

Acts

Acts 15:1-12 - When it dawned on the church what Christianity is

It's fascinating in the book of Acts watching the surprise in the church as it dawned on them what Christianity was really all about - the first glimpse of which came when Peter met with the Gentile Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, and suddenly "the Holy Spirit fell on them as he'd fallen on us (Jews) at the beginning," **Acts 11:15**.

It came as a total surprise to Peter, but it dawned on him in **verse 17** "that if God gave the Gentiles the same gift as he gave us Jews....who was I to think I should oppose God?" But it was so surprising that "when Peter went up to Jerusalem" to report what had happened (in verse 1), some did oppose it and "criticized" Peter for even entering a Gentile house in the first place.

But then it dawned on these critics too in **verse 18**, that God had "even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life." Imagine how surprising it must've been, though, because up to this point they'd been "telling the message only to Jews," **verse 19**, thinking it was only Jews that the gospel was meant for. But then, surprise, surprise again in **verses 20-21**, "men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to (Gentile) Greeks, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus....and a **great number of** (these Gentile Greeks) **believed and turned to the Lord.**"

The church leaders at Jerusalem were so surprised by this as well, that they "sent Barnabas to Antioch" in **verse 22** to check it out. Barnabas immediately recognized this truly was God's doing, so he shot off to Tarsus to collect Saul, and for a whole year the two of them "taught great numbers of people" in Antioch in **verse 26**, and by interesting coincidence this was the first time that believers were "**called Christians**" too (same verse).

The term "Christianity," therefore, came at the same time Gentiles were responding in great numbers to the good news message about Jesus. So imagine being there at that time, because all the apostles needed to do was preach about Jesus and to their enormous surprise and delight **that was all that was needed** for the Gentiles to respond. Even the governor of Cyprus, the totally Gentile Roman Sergius Paulus, "believed, **for he was amazed at the teachings about the Lord,**" **Acts 13:12**. It was simply the message about Jesus that brought him to belief.

This was amazing, because Saul (now Paul in verse 9) and Barnabas had been “proclaiming the word of God in the Jewish synagogues,” **verse 5**, but were being met with abusive opposition to their teaching about Jesus. It wasn’t from the Gentiles, however, it was from their fellow Jews (verses 45-46), to the point that Paul had to tell them in **verse 46**, “Since you reject the word of God (about Jesus) ...we now turn to the **Gentiles** who (unlike the Jews) were glad and honoured the word of the Lord,” **verse 48**.

It was another great watershed moment in the book of Acts - and for us today too - because this was the time in history when it dawned on the church that God “had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles,” **verse 27**.

And why was that important for us today as well? Because **the Gentiles were the first people to become Christians without any Jewish ritual, tradition, or even knowing about the Law of Moses**. They’d been given the “message of salvation,” **verse 26**, without any requirements about keeping the law, or any prerequisites from Judaism having to be done first. The Holy Spirit had “come on all” of them for simply “**hearing the message**” (Acts 10:44).

So what we’ve got in these chapters is the church beginning to see what Christianity is, because here were Gentiles becoming Christians without having to become Jews first. They’d simply heard what was being preached about Jesus and believed it, and that was enough for them to be called Christians.

This was shattering to many Jews at the time, however, because they’d been required to go through all sorts of law-keeping and rituals as God’s chosen people, but the Gentiles weren’t expected to do any of them. Not only did that make the Jews “jealous” (Acts 13:45), it also made them angry. In **Acts 15:1** a group of them had even travelled to the church in Antioch from Judea “and were teaching the brothers: ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved.’” In other words, the Gentiles couldn’t be called Christians, nor could they expect any sort of salvation in their lives, until they obeyed the law of circumcision taught by Moses.

The gloves were off: Obey the Law of Moses, or else. It’s interesting to note, then, how Paul and Barnabas reacted. They could have said, “Well, we’ll leave that up to the Gentiles to decide, and if they wish to observe some Jewish laws and rituals, that’s between them and God.” But that’s not what happened. Instead, **verse 2**, it “brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate” with these Jews. And it sounds like it got so heated that the two of them “were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.” So off they went.

But on the way Paul and Barnabas also grabbed the opportunity in Phoenicia and Samaria to tell “how the Gentiles had been converted” by simply believing the good news about Jesus, which “made all the brothers very glad.” In Jerusalem, however, “some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’” So even as “believers” (verse 5) they still thought that for Gentiles to be rightfully called Christians they must follow all the Mosaic regulations God placed on the Jews.

By now, however, it had fully dawned on Peter what Christianity is, so “After much discussion among the apostles and elders, Peter got up and addressed them,” **verses 6-7**. And what follows from Peter might come as a huge surprise to “believers” today too. So let’s try it: Imagine yourself listening to Peter with all your ideas as to what Christianity is, and comparing them now to what Peter says next in Acts 15:7-11.

“Brothers,” he starts off in **verse 7**. “you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that **the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.**” So it was God’s choice to give Peter the understanding of the gospel first, and to Peter the job of explaining it to Gentiles, and to Peter the huge surprise of Gentiles believing it. We look to Peter, then, for our understanding of Christianity, because when he explained it Gentiles like us got it.

The first Gentile to get it being Cornelius. But why him? Because, Peter continues in **verse 8**, “**God, who knows the heart...**” Well, in the story about Cornelius the first thing WE get to know is the heart too, because right off the bat in Acts 10:2 we learn that “Cornelius and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” He was also “respected by all the Jewish people” (verse 22). **So this was a man with a good heart** - and God knew it too, because he sent an angel in Acts 10:4 to tell him, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a **remembrance before God.**”

So, God not only **knew** Cornelius had a good heart, he **celebrated** it too. And that’s what led to God then orchestrating a meeting with Cornelius and Peter, who immediately launched into the good news message about Jesus in Acts 10:34-43. And that’s when the Holy Spirit suddenly “came on all who heard the message,” which totally astonished “the believers who’d come with Peter, that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (verse 45). So, we’ve actually got “believers” being “astonished,” because this was something that even they had never expected. It caught them completely by surprise too.

But it WAS astonishing - because God was showing them, as Peter now continues in **Acts 15:8**, that he, God, had “accepted” the Gentiles on the basis of their good heart and believing the gospel about Jesus - **and that was it**, nothing more. And God “showed” it was nothing more, **verse 8**, “by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us (Jews).”

But imagine being a believer today, and hearing that - that all it takes for conversion to Christianity is God knowing a good heart when he sees one, getting the gospel across about Jesus in terms people just soak up and love, and the Holy Spirit takes it from there, “purifying” good hearts that trust him, **verse 9**.

You mean that’s all that’s needed for conversion to Christianity? You mean there was no law they had to obey, no repenting they had to do, no ritual they had to go through, no circumcision, no sabbath keeping, and no church attendance? Was that all that was needed?

Well, not quite all, because Peter has one more thing to say in **verse 10**: “Now then,” he says, “why do you (believers who demand Gentiles obey (the law of Moses)....why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of disciples a yoke that neither we nor (our) fathers have been able to bear?”

That’s a total “No, no,” Peter says in **verse 11**, because God never put that yoke on us as Christians. Why would he when centuries of experience taught us Jews we could never match the demands of the law? That’s why “We believe it’s through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as (we’ve now come to see) the Gentiles are too.” God never made it a requirement for us Jews to obey the law of Moses to be called Christians, so why should it be any different for the Gentiles? And it wasn’t different, because as Peter said back in **verse 9**, God had made it clear to Peter in his dealings with the Gentiles that he “made no distinction between us (Jews) and them.”

In other words, God was showing through the conversion of the Gentiles what Christianity was based on. It’s based on three “goods”: good heart, good news, and good riddance to anything but God’s grace saving us. And not only did God reveal that to Peter, but to Paul and Barnabas too, **verse 12**. This, then, is when Christianity really came to light, and in just five verses too.

And where had it all begun? With Cornelius and his good heart, because that’s what **started off his conversion to Christianity**. He was already one third of the way to conversion. Shocked and astonished by that? Good, because in **verse 12**, “The whole assembly became silent” too.