

# Challenging the Church

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[ 0 : 00 ]     How good it is to follow Easter with a series from the book of Acts, which of course are the acts of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

They're not the acts of the apostles or the acts of the Holy Spirit. They are the acts of Jesus Christ who himself said, as we saw last week, all authority is being given to me. He's not intending on going on any holiday.

He is risen, active, reigning and still at work through the apostles and through the Holy Spirits, as we'll see in the book of Acts.

And I hope we'll encourage you to remember that in your own relationship with Jesus, that he lives and reigns and works through his people even today. All authority was given to him.

Go to all nations. And so the book of Acts is the historical record of the unfolding plan of Jesus to take this movement of Christians who are Jewish Christians and to spread it wider and wider and wider to their cousins in Samaria and then to Gentiles and then to go to the ends of the earth.

[ 1 : 11 ]     This is a huge thing in the Bible. In God's salvation plan, which had previously in the Old Covenant largely been limited to the people of Israel, largely, now is actually clearly being opened up by Jesus.

And he's saying and he's working such that Gentiles and all nations will be able to become part of his church. And this is one of the great dramas of the book of Acts or maybe even of the whole New Testament of this spreading out of God's people, not being just one nation but coming from all nations.

Now, we did a series on Acts in this church two years ago and we did chapters 1 to 14. And in that we saw that Peter the Apostle was particularly used by Jesus to open the door to Gentiles.

When Peter had that vision of the blanket coming down from heaven with all the clean and unclean animals according to the Old Covenant law and God commanded Peter to eat and he was reluctant.

But eventually he learnt the lesson that all foods were clean, which in itself was, though true, was also a sort of a symbol for the fact that now all people are meant to be clean or available to hear the gospel of Jesus, including the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius.

[ 2 : 34 ]     And Peter goes to his house, preaches the gospel in Acts chapter 10 and the first Gentiles are accepted into the church. This is good for us because everyone in this room is a Gentile.

So if it were not for these events happening, we would not have a place here today in God's salvation. We would largely be outsiders. Now, Peter's a key guy but also is Paul the Apostle.

Paul is a Christian killer. That's his job. He's a Jew who's adamant to crush Christianity. He hated it. But then he met Jesus.

Again, it's the book of the Acts of Jesus, right? So he meets Jesus on the road to Damascus and Jesus commissions him in a very specific way about his ministry.

This is what Jesus says to Paul, that Paul will be an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

[ 3 : 37 ] So Paul's ministry doesn't exclude the people of Israel, but it's really clear that he's going to preach the gospel to Gentiles, to non-Jews. And he's actually very successful at this.

Everywhere he goes, he goes first to the synagogue, first to the Jews, preaches Jesus, and then inevitably there's some level of stoning or persecution or running him out of town and then he goes to Gentiles.

And so at one point in Acts 13, this is what he says to the Jews who are against him. In Acts 13.46, he says, It was necessary for me that the word of God should be spoken first to you, that is to the Jew.

But since you reject it and since you judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to Gentiles. So there's a shift. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

Quoting Isaiah 49, the great hope of Israel was that their God would be known by the whole world. And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord and as many had been predestined for eternal life, became believers.

[ 4 : 53 ] So this is Paul's ministry. He never gives up on Israel. In fact, everywhere he goes, he goes to them first. But what Jesus is doing is clearly opening a door for us, for non-Jews, for Gentiles.

In fact, Paul is so kind of popular among the Gentiles who are pagans, right? So they worship idols, statues, anything kind of hedonistic.

It's very, very unusual, the pagans. At one point, he's so successful that they decide that Paul is God. So he does a miracle in the name of Jesus and instead of worshipping Jesus, these Gentiles start killing a bull to worship him.

So there are some hiccups along the way. That's clearly not good, is it? But many Gentiles do become Christians. And Luke, the writer of this book, loves to give us these little pocket summaries of how well it's going.

And so at the end of chapter 14, which is nearly up to where we are today, Paul says, or Luke says, when Paul and Barnabas arrived back at Antioch, they called the whole church together, the assembly, and related all that God had done with them and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.

[ 6 : 12 ] And they stayed there with the disciples for some time. So everything is great because Jesus is still at work, has opened a door for Gentiles to become followers of him.

What Luke is saying here is that Jesus is doing everything that he said he would do. He said he would die and rise. He did that. He said he would send to heaven. He did that. He said he would provide the Spirit. He did that.

He sent Peter to let Gentiles in. He did that. He converted Paul from being a Christian killer to being a Christian missionary. He did that. And now thousands and thousands of Jews and Gentiles are becoming the Christian church.

So everything is good until today. Then there's a fight. And this chapter is going to tell us a lot today about how to have fights in the Christian church.

What happens is in chapter 15 some 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.

[ 7 : 20 ] This is a huge conflict. No one is disagreeing that the church should be Jew and Gentile. Everyone agrees on that. But what they don't agree on are the conditions for entry.

And in effect what these certain individuals are saying is that most of the people in this room shouldn't be Christians because you are not Jewish yet. And to become a Christian they're arguing you have to become a Jew first and then you can become a follower of Jesus.

You must become a follower of Moses' law and then you become a follower of Jesus. That's what they're arguing. And we are not doing that by and large and so it's really a slap in the face to us or it's a threat to us if they're right.

Now Paul here, he goes well Luke puts it quite subtly but we know from the book of Galatians this kind of teaching made Paul go nuts made him very, very angry.

And Luke's sort of subtle, he says after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. It's sort of a subtle way of saying they had a very large debate and a very large fight about this matter that they would be demanding that all these Gentile converts become kind of Jews in order to stay Christian.

[ 8 : 32 ] And so there's a fight in Antioch and they say why don't we take this fight to the capital, let's go down to Jerusalem let's take the fight there and see come what may.

And so they go down to Jerusalem and again verse 5, they're welcomed, everyone's welcomed but the Pharisee Christians raise the matter again in verse 5.

It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses. Now you may not be sympathetic to this argument but you ought to see the logic to their claim.

Jesus was a Jew, wasn't he? The apostles were Jews. The day of Pentecost happened to Jews. Jews from all countries but it was a Jewish event that Jesus did with Jews.

The Christian movement began with the Jews. Their scriptures that they have, they don't have the New Testament yet. Their scriptures are the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures.

[ 9 : 37 ] And so there's a logic to it that this is a Jewish thing. Yes, Jesus is the Son of God and he's the Lord of heaven and earth, he's got all authority but it's a Jewish thing.

And so they want to say you've got to come into that to be a follower of Jesus. Well, there's a big debate and Luke's recording of it I'm quite frustrated with personally because I'm interested in the processes of how churches or denominations work out their fights and Luke actually doesn't tell us much about the debate.

He just gives us who won, the conclusions and what the council came to. So they pulled together what people call the first ecumenical council that is a wide range of Christian elders and of course the apostles.

And verse 6 says the apostles and the elders met together to consider the matter and there'd been much debate. And that's all he says about the actual debate. After there'd been much debate Peter stood up and then what Luke is going to give us now are three speeches from Peter the apostle, Paul the apostle and his mate Barnabas and James the apostle who was the brother of Jesus.

So it seems that the apostles sorted it all out. It wasn't quite like an Anglican synod I guess with votes and that kind of thing. At the end of the day I think the apostles not only sorted it out they convinced everyone of what the truth was.

[ 11 : 12 ] Luke's also skating over something else here he's skating over what happened between Paul and Peter. Because if you know if you've read the book of Galatians they had a massive one-on-one blue where Peter was cowardly and sided with some of these Jewish Christians and refused to eat with Gentiles.

And Paul rebuked him publicly we know from the book of Galatians. I think Luke knew about that but what he wants to do is just to show us where the church got to not exactly how they got there.

So the question is do Gentiles have to become Jews to be saved? Do they have to be circumcised to be saved? That's the question. And Peter says my brothers you know that in the early days God made a choice among you.

God made a choice. The choice was that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. Peter's saying that yes we all agree that Gentiles are now should be in the kingdom but I was the one through whom that was administrated.

It went through me. God chose me. So you better listen to me is what he's saying. I'm an apostle. And God who knows the human heart testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.

[ 12 : 31 ] And in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. There's a play on words here I think. God who knows the human heart I think at that point he's saying God knows that this objection would be raised made clear to Peter and to the church by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household in an extension as it were of the day of Pentecost.

So when Cornelius the Gentile and his household became Christians they were speaking in tongues and there were signs and wonders just like the day of Pentecost because God had anticipated that they would doubt whether they were the real deal.

And so Peter says that's why they had their own kind of equivalent of the day of Pentecost in Acts 10 so that we would know that God accepts them. And so God has cleansed their hearts by faith not by law by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.

And so now therefore why Peter says why are you putting God to the test by placing on these new Gentile converts on their neck a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear.

That is he's saying even though they're Jewish Christians as Christians they are no longer under the yoke of the law. So they still retain their Jewishness they're still rightly proud of their heritage of being old covenant people but they're no longer under that yoke so why should Gentiles be put under that yoke which they weren't able to bear anyway.

[ 14 : 13 ] On the contrary says Peter and here's his conclusion we believe that we'll be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will. So the level playing field between all Christians is that we are saved by grace.

That's actually quite timely really because even today there are many Christians who think it's not a level playing field that some people are closer to God because they're better people or more holy or more Christ-like.

But Peter says that's a level playing field we're all saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone that's Peter's clear message of the gospel and so Jew and Gentile together are one new people saved by God's grace.

And I think we ought to watch out and aside we ought to watch out for Christians today who find new ways to pervert Christianity by adding conditions to it that aren't biblical by saying yes you've got to trust in Jesus and do X Y Z when you add to the gospel you end up taking away from the gospel and it ceases to be the true gospel.

So that's Peter's speech very clear Gentiles do not have to get circumcised do not have to become Jews do not have to become under the law to follow Jesus. Now Paul's speech is very short and sweet or at least the way Luke presents it is the whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

[ 15 : 47 ] Luke doesn't need to go into it because if you've been reading the book of Acts you've already heard about what's happened among the Gentiles the supernatural things that happened as the gospel was preached to them again I think linking it back to what Peter said that Jesus was confirming his hand in all this with signs and wonders in the early church and now many Christians today would love to see more signs and wonders and part of me would like to as well but we ought not to expect it the way they had it because that was Jesus special stamp of approval on the inclusion of what was happening on the inclusion of Gentiles on the giving of the spirit and so now that Jesus has given his stamp on all nations we don't need another stamp to tell us to plant a Mandarin congregation for example which we've done you know we already have Jesus' stamp so we ought to just go and preach the gospel to all nations and not necessarily clamour for the signs and wonders that punctuated the book of Acts so Paul and

Barnabas say what God has done and they like that they hear that they accept that and then finally the third speech is James who is the brother of Jesus and if anyone he seems to be the one who's like the chairperson sort of the de facto leader among the apostles which is interesting because it's not Peter which the kind of Roman Catholic Church says he's the boss but James seems to be the facilitator of the conclusion here and he basically agrees with them except he gives a controversial recommendation at the end of his speech so just watch out for this okay this is what James says my brothers listen to me Simeon that's Peter he kind of uses his Jewish name to kind of I don't know it's just being sensitive Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles to take among them from among them a people for his name which is actually how God spoke about Israel a people for my name we're saying now that's sort of the Gentile

Christians too a people for my name this agrees with the words of the prophet so there's an appeal here to the scriptures as it is written this is from the book of Amos chapter 9 Amos says after this I will return then I will rebuild the dwelling of David which has fallen from its ruins I will rebuild it and set it up speaking to Israel when they were in exile they'll come back and be rebuilt so that all other peoples may seek the Lord what is God's purpose in his salvation plan when Israel is restored from exile other peoples will seek God even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called thus says the Lord who has been making these things known from long ago so there's clearly in the Old Testament a plan of God to include Gentiles as Gentiles per se with faith in God and faith in his Davidic king and so I guess

James is saying in effect the renewal of Israel is not in the city it's not in the temple it's in the king it's in David's descendant who was Jesus Christ that's the rebuilding of the dwelling of David in Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ now that he is God's king of Jews he's also going to be God's king of the Gentiles who will accept him so that's the conclusion of the matter the fight is now solved do Gentiles have to become Jews no do we have to follow the Jewish law no straightforward isn't it but now there's a bit of a sting in the tail James says we should not trouble I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God that's good but we should write to them and we should write to them to abstain now this doesn't sound right to me because he just said you're free from the law and all these rules and regulations all these foods you have to abstain from they conclude that and then James says let's write to them to abstain so it sounds like is he going back on his word is he contradicting the conclusion of the council why would he say write to them to abstain and to abstain from things polluted by idols from fornication that's fair enough but from whatever has been strangled and from blood it sounds like he's asking them to abstain from the kind of

Jewish food law things or at least from the most explicit things that the Jews didn't like the meat sacrifice to idols for example and the Jews couldn't eat food with blood in it he's saying Gentiles don't eat food with blood in it so why would James tell them to abstain after concluding they don't have to abstain do you see the puzzle well I think the answer is because he says to abstain only from so he's actually saying here is the most they have to do we've concluded they're free to actually not be under the law but why don't we recommend that they just abstain from these things and clearly I think the implication is because that would be loving that would be sensitive to your Jewish brother in Christ this would allow them to be able to eat meals at each other's homes if they would hold back from these things that this will help promote fellowship in the early

[ 21 : 27 ] Christian church I mean James says in verse 21 this is kind of the concession language for in every city for generations past Moses has had those who proclaim him for he has been read aloud in every Sabbath in the synagogues that is everywhere you go on your Christian mission you are going to encounter Jews who have been taught the Mosaic law again and again and again for generations you ought to be sensitive to them you ought to limit your freedom as Gentile Christians or as Christians in order to be able to bring the gospel to them and still be one church one fellowship a sharing table together and everyone it seems is actually very happy with this letter and Luke goes on to report how they go around spreading the letter and everywhere they go there is joy and he says there is peace what James wants is for the truth to be a power of the gospel but also for there to be a fellowship of peace as well now let me share how I think God is challenging us today with this example of the council of Jerusalem and this is really how it has been taught to me

God wants us as a church to be two things to be hard-headed and soft-hearted hard-headed that is to be concerned for doctrine concerned for the truth to be concerned to obey apostles in our new testament to be concerned to obey prophets in the old testament to be concerned about theology and to argue it and to fight it out and when someone actually says something that's theologically wrong that undermines the gospel we are to have dissension and debate and argument we're to be hard headed in the Christian church at the same time we are to be soft-hearted and you see that in this letter we ought to be concerned to love the weaker brother or sister in Christ who has scruples that we aren't bound to but they feel bound to we ought to be seeking to love the body of

Christ to love the church of which Jesus Christ is the head so if we love Jesus we love the head we ought to love the body does that make sense we ought to seek to not just to win arguments but to seek to persuade people patiently and so I think this letter from the council it's a temporary letter we're not bound by it today it was a temporary thing to persuade and to be sensitive to the growing Christian church as it was growing with its Jewish members and it still does so today and we ought to still be sensitive to them today and so I guess if you had Jewish friends you might fire the letter in order to win them or Jewish Christian brothers and sisters you might fire that letter to win them but we're not bound by that today but there might be other ways in which we want to be soft hearted with other Christians in the church who disagree with us or have scruples that aren't necessarily core gospel matters we ought not let that divide us does that make sense so hard headed and soft hearted now here is the rebuke we are the opposite today so you know we have it we have people in this church think about yourself you're probably one of these two people we have people who are soft headed instead of being hard headed they're soft headed they never are they don't care about doctrine they don't care about theology they could sit in a pew here week after week and totally disagree with a sermon and never come and tell me friends if you disagree with something I say theologically I want you to tell me I want to have a debate with you a loving friendly argument with you we'll sit down open the Bible and I will try and plead my case and argue my case you come and tell me you know it automatically don't just be soft headed don't just say oh it doesn't matter it's just doctrine these things really really matter there are some

Christians who are so soft headed they think all that God really cares about is sincerity it doesn't really matter what you believe you just have to be sincere well that's actually not true clearly from the early church they didn't say to these Jewish Christians you know you can believe that Gentiles must be circumcised and they said you're wrong you're wrong you're sincerely wrong you see it's not enough to be sincere you have to be faithful to the word of Jesus Christ to the word of the scriptures so don't be so soft headed that you don't care about doctrine anymore I think such people waver on core doctrines of the gospel that aren't flexible for example the exclusivity of Jesus Christ is a very unpopular doctrine today but it's such a clear one from Jesus own lips that he is the way the truth and the life that if he is God incarnate if he pleaded with the father if there's any other way don't let me go to the cross and there was no other way he went to the cross that must be the only way of salvation that we have to give the world why do we waver on that truth because we're soft headed and it's unpopular our world hates people who have an absolute truth but that's the way Jesus spoke in absolutes so we ought not to be soft headed and waver some here who are soft headed I think have some doubts but they never seek help with their doubts so if you have doubts about the truth of

Christianity or about certain doctrines in the Bible don't just say it doesn't matter that's being soft headed you have to join a Bible study join a fellowship go with other Christians and wrestle with your doubts and try and sort them out it's not enough just to be soft headed if you're soft headed you're nothing like the early church you're nothing like the apostles and you're nothing like Jesus now on the other hand here there are people who are have an opposite problem they are hard hearted okay they've got the hard head right but they're also hard hearted they enjoy being seen to be right on every theological matter they enjoy proving others wrong they take maybe without admitting it some kind of self reinforcing pleasure in seeing the fall of other Christians or the corruption of the kind of other churches or denominations you know they come to me and argue too much those people but I don't want to discourage you see being hard hearted is not what the early church was like they were soft hearted to these weaker Christian brothers who were in the wrong and so please friends don't don't be proud of your theological knowledge don't show it off don't don't be hard hearted just because you've read some difficult theological books or studied hard or whatever

[ 29 : 10 ] I think you know that maybe I don't know you've got to judge your own heart really or let let the spirit judge your heart as I speak but I've noticed in the wider Christian church there are people who have this kind of reformed remnant mentality that we're we're the we're the we're the right true doctrine believers and everyone else is wrong we don't want to even be infected by them you know those kind of pontificating Christians that's not what the early church was like they're hard hearted that's not what the apostles were like it's not what Jesus was like now I think the if I can speak about the Anglican church the Anglican denomination at its best at its best is hard-headed and soft-hearted because it's it's it's a doctrinal movement it's a confessional movement we've got our 39 articles we've got our founding reformation gospel doctrine documents that we are to adhere to so we're hard-headed but we're also soft-hearted where

Anglicanism is exclusive you know we don't want any Christian to be excluded we want to we want every believing Christian to be counted in the church and we're often criticized for being too inclusive but we're trying to let every every sheep in if that makes sense even at the risk of being a mixed church so at our best I think we are hard-headed soft-hearted although I would add and this I guess this is very quite sad actually the diocese of Melbourne we've actually become quite a soft-headed diocese and very hard-hearted about it so in many ways I acknowledge we're quite sick and we but we're here and we're not going anywhere because we want to reform and renew the place you see because we want to be hard-headed and soft-hearted we want to love doctrine and we want to love our brother and sister in Christ we want to love the saints we want to be patient with the church and we want to sacrificially work hard even giving up our own freedoms to help the church grow in Christ now just think about it in the book of Acts Paul

Barnabas who are the people that are kicking goals in the book of Acts they are the people who are hard-headed and soft-hearted they are the ones preaching the gospel they are the ones seeing churches grow they are the ones seeing people come to faith seeing people saved and friends that is exactly what I believe the Lord Jesus Christ is calling us to be today so let's pray dear Lord Jesus we pray that we would learn the lessons of the early church of the council of Jerusalem we pray that we would love the truth and seek to be faithful to your word loving doctrine loving theology loving the gospel seeking to grow in our knowledge of the gospel and dear God I pray that we'll love the saints I pray that we'll be soft-hearted as well I pray that we'll love the people in this church that we disagree with over non-gospel matters I pray that we'll love the weaker brothers or those who have scruples that we don't necessarily think are biblical but I pray that we'll be patient with them and encourage them and seek to persuade them we pray father for the wider

Christian church that you would have mercy on it we pray for our for the Jewish Christians who are many and varied around the place we ask for your blessing on them and that we would be patient with them and loving to them and seek to keep bringing the gospel to them and to their friends and family who don't know Christ yet Lord God we pray that you protect us from the sins of being fuzzy and soft-headed and not caring about the truth and I pray that you protect us from the sins of being hard-hearted and being arrogant in in in the doctrines that we profess so father please have mercy on us each one of us probably has things to grow in and help us by your spirit to grow together into full maturity in Jesus dom on s angel we pray that we pray that we shall see then we pray that we are together to amfront matter we pray that will make 1 to 2 trials together to keep allow the shifts in the garden and training ■ of water and pray that we can prove that that we pray that we have, so we pray that we pray that we ROBERT

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