

Born to Win

Religious Exclusivism

by Ronald L. Dart

One of the truly *pivotal* events of the New Testament church was a conference. It took place some 18 years or so after the church began on the Day of Pentecost. It's often referred to as "the Jerusalem conference", and it seems odd in a way that it took *this long* to have *this conference* (if it was even necessary at all). By most accounts, the year was AD 49. What was at stake (and it's really astonishing to even *put* it this way) was whether the gospel could continue to go to the Gentiles. Think about that! In other words, Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Actually, he used the word for "Gentiles" in that place.) To take it to the Gentiles, he said, "Go do it." And yet, for some reason, some people in the church didn't think it should go there.

Now, Paul defined this issue in his letter to the church in Galatia. He said that some 14 years after his conversion he went up to this conference along with Barnabas and Titus. (You'll find the story in Galatians 2.) All this had to be done because some whom Paul calls...

Galatians 2

NIV '84

⁴ [...] false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.

Those are awfully strong words, and I guess Paul meant it. He went on to say,

Galatians 2

AKJV

⁵ To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

Now, *that* defines the issue: whether or not the gospel was intended for Gentiles *at all*. It seems incredible today looking back to imagine that *anyone* could think that way, but some of them did. The events that led up to this day started, actually, in the second chapter of the book of Acts. The disciples, after the ascension of Jesus, after they had walked with him over to the Mount of Olives and saw him go right up into a cloud above their heads...this is where the thing began. And they went back to Jerusalem and waited. They were in Jerusalem on that Day of Pentecost when fire fell from heaven. Tongues of fire descended upon each one of them, and they began to speak in languages they'd never spoken in before. In fact, in Acts 2, verse 5 it says:

Acts 2

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⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.

Notice, not just ethnic Jews, practicing Jews.

Acts 2

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⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?”

How'd they know that? Well, by their clothes.

Acts 2

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⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?

⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia [...]

He goes on listing all these things; 15 known languages are *named* here. And moreover, unlike most tongue-speakings you'll hear about in churches nowadays, the people who heard these languages *understood the content of the message*. They said,

Acts 2

AKJV

¹¹ [...] we do hear them speak in our [languages] the wonderful works of God.

Now, it still puzzles me that the disciples didn't tumble to the import of this miracle, because it's *strongly* suggestive that the gospel was to *go everywhere*. I'll tell you plainly, if God dropped the miraculous gift of speaking in Spanish on me today I would assume that from this day forward my ministry and my mission would be to Spanish-speaking people, and I would go looking around for a way to go make use of that gift. I would have thought the church would have made plans to get out and go everywhere right from the beginning, because the commission from Christ himself was explicit. In Matthew 28:18, he said,

Matthew 28

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¹⁸ [...] All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all [the Gentiles], baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit[.]

The Greek word that is translated as “nations” in most versions is *ethnos* [ἔθνος, Strong's G1484], the word usually rendered as “Gentiles”.

Now, put all this together and it's hard to understand how the disciples didn't get this. But it is testimony to the power of a culture to shape our thinking that they did not. We continue to see things in the light that we have *always seen them*. And it's *very hard* to see things differently. This was just as true of those first early disciples whom we look at as pillars of the church as it is for us.

So it became necessary for God to give them an object lesson. The man chosen for this was a Roman centurion named Cornelius. (And the story of this, by the way, is in Acts, chapter 10.)

Acts 10

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¹ At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.

² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

³ One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

Now, in most Jewish thought at the time this should not have happened. The man was a Gentile. He was a stranger. He was uncircumcised. Jews would not even *enter the home* of such a man, much less eat with him; but apparently *an angel* would come into the place. This man is what is commonly referred to in old times as a “God-fearer”—that is, a Gentile who has made a decision to order his life according to the dictates of Almighty God and to follow the Bible. So that’s what he was doing. Well...

Acts 10

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⁴ Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

⁵ Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

Now, I thought it was fascinating, reading this, to note what God deemed important enough to call this man to his attention. It was his prayers and his gifts to the poor. It may seem strange to some (it probably would, in fact, to a Pharisee) that it was not Law-keeping that made that difference. No, it was above and beyond that. He was a reverent man. He stood in awe of God. He prayed and gave to the poor. The difference really boils down to this: we gain no brownie points with God for keeping the Law. The Law is made for *man’s* benefit, not God’s. If you keep the Law, you do it for your own life. You do it for your own welfare. You deserve *no credit at all* for keeping the Law *perfectly*—even if you managed it. God would say, “Well, you just did what I expected of you—what I required. You’ve only done this for yourself. You haven’t given *me* anything by your obedience.” But prayer and giving are another matter it seems, for that goes above and beyond the Law. Now, beyond all that, Cornelius didn’t *earn* this angelic visit; it suited God to use him for a purpose.

Now, it’s to Cornelius’ eternal credit that when this angel told him to send to Peter, he didn’t ask, “Well, what for?” Maybe it was helpful that he was a military man. He just did it. Verse 7 of Acts 10:

Acts 10

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⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants.

⁸ He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Okay, God made the first move, Cornelius made the second. Now it’s time for the *third* move in this drama.

Acts 10

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⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.

¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared [*down in the house*], he fell into a trance.

¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.

¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.

¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

Well, Peter didn’t know quite what to make of that.

Acts 10

NIV '84

¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Now, note well that Peter did not assume from this (as some people tend to assume) that God had made snakes clean and edible. If Jesus had done that, Peter would have been *well aware* of it; it had not happened.

Acts 10

NIV '84

¹⁷ While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate.

¹⁸ They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

Now, it was clear enough to Peter that this vision had nothing to do with dietary laws or he wouldn’t have been sitting there wondering; he would have been saying, “Go find me some shrimp.” But a little bit later, it says,

Acts 10

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¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you.

²⁰ So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

²¹ Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

²² The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.”

I don’t know what Peter thought about that, but this is new to him. Well, Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests, and he started out with them on the way down the road to Caesarea. And what happened there is one of the more astonishing events in the entire history of the Christian church.

Acts 10

NIV '84

²⁴ The following day he [*and his entourage*] arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

²⁵ As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.

²⁶ But Peter [*said, “No way!”*] made him get up. “Stand up”, he said, “I am only a man

myself.”

²⁷ Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

I don't know what he expected, but I doubt if he expected that.

Acts 10

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²⁸ He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. [...]”

Now, isn't that interesting? You will search the Old Testament *in vain* for that anywhere in the Law of Moses—that is, the Law of Moses as we know it. It was against *Jewish* law—that is, the law that was basically accepted in Jewish society, that the traditions of the elders had created. For the Bible did not forbid that association, under all circumstances. Peter went on to say,

Acts 10

NIV '84

²⁸ [...] You are well aware that it is against our law [...] but God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.

Now we know what Peter's vision... we know it had nothing to do with eating snakes; it had to do with Peter's own xenophobia—his aversion to foreigners. God had to *show* him it was *okay* for him to go to the Gentiles. And, in the process, he states plainly the cultural resistance to taking the gospel to the Gentiles. It was *against their law* for Jews to associate with Gentiles (and preaching the gospel to them would certainly be association). He went then, saying,

Acts 10

NIV '84

²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?

And Cornelius told his story.

Acts 10

NIV '84

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism

³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

³⁶ You know the message [...]

And then he comes down and gives his whole summary of the gospel.

Acts 10

NIV '84

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words [*finishing out the words of the gospel*], the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in [languages] and praising God. [...]

Now, this was important. Peter's resistance *had* to be overcome, and so this demonstration of power was there. And it was also important that he brought along witnesses to what happened (and we'll see why that is so). Peter says,

Acts 10

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⁴⁷ Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.

These words must have been spoken to the circumcised witnesses he brought with him.

Acts 10

NIV '84

⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The story didn't end there. The apostles and the elders in Jerusalem heard about all this stuff. Acts 11, verse 1:

Acts 11

AKJV

¹ And the apostles and brothers that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

² And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him,

³ Saying, You went in to men uncircumcised, and did eat with them.

Now, take real special note of this expression, "they that were of the circumcision". It did not mean those men who were circumcised, because in those days everybody in the church was circumcised (all the men). It's a reference to a political party in the church that we will encounter again and again.

Acts 11

AKJV

⁴ But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order to them[.]

He told them *the whole story*. He emphasized *one* peculiarity. He said, about the sheet being let down before him with the animals,

Acts 11

NIV '84

¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying."

He seems to see a link between all these threes—that suggests to him...not absolutely authoritatively, but it connects everything. He continued his story and then he came to this conclusion:

Acts 11

NIV '84

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’

¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”

Now, I would have thought that this ended the matter right there; but I would have been wrong. “He who is convinced against his will is of the same mind still”, and this was as true of that circumcision party as much as anyone; but one reason the error persisted was because everyone had been acculturated to a particular worldview: God was the God of the Jews, *not* of the Gentiles. They had believed some version of this all their lives, and it was not going to go away that easily. And there’s lessons in this for all of us to realize—that we have, all of our lives, looked at things a certain way; and sometimes when God calls upon us to look at it differently, we have problems. We pick up the story somewhat later in a town called Antioch—Acts 13:

Acts 13

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¹ In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

The story of this journey from this day forward (which is commonly called Paul’s first missionary journey)...It’s a *fascinating* story. And it was *full* of surprises. They went first to the synagogue in every city they came to, and *time after time* the Jews in the synagogue *rejected the gospel*. I get the feeling, in my later readings in Paul, that he did not expect that at the time—that was a total surprise to him. Nor was he expecting what happened next. When they had to leave the synagogue, and the Jews had turned them all down, *the Gentiles*—all God-fearers like Cornelius—they were all excited about the good news and wanted Paul to preach it to them again and again and again. They were accepting the gospel *in droves*.

They finally returned to Antioch and everyone was *thrilled* with what had happened. (Antioch, after all, was the first place where the gospel was preached to the Greeks.) Well, it was a great time for them all as they realized the moves that God was making in the world. It wasn’t long before a worm showed up in the apple, though. In the 15th chapter of Acts:

Acts 15

AKJV

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

² When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, [...]

And I don’t doubt that for a minute, because they had seen with their own eyes and experienced what God had done. Well, everyone said, “Well, we’ll just have to get everybody together and go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this matter.” When they got there...

⁴ [...] they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. [*Testified.*]

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.

Who were these people, and why were they thinking this way? This is the group of people that Paul will characterize as “they of the circumcision”. They were, in a word, Christian Pharisees. Now, remember that expression, because it’s important in understanding the political divisions in the early church. And it really makes sense when you think about it, because the Christian faith—the belief in Christ—went completely across the cultural spectrum in Judah. There were *priests* who believed in Jesus, there were *Pharisees* who believed in Jesus, there were *Sadducees* who believed in him. There were people...probably people from that strange community down at Qumran who believed in Jesus. There were people who were *no* Jewish political party, who were barely believers. And they all came to the belief (*a* belief, I should say) in Jesus. You know, it’s pretty hard I think, if you lived in that time and that place, to *deny* that Jesus was raised from the dead; there were witnesses *all over the place*—both to his death, to his burial, and to the fact that he was alive again after that. Even though they didn’t *see* the resurrection with their own eyes, they saw the risen Christ. So we have people who *believed* in Christ, and yet they still held to a Pharisaic view of God.

Well, Paul and Barnabas had a lot of arguments with these people, so they went on down to Jerusalem, and these people stood up and said, “No, it’s needful to circumcise these Gentiles and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.” Now, there’s something about this that I did not understand until recently. I read a book by a man named Jacob Neusner. The book was *Judaism When Christianity Began*. It’s a discussion, in considerable depth, about what Judaism (or the various Judaisms) were like in the first century. He explained in greater detail what I had read before about what these terms meant to those who said them. For example, to command people “to keep the Law of Moses” meant one thing to me. I was thinking it was talking about the first five books of the Old Testament, that was all written down—the Ten Commandments, all that stuff there.

However, that is *not* what the expression “the Law of Moses” meant to the Jews of that day—particularly those who were Pharisees, who may have been the progenitors of what we today call Rabbinic Judaism. These people believed that God delivered the Law in two media: written and oral; and that the Law of Moses included both written and oral. The idea is that God told Moses some things, Moses wrote them down. Then he told him *more* stuff, and Moses remembered it and passed it on to Joshua, who passed it on to people, and it was passed down all through these years.

Now, this was a fundamental divide in early Judaism; and it was a major divide between Judaism and early Christianity. The Pharisees believed it the way I just explained it. The Sadducees did not. The early Christians accepted the written Law; they just did not accept the Oral Law. In fact, both Jesus and Paul characterize the Oral Law of the Pharisees either as “the traditions of the elders”, or as “the commandments and doctrines of men”. Now, I don’t really know whether the expression “Oral Law” was really in use in the first century or not. I think it probably was; and if so, it’s very significant that no one writing in the New Testament ever mentions it. The reason? They didn’t accept it as such. They only considered it the traditions of the elders, or the commandments and doctrines of men. So the decisions that were handed down from this Jerusalem conference *in no way* rejected Scripture. They just made it clear that neither circumcision nor the customs of the Jews applied to Gentile converts.

Now, where did the Christian Pharisees go astray? Theirs was a kind of exclusivism. If you aren’t exactly like us, you’re inferior. There is a lesson, I think, that we should take away from this: It’s okay to believe that you are right, but it is *not* okay to look down on others from your lofty perch. I wouldn’t give two cents for a man who believed he was wrong and clung to it, but I would pay no more to a man who believed he was right and despised others. Remember the parable Jesus spoke about those who

trusted in *themselves* that they were righteous and despised others? It's the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican [**Luke 18**]: one man who said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The other, "God, I thank you that I am not like others."

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes,

Ecclesiastes 7

NIV '84

- 15 In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:
a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.
- 16 Do not be overrighteous,
neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?
- 17 Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool—
why die before your time?

Now, I ask the question: How is it possible to be "over-righteous"? I mean, after all, the Bible describes law; it says this is the way a man should live his life. What's wrong with living it that way? *Nothing*, of course. But in fact, it isn't possible in any *literal* sense to be over-righteous. It's possible only in irony, as a figure of speech, where God says, "Don't think quite so highly of your own rightness and your own righteousness that causes you to exclude others from the realm of faith."

I've discussed this issue in considerably more detail in the book *Law and Covenant*. It's available from Amazon.com or directly from us at *Born to Win*.

Until next time...

Transcript of a *Born to Win*
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Religious Exclusivism
DATE: 8/16/07
ID: 07RX