

THE CONTEXT OF CONTEXTUALIZATION: REVISITING ACTS 15 FROM THE PERS- PECTIVE OF ITS LITERARY CONTEXT

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Most missiologists consider Acts 15 as both a biblical basis for doing contextualization and an example of contextualization. This study will examine the context of Acts 15 to see to what extent the passage suggests contextualization and in what situations contextualization could be applied.

Key Words: Contextualization, Cornelius, circumcision, Jerusalem council

1. Introduction

The Jerusalem council described in Acts 15 has been considered by the missiologists as one of the biblical bases for contextualization.¹ Most of them argue that this passage suggests contextual theology (or contextualization of theology). They divide the conflicting parties into two groups: the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians; Jerusalem and Antioch.²

- ¹ Dean Gilliland, "Contextualization," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Mission*, (ed. A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 227, noticed that there is no single definition of contextualization that is broadly accepted. He suggests that the goal of contextualization may define what it is: "That goal is to enable, insofar as it is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every human situation." With that goal, he defines contextualization in mission as "The effort made by a particular church to experience the gospel for its own life in the light of the Word of God. In the process of contextualization the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ" (Ibid.).
- ² To mention some, see for examples, Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 43-55; A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 57, argues that If the story of mission is at the same time the story of how Jews and Gentiles were able to form one people of God, then "the Jerusalem council is a pivotal point for missionary thinking and provides a model for missionaries today in wrestling with issues of contextualization." See also Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Mission: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 109; John Davis, "Biblical Precedents for Contextualisation," *Asia Theological Association*

However, it seems that Acts 15 has been perceived by missiologists as a major model of contextualization without carefully considering the context of the passage itself. Therefore, it would be necessary to revisit Acts 15 to see to what extent the passage suggests the concept of contextualization and in what context(s) contextualization may be applied. It is the purpose of this study to try to answer the questions above.

In order to reach the goal of this study, the following steps are taken: to analyze the broader context of Acts 15, which includes Acts 10-14; to analyze the background to Acts 15 that created the environment wherein the apostles came up with a decision that is considered by many as contextualization; and to look at what was really going on during the Jerusalem council.

2. The Context: Acts 10-11

In order to know what was going on in Acts 15, the context that leads to the Jerusalem council needs to be clarified. There are at least two events prior to the council that are mentioned clearly in Acts 15: the conversion of Cornelius (15:7-11),³ and the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (15:12; cf. 12:24 – 14:28). With this context in view, it is now possible to assess the story of Cornelius' conversion and its similarities to the pattern of the Jerusalem council as described in the table below:⁴

Journal 2 (1994): 21; David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 10-11; C

- ³ Although Cornelius is not mentioned, Peter's statement, "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us" (15:8), is similar to his statements, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47) and "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning" (11:15). See also Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 453-54.; Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts, Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1993), 162.
- ⁴ Although Dean Flemming, 54 states, "The final two accounts of Cornelius and the Jerusalem Council in particular serve as case studies for doing contextual theology," though he does not provide a parallel pattern between those two narratives.

Acts 11	Acts 15
Caused by evangelism to Gentiles— Cornelius and his household (Acts 10)	Caused by evangelism to Gentiles— Paul’s missionary journey to Cyprus, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13, 14)
The problem raised by those of the circumcision (11:2)	The problem raised in relation to the issue of circumcision (15:1)
The problem raised in Jerusalem (11:2)	The problem raised by those coming from Judea, probably Jerusalem (15:1, 5)
The apostles and the brethren were involved (11:1)	The apostles, the elders, and the church were involved (15:4, 6)
Peter explained the case in Jerusalem (11:3)	Paul and Barnabas brought the case to Jerusalem (15:2, 4, 12)
The problem was solved (11:18)	The problem was solved (15:22-31)

Table 1: *The Jerusalem Council Pattern*

The problem in Acts 11 was triggered by the conversion of Cornelius and his household. Cornelius was “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always.” (Acts 10:2).⁵ He knew God and was called φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, “one who fears God.” This expression occurs nine times in the book of Acts (10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17)⁶ and has been defined as Gentiles “who saw much good in Judaism but who were not willing to go the last centimetre of circumcision to conversion.”⁷

There is no adequate information in the text as to why Cornelius was not willing to be circumcised, although he feared God. However, one may argue that the reason why Cornelius was not willing to be baptized is that he considered circumcision as part of Jewish requirements and not God’s.

⁵ Unless notified, all English Bible texts are taken from New King James Version (NKJ)

⁶ Following Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 52-3, the phrase φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν, σεβόμενοι, and σεβόμενοι Ἕλληνες are considered synonymous and thus included in the counting. It can be considered, however, that the phrase σεβόμενοι προσήλυτοι (13:43) is not synonymous with the phrases above.

⁷ Jade T. Sanders, “Jew and Gentile in the Book of Acts,” *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 439. He classifies Cornelius in Acts 10 and the Centurion in Luke 7 in this category. So also Flemming, 36. For extensive information regarding God-fearers, see Levinskaya, 51-126.

Although he is not a member of the Jewish community,⁸ he believed and practiced Jewish elements that he considered to be God's requirements. Cornelius gave alms and prayed to God constantly (Acts 10:2), both being practical realizations of the love commandment: to love God and to love others (Matt 22:37-39). Had he been convinced that circumcision was part of God's requirement, he would have given himself over to be circumcised.

In his vision Cornelius was told to invite Peter to come to his house (10:5). He obeyed God and immediately sent his servants to see Peter in Joppa. When Peter came to his house four days later, he asked Cornelius: "for what reason have you sent for me?" (10:29). Cornelius replied: "we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God." (10:33). It seems that Cornelius just wanted to hear what God wanted him to do, not what the Jews wanted him to practice. It could have been a great privilege for Peter to tell Cornelius that God required circumcision as a condition for salvation if circumcision were really God's requirement for salvation, and Cornelius would have been willing to be circumcised. Instead, Peter replied that "whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins" (10:43). What Peter required was what Cornelius had never done before: to believe in Jesus Christ. It was a new concept he accepted: to abandon all other gods and to believe only in the God of heaven and Jesus Christ His Son.⁹

God is the playmaker of the narrative in Acts 10-11. The word θεός occurs one-hundred-sixty-two times in the book of Acts, of which twenty-three times it occurs in the narrative of Cornelius (chaps 10-11).¹⁰ The word θεός is used in relation to: the object of fear (10:2); the object of prayer (10:2); the sender of messenger (10:3); the one who answers prayers (10:4); the one who makes a decision and no one can change it

⁸ Levinskaya, 121.

⁹ Cohen classified Gentiles who show sympathy to Judaism into seven categories. Those who showed it by "(1) admiring some aspect of Judaism; (2) acknowledging the power of the God of Jews by incorporating him into a pagan pantheon; (3) benefitting the Jews of being conspicuously friendly to Jews; (4) practising some or many of the rituals of the Jews; (5) venerating the god of the Jews and denying or ignoring the pagan gods; (6) joining the Jewish community; (7) converting to Judaism and 'becoming a Jew'". S.J.D. Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1989): 14f. According to him, Cornelius can be classified as belonging to categories 2-4, but not the fifth, since being a Roman centurion, he participated in a pagan cult. *Ibid.*; see also Levinskaya, 79.

¹⁰ The word θεός occurs 21 times in the preaching of Stephen (Acts 7); 22 times in the narrative of the Pentecost (chaps 2-3).

(10:15); the one who gives visions and makes commands (10:28). This significant occurrence and function of θεός is relevant to the fact that Cornelius is a God-fearer (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν). That is why, after Peter arrived in Cornelius' house and both of them shared God's direction that they experienced, Cornelius said: "Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God" (10:33). It indicates that Cornelius was ready to accept and follow whatever command God would give to Him.

Luke uses the verb προστάσσω, "to command, to order" in describing what God would command through Peter. This verb is used in the LXX to describe a command given by a ruler (either a king or a master) that should be followed (Gen 47:11; 50:2; 2 Chr 31:5, 13; 1 Esd 5:68; 6:22-31; Esth 2:23; 3:2; Jdt 6:10; 12:7; 1 Macc 10:37; 10:62; 2 Macc 7:3, 4; 13:4; 15:30; 3 Macc 4:11, 13; Dan 2:12, 14; 3:13, 24). It describes God's command to his natural creature (Jonah 2:1; 4:6; 4:7; 4:8). It also describes God's command through His prophets (Deut 18:20), a command that neglecting it would result in death (Lev 10:1, 2; Deut 17:3-5; 27:1-26). In short, the verb προστάσσω is used in the LXX to describe a command by someone in higher authority to his subject. It is never used to describe a command given by a person to another on the same level. Such a command must be obeyed.

In the NT, the verb προστάσσω occurs only seven times (Matt 1:24; 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14; Acts 10:33; 10:48; 17:26). It is used to describe God's command to his creation (Acts 17:26); a command of God's angel (Matt 1:24); the command of Moses to the Israelites (Matt 8:4; Mark 1:44; Luke 5:14); and the command of God through his servants (Acts 10:33, 48). As it is in the LXX, the use of προστάσσω in the NT also suggests the same meaning—a command given by someone in higher authority than the one or those to whom he gave the command. Luke used it the most, once in his gospel and three times in the book of Acts.¹¹ In the sequence of the occurrence, the meaning of verb προστάσσω in Luke-Acts shows a switch from describing commands given by Moses (Luke 5:14) to describing commands given by God (Acts 10:33, 48; 17:26).

Luke emphasizes the importance of obeying what God commands. He records the decisive statements of John, Peter and the apostles: "Whether

¹¹ This paper presupposes the Lukan authorship and the unity of Luke-Acts. For further explanations regarding the common authorship of Luke and Acts, see Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, (ed. John Riches; Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1982), 3-23. See also Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), 1-12; Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 21-48.

it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge" (Acts 4:19); "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). These statements are declared before the top leaders of the Jewish people and Judaism. It seems that Luke considers the command of the Jewish leaders to be a human command and the gospel commission as the command of God. Therefore, in the case of Acts 10-11, Cornelius may be seen as having been ready to follow whatever Peter would tell him, when he said: "We are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God (πάντα τὰ προσεταγμένα σοι ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου)" (Acts 10:33). This request of Cornelius was fulfilled by Peter in 10:48: "And he commanded (προσέταξεν) them to be baptized in the name of the Lord." For this reason, as mentioned above, had Peter commanded Cornelius to be circumcised, he would have given himself up to undergo circumcision. In this case, circumcision was not required of Cornelius, not because circumcision was not his culture, as was clearly not the case, but because circumcision was not the command of God for salvation. In this sense, the absence of circumcision was not a form of contextualization. It was simply not the command of God.

At this point, Dean Flemming seems incorrect in his inclusion of dietary laws as among the barriers which separate the Jews from other people.¹² He interprets the vision of Acts 11 as a command to Peter to give up the law of clean and unclean foods.¹³ The fact that Peter did not understand the meaning of the vision until the messengers sent by Cornelius arrived, indicates that Peter did not see that the vision should be interpreted literally.¹⁴ Peter did not know that while he was receiving the vision, God had been unfolding the meaning of the vision. When he entered Cornelius' house and saw many people gathered together, he said: "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (10:28). Peter continued: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality" (10:34). The vision is about animals and the meaning is about human beings.¹⁵ The vision does not indicate the idea of

¹² Flemming, 38.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ After three times he heard the voice say: "What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:15), "Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean" (10:17, cf. v. 19).

¹⁵ The word used in the statement given to Peter in the vision and in the statement of Peter to Cornelius is the same: "What God has cleansed (ἐκαθάρισεν) you must not call common (κοίνου)" (10:15), and "But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean (κοινὸν ἢ ἀκάθαρτον)."

contextual theology in the sense of giving up or negotiating the law of clean and unclean foods in order to bring Gentiles to Christianity. Instead, the vision indicates that God, by using a law that had been familiar to and observed by Peter (10:14), contextualizes His commission to Peter in order that Peter might overcome his internal barriers to reach out to the Gentiles. The meaning is revealed and the law of the clean and unclean foods remains.

There were two reactions of those of the circumcision to what happened in Caesarea.¹⁶ This group is divided in the following manner: first, those of the circumcision who came together with Peter to Caesarea were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was also poured upon the Gentiles (Acts 10:45); second, those of the circumcision from Jerusalem were not happy with what happened in Caesarea. As soon as Peter arrived in Jerusalem, the latter group criticized him (11:2). However, after Peter explained to them what really had happened, “they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (11:18).

The issue was circumcision or uncircumcision and not clean or unclean food. The complaint was about the persons with whom Peter was eating and not what he was eating (11:2, 3). This complaint is similar to that which was addressed to Jesus when he was eating with Jewish tax collectors, although the food was clean (Matt 9:10, 11; Mark 2:15, 16; Luke 5:29, 30).

Acts 10-11 does not provide a biblical basis for contextualization in the sense of overcoming the so-called cultural and social boundaries by nullifying circumcision and the law of clean and unclean food. Contextualization in this context is far from the context. The context of Acts 10-11 has to do with overcoming *soteriological* prejudice—salvation is only for the Jews. The passage does not indicate that either Peter accommodated a certain cultural aspect of Cornelius or modified a certain belief of that Caesarean in order to bring them into Christianity. Instead, Peter broke the wall of prejudice and found his way to Cornelius, bringing to him the command of God. Cornelius, who had been ready to accept whatever God commanded, gave himself up to be baptized.

In the context of Acts 10-11, both Cornelius and Peter received a vision. In the case of Cornelius, the angel of God spoke directly to Cornelius, without any illustration and straight to the point, that he should

¹⁶ Luke makes a specific distinction between Cornelius with his household and the Jews. The first is called ἀκροβυστία “(the) uncircumcised” and the latter is represented by οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς “those of the circumcision” (Acts 11:2, 3).

see Peter. Cornelius responded to the command of the angel immediately. In the case of Peter, God had to use an illustration that was familiar to Peter to impress the truth upon him. Peter understood the message and obeyed God's command accordingly. When there was a protest in Jerusalem, Peter had to explain the case step by step, using the illustration that God gave to him in the vision; it worked and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem glorified God. It seems that contextualization was more appropriate to reach Peter and the Jews than to reach Cornelius, a God-fearer. Acts 10-11 tell not only "a tale of two conversions"¹⁷—the conversion of Cornelius and the conversion of Peter, but a story of three conversions—the conversion of Cornelius, the conversion of Peter, and the conversion of those of the circumcision.

3. The Context: Acts 12-14

Acts 12 deals with the persecution agitated by Herod. James, the brother of John, was killed by Herod, and Peter was put in prison, but then miraculously delivered. Herod died and the word of the Lord was spreading and more people heard the good news.

Acts 13 and 14 tell about the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas, after Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen laid their hands on them and sent them away (13:2, 3). They started their journey from Antioch and ended it in Antioch.¹⁸ This indicates that Antioch, in a sense, was the central missionary base for Paul and Barnabas. In Antioch itself, there had been many believers with both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds (Acts 11:19-26).

In order to understand what happens in Acts 15, it is necessary to analyze the different people groups referred to in the missionary journey. Through careful analysis of such groups, the identity of which group complained and which group was attacked should become evident.

3.1 In Cyprus (13:4-12)

In Cyprus Paul visited two cities: Salamis and Paphos. In Salamis they preached the word of God in the Jewish synagogues (13:5). In Paphos

¹⁷ Flemming, 35.

¹⁸ In this missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas departed from Syrian Antioch, going down to the seaport in Seleucia, sailed to Cyprus where they stopped by Salamis and Paphos, sailed to Perga, took a land trip to Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and then retraced the same route from Derbe back to Syrian Antioch.

they met with a Jew by the name Bar-Jesus, a sorcerer and false prophet who introduced them to the governor of that territory. In Paphos there was a miniature representation of the two main groups which dominates Paul's mission: Governor Sergius Paulus, representing the Gentiles who receive the gospel message, and Bar-Jesus, representing the Jews who try to obstruct the conversion of the Gentiles.

3.2 In Pisidian Antioch

In Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas maintained their custom of entering Jewish synagogues wherever they went. After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, Paul was asked to give words of exhortation to the congregation. Paul addressed two groups of people with his message: "ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται "men of Israel," and καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν "those who fear God." This classification indicates that those who feared God were not Israelites; rather, they were Gentiles, even God-fearing Gentiles. In 13: 26, once again Paul called them υἱοὶ γένους Ἀβραάμ "sons of the race of Abraham," and οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν "those who fear God." These two groups worshipped together in the synagogue.

Although God-fearers were not necessarily proselytes,¹⁹ they did have good relationships with the Jewish community. God-fearers came from a group of Gentile people "whose social links with the Jewish community secured Jewish life in the Gentile milieu."²⁰ They were not 'won' by the Jews because the Jews had a special mission for their salvation, but simply because the Jews sought to have a good life among the Gentiles. The Jews were satisfied with a certain *status quo* in regards to their relationship with the Gentiles. They accepted the God-fearers in the synagogues in order that they might maintain that relationship with them. When Christianity concentrated its efforts to win the Gentiles, the Jews were shocked, because Christian evangelists were targeting and had gained success among people whose social links with the Jewish community secured Jewish life in the Gentile environment.²¹ The more the Christian mission was intensified, the more effort was put forth by the Jews to secure the support of their Jewish sympathizers. Therefore,

if the Jewish community in a particular place decided to put a stop to the Christian mission, it was by far the easiest way to do so by using their influence on the God-fearers, among whom there were socially

¹⁹ Levinskaya, 123.

²⁰ Ibid., 125.

²¹ M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 87.

high-ranking and influential people. Consequently God-fearers, in places where these happened, ceased to be responsive to the Christian message and the missionaries found that those Gentiles who were not connected with the synagogues were easier to approach.²²

The social phenomenon described above happened in Pisidian Antioch. After the meeting at the synagogue, “many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God” (13:43). Here another two groups were introduced: πολλοὶ τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων, “many of the Jews,” and “(many) of the devout proselytes.”²³ The two partitive genitives πολλοὶ τῶν Ἰουδαίων and πολλοὶ τῶν σεβομένων πρὸ σηλύτων suggest that both groups came from the two main groups mentioned above—the Jews and the God-fearers (13:16; 13:26). The implication is that there were many of the Jews who received the gospel and there were also many of the God-fearers who received the message of salvation. Those of the God-fearers were described as proselytes. It seems that many of the God-fearers had become proselytes and if that was the case then they must have been circumcised.²⁴

Paul and Barnabas gained a large catch of converts in that synagogue.²⁵ They found success not only among the God-fearers but also among the Jews. The following Sabbath “almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God” (13:44). According to the theory posed by Goodman and Levinskaya above, this phenomenon might have destroyed the security of Jewish life in the midst of the Gentile milieu. “They were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the

²² Levisnkaya, 125.

²³ The syntactical construction suggests that πολλοὶ modifies both τῶν Ἰουδαίων and τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων.

²⁴ Philo indicated that physical circumcision should symbolize circumcision of the heart, and therefore emphasized circumcision of the heart rather than that of the body. However, in the circumcision of the heart, the bodily circumcision was assumed. Peder Borgen, *Philo, John and Paul: New Perspectives on Judaism and Early Christianity*, Brown Judaic Studies 131 (Atlanta, GA: Scholar Press, 1987), 217.

²⁵ Acts 13:43 indicates that those Jews and devout proselytes accepted the gospel messages. Luke describes Barnabas as admonishing the church in Syrian Antioch to remain in the Lord (11:23), and Paul and Barnabas also taught the new believers in Pisidian Antioch to remain in God’s grace (11:43). He uses the same infinitive προμένειν, “to remain faithful to, to continue in” in describing the admonition given by the apostles to the believers in both places.

things spoken by Paul" (v. 45). They "stirred up the devout and prominent women and the chief men of the city, raised up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region" (v. 50).

Thus far, it may be reasonably concluded: The people of Antioch consisted of three different groups: (1) the Jews, (2) the God-fearers, and (3) the Gentiles. The message of forgiveness and salvation gained many people among those three groups (v. 43, 48). The rest of the Jews, through some of the God-fearers and the Gentiles, raised persecution and expelled them from the region (v. 50).

3.3 In Iconium (14:1-6)

Coming to Iconium, Paul and Barnabas again went into the Jewish Synagogue and preached in such a way that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed (14:1). While referring simply to "the Jews" as the opponent of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch, Luke clearly identified the group which opposed the apostles in Iconium: the unbelieving Jews (v. 2). They "stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren" (v. 2). The people of the city were divided into two: those who sided with the Jews and those who sided with the two apostles (v. 4). Then the unbelieving Jews, the unrepentant Gentiles, and their leaders became allies in devising an evil plan to persecute and stone the apostles. Those who sided with the apostles must have told them about such a plan and the apostles went on to the cities of Licaonia (v. 6).

Up to this point, there had not been an issue of circumcision, at least as far as the record of Luke is concerned. There had not been a request by the Jewish Christians that their Gentile brethren must be circumcised. Many Gentiles became Christians because they believed in what Paul and Barnabas were preaching, and not because there was an anti-circumcision proclamation. In other words, the absence of circumcision did not become a major factor in bringing the Gentiles into Christianity. The power of the gospel message had attracted not only the uncircumcised but also the circumcised.

3.4 In Lystra and Derbe (14:7-20)

From Iconium Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra. Here Paul performed miraculous signs that amazed the people of the city. As a result, they were trying to idolize the apostles as Zeus and Hermes. It is indicated that as the result of this missionary work, churches were established in those cities (Acts 14:21-23). The Jews from Pisidian Antioch and from Iconium went also to Lystra and influenced the people against the apostles. Paul

was stoned in Lystra and left for dead. Both of them continued their trip to Derbe, and retraced their route back to Antioch.

3.5 Tentative Observations

As to what has been discussed above, the following important points may be advanced:

1. In any city Paul and Barnabas visited, they would, as much as possible, have entered Jewish synagogues and met with both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. In addition, they would also have done their best to meet the Gentiles. Many people of these groups received the gospel message and believed in Jesus.
2. In reaction to the gospel mission, the Jews were disturbed and tried their best to hinder the spreading of Christianity. The opposition and hindrance did not come from the Jews who became believers, but from the Jews who rejected the message of salvation. They did this in several ways: (1) by confronting directly the teaching of the apostles; (2) by stirring up the prominent God-fearers and the chief leaders of the city to persecute the apostles; (3) by provoking the unrepentant Gentiles to be against the repenting Gentiles; (4) by following the apostles to any city they visited that they (these Jews) might also agitate persecution against the apostles.
3. There has not been an issue of circumcision in the cities the apostles visited during the first missionary journey. Many God-fearers and Gentiles repented and became disciples, not because there was an anti-circumcision campaign, but because they accepted the message of forgiveness and salvation. The message of salvation brought by the apostles was so powerful that it might convince not only the uncircumcised but also the circumcised. The core emphasis of the message was not on the absence of circumcision but on the saving power of God through Jesus Christ.

4. What Happened in Acts 15?

The issue of the conflict depicted in Acts 15 is clearly the issue of circumcision: "And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (15:1).

These men were false teachers in two senses: (1) they were not sent by the “mother church” in Jerusalem,²⁶ and (2) they taught false teaching. They told the church in Antioch that they were sent by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem but actually they were not (15:24).²⁷ Interestingly, the conflict was not triggered by the local Antiochian Jewish Christians, but by those of Jerusalem. Why Jerusalem? Jerusalem played an important role in the decision-making and problem-solving in the early church.²⁸ Peter had to make a report to the leaders in Jerusalem about the conversion of Cornelius and the church in Jerusalem accepted the report (Acts 11:1-18); Jerusalem sent Barnabas to resolve a problem in Antioch and the problem was settled (11:19-26); some prophets came from Jerusalem to prophesy the forthcoming famine, and the believers in Antioch believed them and sent their aid to Judea (11:27-30); Paul and Barnabas and some others had to come to Jerusalem in order to discuss the matter with the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem (chap 15).

“While [the] Jerusalem church became the center of the circumcised Christians, Antioch in Syria became the center of the Christian mission to the Gentiles.”²⁹ The church in Antioch depended on and was influenced by the church in Jerusalem. It is reasonable that by bringing a false teaching to Antioch in Syria, the circumcised party, coming from Jerusalem might be able to incite Gentile Christians, not only in Antioch, but also in all the cities that Paul and Barnabas visited during their first missionary journey. With this incitement, circumcision, which was once not an issue, became an issue in the south Galatian cities (Gal 1, 2).³⁰ It has been observed above that the problem in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Listra was not triggered by the Jewish (circumcised) Christians, but by the unrepentant Jew—the circumcised that rejected the Christian message of

²⁶ D. Tjakrapawira, “The Jerusalem Council and Doctrinal Conflict: An Exegetical Study of Acts 15: 1-35,” Ph.D Dissertation, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS, 1995), 18, explained that the church in Jerusalem is called “the mother church” for five reasons: (1) It was the first base of the church; (2) the gospel spread to other territories from Jerusalem; (3) the church in Jerusalem helped in resolving the problems of other churches; (4) it was the pattern of other churches; (5) it was acknowledged by other churches.

²⁷ This *modus operandi* was common during Paul’s missionary journeys. See for example 2 Thess 2:2.

²⁸ Tjakrapawira, 16-20.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁰ The South Galatian theory is assumed: that is, that Paul wrote his epistle to the churches in the cities of South Galatia which he and Barnabas had visited during his first missionary journey.

salvation. Therefore, if circumcision eventually became an issue in South Galatia, then it was probably triggered by the circumcised coming from the mother church of Jerusalem.

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul seemed to suggest to the brethren there that although a messenger from Jerusalem brought a different gospel than what Paul had preached, they should not have accepted it. He said: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). Paul was astonished that the Christians in the cities he visited in south Galatia were so quickly turning away from the grace of Christ (v. 6). Perhaps, they turned away from Christ as quickly as the false teaching coming from Jerusalem arrived in their cities. These false teachers might have assumed that if Paul and Barnabas had claimed authority, since they had been sent off by virtue of the authority of the church in Antioch, then they could make the counter-claim that they had been sent off by the apostles in Jerusalem, thereby laying claim to a superior authority over that of the two apostles.

The context of Acts 15 indicates that the requirement of circumcision was imposed by the circumcised, not on the unbelieving Gentiles, but on the believing Gentiles. It was a practice required of the Gentiles who have become Christians.³¹ There is no indication of the involvement of non-Christians. It was a problem between the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were sent by the church in Antioch (15:3), welcomed by the church in Jerusalem (v. 4), and the church in Jerusalem wrote a letter to the church in Antioch (vv. 22-29), and the letter was read publicly before the church in Antioch (v. 30). Therefore, it was an internal problem, not an external one.

It was thus a doctrinal problem and not a practical one. The false doctrine was: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (v. 1), and the right doctrine is: "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they" (v. 11). In the Old Testament there are several examples where non-Israelites were willing to undergo circumcision. Abraham and all the men in his house were circumcised, and the practice was done after the reason for the practice had been explained (Gen 17:12-27). They gave themselves to be circumcised because they understood and accepted the

³¹ This group of believing Gentiles was referred to by Luke as τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς "the brothers, brethren." This term is always used to refer to the believers (see Acts 15:1; 15:32; 15:36; 16:40; 17:6; 21:7; 22:5; 28:14). They were also called τῶν μαθητῶν "the disciples" (15:10).

significance and the meaning of circumcision. The same was with Shechem, Hamor, and the Hivites who were willing to be circumcised because the reason for their circumcision was understood and accepted (Gen 34:14-24). Every male in that city was circumcised willingly (v. 24). In the case of Acts 15, it is true that it was not the practice of Gentiles to be circumcised. We can even say that circumcision was not part of their culture. However, the Gentile Christians were not circumcised when they became Christians because there was no doctrinal requirement taught to them by Paul and Barnabas that they had to be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas did not require circumcision of the incoming Gentile Christians, not because they wanted to adjust to or adopt the culture of the Gentiles; it was simply because circumcision was not a requirement for salvation.

When there were several practical requirements made, those were requirements that had been read every Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 15:20, 21). Those included abstinence from: (1) things offered to idols, (2) blood, (3) things strangled, and (4) sexual immorality (v. 29). Interestingly, circumcision was not mentioned in the letter. It seems that circumcision was not part of the Law of Moses that had been read every Sabbath.³² The Gentile Christians must have been given good reasons to practice those requirements and no reason to practice circumcision.

Most likely, circumcision was implied by the expressions: ζυγόν, “a yoke” (v. 10), and βάρος, “a burden” (v. 28). If this was true, then the opposite of ζυγόν, “a yoke,” is found in the following statement, preceded by a contrasting conjunction ἀλλὰ, “But [on the contrary] we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (v. 11). Then the emphasis on circumcision was not the practice, but the concept that circumcision brings salvation—salvation by works. Following this argument, then the four-fold practices required from the Gentile Christians (v. 29) did not imply that they were to be saved by works.

When the letter was read before the church in Antioch, “they rejoiced over its encouragement” (Acts 15:31). A question must be asked: What brought consolation for the church? Was it the exclusion of circumcision from the list? In fact, as far as the number of requirements is concerned, what was included was more than what was excluded. Is it because their culture was adopted or adapted by the church? Remember that what disturbed the Gentile Christians in Antioch was the teaching of some false teachers from Jerusalem who came to Antioch claiming to be sent by the

³² The conjunction γὰρ connects the requirements (v. 20), and the reason for requiring them (v. 21).

leaders in Jerusalem (v. 24). There was an issue of leadership and authority. In fact, of the 115 Greek words (including definite articles, prepositions and conjunctions) composing the letter, only 32 words or ¼ of it that dealt with the problem mentioned in 15:1. The remaining words are introductory. However, what was mentioned in the introduction might have had more impact that caused the rejoicing of the church than the four-fold requirements.

There are at least four aspects emphasized in the introduction. First, the elders, the apostles and the brethren in Jerusalem considered the Gentile Christians in Antioch as their brothers (15: 23). Second, the teachers who taught that there is no salvation without circumcision were false teachers. They were not sent by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (v. 24). Third, Paul and Barnabas were recognized and acknowledged by the leaders in Jerusalem as authorized teachers and apostles (v. 25). Fourth, to confirm the content of the letter, the leaders in Jerusalem sent Judas and Silas to be witnesses of the validity of the letter by giving an oral report of the same content with the letter (v. 27). These might have been the factors that made the Gentile Christians in Antioch rejoice.

In the context of Acts 13-15, the group of people that always created difficulties for evangelism was the Jews. They did that directly or by using the God-fearers and the Gentiles who did not accept the truth. This was the group that was most difficult to reach. The next group, after the Jews, that was difficult to reach was the God-fearers—Gentiles who had a connection with the synagogues. They were difficult to reach because the Jews influenced them not to accept the gospel message.³³ If this is the case, then the Gentiles who did not have any connection to the synagogues were the easiest group to reach. Therefore, in this context, if contextualization was needed, then it was needed mostly to reach the Jews. The four-fold requirements mentioned in the letter were not new for the Gentile Christians. They were not commanded to start doing those requirements, but to continue doing them.³⁴ So, if they had been doing those requirements, why should such requirements be mentioned in the letter? It was for the sake of the Jews.³⁵ The same reason had been given for the circumcision of Timothy: Paul “took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts” (Acts 16:3). To continue following those requirements was not a significant factor for the Gentile Christians since they had been connected to the Jewish synagogues.

³³ See Levinskaya, 125, in footnote 22 above.

³⁴ The present infinitive ἀπέχεσθαι should be translated “to continue to abstain.”

³⁵ See Flemming, 47.

5. Conclusion

Both the stories of Acts 10-11 and Acts 13-15 do not imply contextualization, at least in the sense of adopting the cultural practice and belief of the Gentiles in order to bring the gospel to them and win them for Christ. To overemphasize contextualization in this sense based on these passages is far from the context.