruit when we pursue racial reconciliation!** The gospel has now broken down the walls between Hebrew Jews and foreign born Jews, Jews and Samaritans. Now all that is left is the massive wall lodged between the Jews and the Gentiles!

*Principle:*

*An important piece to see in these incredible events is how crucial, and valuable it is to entrust minority believers "full of the Spirit and wisdom" with leadership and support! They, having experienced separation and prejudice, have greater compassion for others who are set aside. And they have a greater vision with the gospel! Stephen and Philip, minority Greek Jews, will be forever remembered as the instruments God used to break the "Jewish only" Christian church that had been set up in early Acts. Who are the Stephen and Philips in our community? Are we overlooking them?*

#### **ACTS 10 AND 11 – INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PETER AND CORNELIUS, AND THE BIRTH OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH**

-refer to your study-

After the Antioch creation, Luke gives another summary statement in 12:24: "But the word of God grew and multiplied."

#### **ACTS 13- THE MODEL OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH**

The first couple verses of this chapter give us so much about the Antioch church. The first thing we see is that it was truly the first multiracial church. In verse one, Luke lays out the multiracial leadership of the church. And it is important to see that Luke makes a point to list the background of each leader, to show what the gospel is doing. The leaders are: Barnabas, a Greek Jew; Simeon "called Niger", or Simon the Black, an African; Manaen, a Jewish aristocrat; Lucius of Cyrene, another African; and Paul, a Hebrew Jew from northern Tarsus.

The second crucial aspect of this church, is that from the beginning, the Antioch church is an intentional missionary church. Unlike Jerusalem, that needed some prodding, and eventually persecution, the Antioch church is obeying Jesus' command immediately. Acts 13:2-3, the church sends Paul and Barnabas away to do missionary work. What is



also intense is to see that Paul and Barnabas are seeing and using the Antioch church as their base of operations, as their primary community, and not the Jerusalem church.

*Principle:*

*As Perkins and Rice aptly note, we see how much easier it is for a multiracial church to embrace Jesus' command to take the gospel to all the nations. A principle is learned that to effectively overcome cultural barriers abroad to bring the gospel, we must be actively working to build reconciled, cross-cultural relationships at home!*

### **WHAT ANTIOCH DID FOR PAUL**

The Antioch church in essence, proved to be the central role in breaking through the racial walls to bring the world, faith in Jesus Christ. Much of this was due to the fact that it was in this community that Paul is taught a new model of church. Remember, Paul, after his amazing conversion spends some time preaching the gospel out of the Jerusalem church. But this doesn't last very long as his life is threatened. So the disciples send him off to Tarsus. And in Tarsus, Paul just preached the gospel until Barnabas called him to the Antioch community. During the time in Tarsus, Paul had no real community experience. He says that during this time, "I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; they only heard it said, 'He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.'"

So Paul, while totally educated in Jewish tradition and practice, is a total rookie when it comes to his understanding of Christian community. Thus, Antioch becomes his model of what the new Christian church should look like. And it is this church, a multi-cultural church, that Paul now embraces and preaches as he travels to different cities.

This is shown in Acts 13 when Paul and Barnabas begin to teach in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia (not the same Antioch church we have been referencing). Paul begins a great gospel presentation that is directed at both Jews and non-Jews (13:16, 13:26). He finishes the speech by saying, "and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (13:39)." And in verse 43, many Jews believe and follow Paul and Barnabas. But then, there are Jews who try and undermine Paul's message because of the success and so Paul then advocates for Gentiles and it says in verse 48, "when the Gentiles heard this (that salvation has come to them), they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Through the Spirit, Paul creates both Jew and Gentile disciples of Jesus in the same cities! (This happens again in Iconium as both Jews and Gentiles believed, Acts 14:1).

And as we will see in greater detail when we study Paul's letters and teachings on this issue, it is clear that racial reconciliation is the core of his theology. Antioch is the springboard for the greatest evangelist the world has known.

### **RACIAL TENSION IN ANTIOCH BETWEEN PETER AND PAUL**

The creation of the Antioch church is not the end of the racial tension that permeates the book of Acts. As Perkins and Rice put it, "it's one thing to regard a racial opposite like Cornelius as a child of God; it's quite another for him to become your equal." Peter is a perfect model for this. Even though he had accepted Cornelius, he still had some racial issues to deal with. According to Paul's account in Galatians 2:11-14 Peter is visiting



Antioch eating with the Gentiles, but then when a group of Jews came down to rebuke the Gentiles for not being circumcised, Peter feared them and so withdrew from the Gentiles. Because of it, Paul confronts him on his racism in front of everyone. For Peter, the thought of being labeled a sell-out, or a fool, was too much for him. He went against his new theological beliefs and let his old racist self come back out.

*Principle:*

*This presses for us, how hard it is to reach out to other groups. There is a very real cost we must face of being labeled a sellout from our own group. And it is also powerful to see that Paul, a privileged member of the dominant culture, stands up and advocates for the minority culture. It presses in us, the challenge to advocate for other racial groups.*

#### **ACTS 15 – THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL**

Sometime later, another conflict in Antioch brought the racial tension to a breaking point. Factions of Jewish ethnic pride are forming in the church, Barnabas has wavered (Galatians 2:13), Peter has turned. And now, this new conflict in Antioch does not get resolved and so one final showdown has to happen, a council is set up in Jerusalem. And the great gospel is on the line. The fate of our future faith is on the line. The obedience to Jesus' great commission is on the line.

Paul and Barnabas are appointed to go and speak for the Gentiles. The council of apostles and elders is formed and waiting for them. Paul and Barnabas start by telling the council all that God has done for them. Then, some Jews in the room stood up and said "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses." Now the debate is on, and I am sure it was a fierce one. But then Peter, showing a soft heart and willingness to be corrected by Paul, and most importantly, showing repentance, stands up and advocates for the Gentiles. Peter shows his recent, but now deeply entrenched understanding of the gospel of grace, and reconciliation.

*Principle:*

*What is so powerful about Peter's speech, is that the first thing he references is his experience with Cornelius. For Peter, it is not just the right theological point he is making. For Peter, there is also a personal experience, a personal friendship, that is the catalyst for Peter's effort to reconcile, and to lead in reconciliation. Racial reconciliation is a one to one affair. **Personal relationships and friendships are needed in order for us to be racial reconcilers for life, in order for the conviction to stick and last.** The importance of this is seen in how little the conviction lasted for the Jerusalem church. They glorified God after Peter's testimony in chapter 10. But because they didn't act on it and begin reaching out to non-Jewish people, they lost their conviction, and ended up needing a major council in chapter 15 to figure things out.*

After Peter's speech, Paul and Barnabas share as "all the assembly kept silence.(15:12). When the smoke had cleared, the apostles, elders, and whole church, had written a letter to the Gentiles explaining that there is no Jewish cultural distinction (circumcision) that is required, they are equal participants in the gospel of grace. Paul and Barnabas took the

letter down to Antioch and it says, "and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation (15:30,31)."

Thus, God had broken through the last great wall that stood between his gospel getting out of Israel and into all nations. The significance of the Jerusalem council did not allude God, or Luke, as in 16:5, Luke says, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily." **God brings fruit as we pursue reconciliation with the gospel.**

*Summary Principle:*

*The command is still the same today, "Go and make disciples of all nations." And the fears of leaving our comfort group, racial hatred, racial apathy, prideful distinctions – they all still exist today. We need to see that the process of racial reconciliation is just that, a process. It is a long, labor intensive journey. We can't expect results overnight. We must be willing to endure. **But the question for us, is will we let the model of Antioch sink in? Will we settle for comfortable Jerusalem communities, or will we push to build Antioch communities, for the sake of the gospel being preserved and the kingdom expanding?***

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<sup>1</sup> Perkins, Spencer and Rice, Chris. More Than Equals. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill. 1993. This quote and much of this paper uses the work that was done in this excellent book. Perkins and Rice specifically do a walk through of the racial problems and reconciliation within the Acts church, in chapters 12 and 13.