

Did You Have to be a Jew to Become a Christian?

All the disciples and most of those who followed Jesus were Jews. All of the scripture that pointed to the Messiah came from the people of Israel. On the other hand, Jesus explicitly included people of all nations in those who should be included. He said,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

Becoming a Jew included a lot of learning and circumcision for men, and many wanted to be able to come directly to Jesus.

The apostles met in Jerusalem in council described in Acts 15 to consider a single question: Should Gentiles (the word for those who were not Jews) who were coming into the new churches have to convert to Judaism first and be circumcised? The decision of the council, unfortunately, can have two different and almost contradictory meanings, one to do with behavior and one to do with food.

At the end, the rationale for the decision says that Gentiles are to be accepted into the people of God as they are—as Gentiles—but that moral purity, rather than participation in the rest of Judaism, would still be required of them. How did the council come to this result?

Two ways of looking at the council decision

The apostolic council described was the one place that the leaders of the early church came together to talk about how Jews and Gentiles came together in the church. The council met to settle the dispute over whether Gentiles who were coming into the new churches needed to convert to Judaism and be circumcised.

All perspectives were represented in the council, and participants all took their turns to present their arguments on both sides. The decision was made by majority rule, but a critical part of the decision making process, as in the Jewish councils at the time, was listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

After hearing Peter, Paul, and Barnabas talk about the power of God working through the Gentiles, James proposed a resolution to the question that was accepted by everyone. The requirements of the decision were expressed in a single sentence in Greek,

ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ καὶ τοῦ αἵματος (Acts 15:20)

We are left to struggle, after all these years, with what that decision actually meant.

Unfortunately this single set of words can have two different and almost contradictory meanings. The interpretation most widely accepted in recent centuries says that this decision is primarily about food, about what may or may not be eaten by followers of Jesus in the churches. The alternative, which has had strong advocates at different times in history, is that the decision is primarily about morality, about what behavior is or is not acceptable among followers of Jesus.

Each interpretation focuses on a particular problem in the early church. If the primary problem in the church at that time was how to make it possible for the Jewish and Gentile believers to share meals together, then a statement about eating practices would solve the problem. However, if the primary issue was what life changes Gentiles were expected to make to accept the teachings of Jesus, then a general declaration about acceptable and unacceptable behavior would be appropriate. The words of the decision can be interpreted either way.

The decision uses the Greek term “*ἀλισγημάτων*,” which means defilements or impurities, to specify things Gentiles are required to stay away from. Jonathan Klawans examined the various causes and characteristics of purity and impurity in the Torah, and offered a way to understand impurity in his book, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism*. He calls the two kinds of defilement as “ritual impurity” and “moral impurity.”

How are ritual impurity and moral impurity different?

According to Klawans, ritual impurity is concerned with a person’s relationship with holy things and holy places, and not with the person’s moral state or position in the community. This kind of impurity has to do with a person’s status in religious rituals, because impurity results in exclusion from ritual activities and from entering sacred places.

The good news is that this kind of impurity is both temporary and fixable. Each kind of impurity comes with its own process for purification. Ritual impurity results from natural causes that are not completely avoidable, can be addressed and removed, and does not reflect any kind of sinfulness.

On the other hand, moral impurity is the result of committing certain sins that are described in the law as “defiling” or “abomination.” Impurity that is morally but not ritually defiling has its defiling effect on the person who has committed the sin, on the land itself, and on the sanctuary of God. (Leviticus 18:24-30, Numbers 35:33-34, Leviticus 20:2-3, Ezekiel 5:11)

The primary sources of moral impurity are idolatry, sexual immorality, and bloodshed. Indulging in these sinful activities causes the impurity, and the effects of moral impurity tend to last until the situation is resolved.

Resolution of moral impurity follows one of two tracks. For those who are rebellious and refuse to acknowledge their sin, some form of punishment can be expected to follow. For those who continue to be resistant, pollution of the land and sanctuary ultimately leads to poisoning their relationship with God. For those who sooner or later repent of their sin, repentance and atonement provide the way for restoration of the relationship with God.

How did Jesus distinguish between the two kinds of impurity?

Jesus made an explicit distinction between ritual and moral purity. When he was confronted by the fact that his disciples had not washed their hands before eating, as is required in the oral law, Jesus made a policy statement:

Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’ (Mark 7:14-15)

To the disciples he gave some additional explanation:

What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice,

deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' (Mark 7:20-23)

Matthew's gospel has a slightly different version of these sources of defilement.

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. (Matt 15:18-19)

What these two lists have in common is that they include sources of moral impurity from the moral provisions, but not from the ritual provisions, of the Mosaic Law. For Jesus, the moral defilement of sin is far more important than any ritual defilement coming from unwashed hands.

What did the early church leaders think of Gentiles?

What would the members of the Jerusalem council think was the problem with Gentiles in the early church? One clue comes from the way the phrase "Gentile sinners" is used as a statement of the obvious. Gentiles are assumed to be in a state of sin, with their sinfulness seeming to be a part of their identity as not being the people of God.

Gentiles are condemned for their sinful ways in many places in scripture. The Book of Jubilees, written in the second century BCE, shows a perspective on Gentiles from shortly before the first century.

[the Israelites] will forget all of my commandments, everything which I shall command them, and they will walk after the gentiles and after their defilement and shame. And they will serve their gods, and they will become a scandal for them and an affliction and a torment and a snare. (Jubilees 1:9)

The risk is that association with Gentiles will lead to the moral impurity of idolatry and sexual sin.

Gentiles were corrupting because Gentiles were sinful. Their sin was not contagious in the same way that ritual impurity was. It was dangerously attractive since Jews can be led into sin by their example. The laws which lead to separation (forbidden animals, intermarriage, etc.) symbolize and enforce the differentiation of the people of Israel from the idolatry and immorality of others.

They also enforce social separation from those who might lead the people into such behavior. Those Gentiles who wanted to join the people of Israel through Jesus need to leave behind those sinful practices identified in the moral provisions of the Mosaic law, which had always applied to non-Jews living among the people.

What else is wrong with Gentiles?

Even if Gentiles were not inherently ritually or morally impure, they would still not be holy in the same way that the people of Israel are holy to the Lord (Lev 20:26). Richard Bauckham points out that just as the opposite of purity is impurity, so the opposite of holy or sacred is profane. Both sets of distinctions, between the sacred and the profane and between the clean and the unclean are critically important (Ezekiel 22:26).

Even though Gentiles can turn away from sinful behaviors, this repentance does not make them holy people belonging to God (Lev 10:8, 10). Gentiles, even "good" repentant Gentiles, are still ordinary people. It takes something more than simple repentance to bring the holiness that comes from being one of God's chosen people. Before the coming of Jesus, only joining the people of Israel and living under the Mosaic covenant could make this possible.

However, the coming of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles in the early church showed that this had changed. Peter's vision which is described in Acts 10:9-16 of different kinds of animals to be eaten was accompanied by the message "What God has made clean, you must not call profane (Acts 10:15)." When Peter was called to the home of the Gentile Cornelius, he said

You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. (Acts 10:28)

Peter concluded that, like the animals in the vision, the *people* he is called to see are neither profane nor unclean. When Peter was criticized for his actions and reported back to the leaders in Jerusalem, he said, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. (Acts 11:12 NRSV)" At that meeting, held before the Jerusalem council, the concern about maintaining separation was raised, and the gathered leaders agreed that Gentiles were included in the community of those who received the Holy Spirit.

Peter related the incident with Cornelius and his family again during the council, because it removed the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Peter said to the council,

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. (Acts 15:8-9)

This action of the Holy Spirit implies a change in the status of Gentiles from profane to holy. They receive holiness through the Holy Spirit which is given to them and lives within them. The presence of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19) removes the last distinction, profaneness as opposed to holiness, that separated Christian Jews from Christian Gentiles.

James explained the decision

In the end, it was not the miraculous confirmation of the mission alone, but the witness of scripture that led to the resulting decision. Bauckham explains that James presented an argument based in scripture, the way a Jewish sage of his time would, to address the requirements for inclusion in the people of God.

James based his thinking on the idea of the Christian community as the temple. He dealt with the issue of Gentiles in a way which upheld the authority of the Mosaic law. When James quoted Amos 9:11-12, it is in a combination that includes other texts to interpret Amos for this context. James says,

The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: " 'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages. (Acts 15:15-18)

For James, the "booth of David" refers to the eternal Temple, and "the nations who are called by my name" to the Gentiles who acknowledge God.

In the form of the interpretation used at the time, common words were used to identify links between related passages. The Greek passage in Acts uses quotations from the Septuagint, with slight changes in the wording of Amos, to create word associations. James also includes references to Hosea 3:5, Jeremiah 12:15, and Isaiah 45:21 in his interpretation.

The interpretation James is making for the council is that the Christian community, including its Gentile participants as they are, has become the people of God. All the nations who are called are included in the covenant status and privileges, again as they are.

However, even as Gentiles are to be accepted as they are, it is still necessary for Gentile Christians to separate themselves from the moral pollution of their previous lives. Purity is still required, and righteousness is still the goal for all, Jews and Gentiles. To discover the way this is expressed in the decree of the council, we need to address some issues in the translation of the council decree itself.

Language issues in translating the decision

Our perspective in translating the critical passages leads to which of a set of alternate word meanings we choose. When our perspective changes, moving between a moral and a ritual way of thinking, the elements of the passage snap into a completely different and internally consistent set of meanings.

Looking at some of the individual words used in the decision, the range of potential meanings for the critical words in these two passages is fairly great:

ἀλισγημάτων ἀλίσγημα [pollution] – This is the noun form of the verb ἀλίσγέω which means to pollute or to make something ceremonially impure. The noun form then means that which has been ritually defiled—“a thing defiled.” When used in the plural, it indicates multiple separate acts. Translators have assumed that the pollution is caused only by idols, although it is possible that the pollution may be caused by any or all items in the following lists.

αἷματος αἷμα [blood, bloodshed] – This word has different potential meanings, including actual blood, the red life-fluid in of humans and animals; the death of a person, and to deprive a person of life by violent means. The word used here is simply “blood” with no implication of blood as food or meat in which the blood remains.

πνικτοῦ πνικτός [strangled, suffocation] – This rarely used word refers to the experience of being choked, strangled, throttled, drowned, stifled, suffocated, afflicted, or tormented. When translated in the context of the apostolic decision, context alone has been used to establish that this term refers to animals that have not been properly slaughtered.

As a result, depending on the perspective used, these elements in the decree can take on different but collectively consistent meanings:

Greek phrase	if food/ritual concern	if sin/moral concern
ἀλισγημάτων ἀλίσγημα	something ritually defiled	impurity from moral law violation
εἰδωλοθύτων εἰδωλόθυτος	meat sacrificed to idols	sacrifices to idols
αἷματος αἷμα	meat with blood in it	bloodshed
πνικτοῦ πνικτός	meat from an animal which has been strangled	suffocation, cutting off breath
πορνείας πορνεία	forbidden sexual relationships	sexual immorality

The choice of a food-related perspective is typically based on context, either because the use of the concept of impurity is assumed only to refer to ritually impurity or because the “majority” of the elements of the list can consistently be applied to foods.

The version of the decision which is sent to the churches eliminates the concept of pollution, which was the reason for avoiding each of the behaviors listed. It's possible that this omission was intentional, that the council only wished to transmit the substance of the requirements to the Gentile churches without confusing matters with issues of defilement that would only be familiar to Jews.

The meaning of the decision

The alternative translations of the two passages which I propose are from food based

Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:20)

to moral

but we should write to them to only stay away from impurities caused by idols, by sexual immorality, by suffocation, and by bloodshed. (Acts 15:20)

and from food based

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:29)

to moral

that you stay away from idol sacrifices, from bloodshed, from suffocation, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. (Acts 15:29)

Gentile followers of Jesus are told to avoid idolatry, violence against others whether by bloodshed or cutting off breath, and sexual immorality. There are no explicit references to eating in any of these restrictions, and food laws are not part of the immediate context of these passages.

Further, in the injunction to "stay away" there is also the implication that there has already been more than enough of the pollutions listed. In the new life in Jesus, these sins no longer have a place.

Does this decision answer the whole problem?

The question that was asked of this council was whether circumcision and following the entire Mosaic law was required of Gentile followers. The response of the council was to say that, no, one did not have to become an Israelite and enter the full Mosaic covenant to belong to the God of Israel. A place had already been prepared for Gentiles. The specifics of the moral law for Gentiles had already been spelled out in the Torah for aliens resident among the people.

Immediately following his statement of the decision of the council, James concludes with a reference to the availability of the Mosaic law:

For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." (Acts 15:21)

If a Gentile is looking for the basis of the decision, he need only go as far as the local synagogue to hear the reading of the law.

When Gentiles ask for those provisions of the law which specifically apply to non-Jews living among Israelites, the law is available which states clearly that Gentiles are forbidden

idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, and sexual immorality. As followers of Jesus, these Gentiles would already be aware of the prohibition of insult to God by blasphemy. By sending their letter, the council of elders was reinforcing the other major provisions of the law given through Moses as it already existed and applied to Gentiles.

Conclusion

When the question was explicitly raised in the early church as to whether Gentiles were required to become Jews and observe the entire Mosaic law, the answer was a clear “No.” Gentile followers were only directed to observe those critical portions of the Mosaic law which applied to Gentiles—forbidding idolatry, violence, and sexual immorality. Jewish and Gentile followers were to be one people, without distinctions among them before God or with each other.

The decision was an affirmation that moral law, as understood through the covenant under Moses, continued to be relevant to all those who belong to the people of God through Jesus.

It was not a statement of exemption from the law, but rather an affirmation that the righteousness defined by the law had not gone out of fashion, particularly in the face of the idolatrous, violent, and immoral practices of the surrounding Gentile cultures. The righteousness of the resident alien was still required of the newly invited Gentiles in the early church.

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