

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Disciples, on the GO!

(Studies of the book of Acts)

Assimilation vs. Accommodation

(Acts 15:1-35)

Study #19

Introduction: When in Chile...

During the trip that several of us from Northwest took to Chile, South America, in August, we got to experience a Chilean cultural treat called an *asado*. Basically, an *asado* is a BBQ on steroids. There is great food of all kinds, but especially there is MEAT at an *asado*.

Those present at the table were Manuel Abarca's family, friends of the Abarcas, and the Northwest team. So, yes, we were barging in on a family re-union.

But not once during the *asado* did it feel like that.

We were greeted warmly - VERY warmly - with hugs and kisses all around. We sat together at a very long table. We were offered the same wonderful food as everyone else. We were toasted by our hosts, and we toasted them right back.

Most of us didn't speak Spanish, which made conversation difficult. But the Chileans (Chillenos) all tried to understand English. They all appreciated our clumsy attempts at Spanish. The bi-lingual among us looked for opportunities to help out.

That evening was a picture of the reception we received in Chile throughout our two weeks there.

We enjoyed and endured interminable travel, sleeping arrangements with a twist, different styles of worship, some different kinds of food, and, of course, always, everywhere, Spanish.

But, our hosts went out of their way to do everything they could to help us feel welcomed.

When we would arrive at a home at 11:30pm, there was a hot meal for us. The beds were prepared for us when we arrived. Their homes were open to us as were their hearts.

They didn't try to change us. Assimilating us to Chilean ways wasn't their goal. We were the outsiders and they accommodated us. They changed their routines to meet our needs. Accommodation is a most gracious way to welcome guests.

Thankfully, accommodation won the day in the first century church, as we will see today.

Review...

Last Sunday, Jeff took you on a wild ride through Acts 14. He highlighted the courage it took for Paul and Barnabas to face rejection and physical suffering on the First Missionary Journey - and to keep on sharing the Good News of Jesus. What an example for us to follow!

With that mission completed, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and to the church that had sent them.

For some time, all was well in the church at Antioch. But, tension arrived with the arrival of a new teaching, courtesy of some visitors from Judea.

A Toxic New Teaching from Jerusalem (vv. 1-4)

Trouble Comes to Antioch... (v. 1)

[1] Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Nothing like this had ever been taught in the church at Antioch before. The founders of the church, who came to Antioch when persecution forced them to flee Jerusalem, sure hadn't taught this.

This teaching that a man couldn't be saved unless he was circumcised was a something brand new. And it was a profoundly unsettling teaching to the Gentiles in the church.¹

It would have been troubling, in part, of course, because of the physical pain involved in a mid-life first-century surgical procedure.

But, here's an even more troubling part than the physical pain.

If circumcision, a Jewish rite, was required of non-Jews, then the Christian faith was just another sect of Judaism.

The full message of the men from Judea was, *"If you want to be a Christ-follower, you have to be a Moses-follower. If you want to be a Christian, you've got to be a Jew."*

These men who had come with this teaching came with some *gravitas*, some measure of authority. After all, they came from Judea, the geographical heart of the faith.

But, in coming to Antioch, they hadn't come to a church of push-overs. Paul and Barnabas had faced rock-throwing crowds in Lystra and assassination attempts in Iconium.

Antioch - a Church with Backbone (v. 2)

[2a] And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them...

When the men from Judea began telling all the Gentile men in the church that they had to get circumcised and begin following the Mosaic Law, Paul and Barnabas stood up and said, *"No way!"*

¹ To clarify...the focus of the discussion of circumcision was male circumcision. The Bible never mentions, encourages, or condones female circumcision.

They had just returned from a trip to Galatia and had seen people from all walks of life receive the gift of eternal life through faith alone in Christ alone.

Not once did they encourage these Gentiles to observe Jewish holidays, keep a kosher diet, or get circumcised. The Galatians believed in Jesus and were saved. Period. End of story.

Still...

These men from Judea had never seen faith in Jesus without the trappings of Judaism. They couldn't imagine a God-fearing person NOT observing the Jewish festivals, NOT eating only kosher foods, a man NOT getting circumcised. So, we get where they're coming from, too.²

But the two sides can't come to agreement about what should be taught. And after a while, both groups - the Barnabas/Paul group and the Judean group - all agreed that they needed arbitration.

[2b]...the brethren³ determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

When it came time for Barnabas and Paul to leave, they did so with the church's full blessing.

On to Jerusalem! (vv. 3-4)

Sent by the church (v. 3a)

[3a] Therefore, being sent on their way by the church...

This is Luke's way of telling us that the church at Antioch understood that the stakes in this debate are enormous.

² Try asking yourself what the Judean Christians might have feared that would have led them to force Gentiles to conform to the Law. That they would be outnumbered by Gentiles? That including former pagans would lead to moral decay in the church?

³ I assume that *"the brethren"* is a reference to both sides of the debate, and that all were concluding they needed arbitration.

When Paul and Barnabas left on the trip to Galatia, they were sent out *by the church*. Now, they are sent on their way *by the church* to Jerusalem.

What is decided in Jerusalem about this issue (How “Jewish” must Christianity be?) will determine the shape Jesus’ church takes.

Spreading joy on the way (v. 3)

[3] Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

In only fifteen years, churches have sprung up between Jerusalem and Antioch.

There were churches in Phoenicia, just south of Antioch, on the Mediterranean coastline. There were even churches in the one area where, formerly, no self-respecting Jew would go: Samaria! Samaritans have been welcomed into God’s family through faith in Jesus.

And the believers were thrilled to hear the stories of God’s amazing work among the Gentiles of Asia Minor.

The group from Antioch were spreading joy everywhere they went as they told the stories of what God had done. (In our Sunday morning videos, we’ve been calling them “God-sightings”.)

Spreading joy at their arrival (v. 4)

[4] And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders,⁴ and they reported all that God had done with them.

⁴ The church in Jerusalem knew Barnabas, as he had been an active part of that church, years earlier. (Acts 4). They knew Paul, too, since he had gone to Jerusalem shortly after his conversion, trying to associate with the disciples, when Barnabas befriended him (See Acts 9). The two had come to Jerusalem one time, together, to bring a financial gift to the church during a famine (cf. Acts 11).

Pretty soon after their arrival it was time to get down to business. And the first-ever meeting of the leadership of the church was going to decide on a make-or-break issue: “*What do we do with all these Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus?*”

The Jerusalem Council is about to convene.

The first words state the position of the men from Judea.

The Anti-Toxin: The GRACE of Accommodation! (vv. 5-29)

Meeting the Issue Head On (vv. 5-6)

Let’s state the issue plainly (v. 5)

[5] But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them (i.e. - the Gentiles), and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

During Jesus’ three-year ministry, the Pharisees had been among His fiercest enemies. But now, some of the Pharisees have become Christians.

Well, this is great! Praise God - Pharisees have come to Christ! Sadly, though, their Christian teachings are consistent with what we see in the Gospels when they opposed Jesus.

These guys naturally gravitated toward rules and regulations, to “*Thou shalt*” and “*Thou shalt not*s.”

And they argued that if a Gentile wants to become a Christian, he must submit to the surgical rite of circumcision.⁵

However, in the minds of the Pharisees, getting circumcised was just Stage One. It was the nose of the camel.

⁵ Male circumcision had long been recognized by the Jews as a symbol of the covenant God made with His people. Dating back to the days of Abraham, circumcision set the Jews apart from non-Jews.

Once circumcision became a standard requirement, the rest of the camel - meaning, the rest of the Law of Moses - would find its way into the tent. Christianity would become a Jewish denomination.⁶

Serious stuff, indeed.

Let's debate the issue honestly (v. 6)

[6] And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Throughout the last two thousand years, whenever the church has confronted major issues related to faith or practice, leaders have come together to study, to discuss, and to pray.

Then, after their deliberations, they have issued statements along the lines, *"This is what we believe"* that clarify the issue at hand.

It was not uncommon during the early centuries of the church's life to pull prominent leaders together from different areas and from influential churches to come to one mind on a pressing issue.⁷

The very first time this happened was in Jerusalem around AD 50. Acts 15 gives us the Minutes from that meeting.

A good-sized crowd of Pharisees, apostles, elders of the church, the delegation from Antioch, and others who were interested all gathered for this discussion.

And after lots of people had their say, the Apostle Peter rose to speak.

The Great Debate Rages (vv. 7-18)

The Apostle Peter - who was given the "keys to the kingdom" - speaks about Gentile inclusion (vv. 7-11)

[7] And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe."

The background to this was the time when Jesus had asked the apostles, ***"Who do you say that I am?"*** Only Peter answered, ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*** (See Matthew 16)

Jesus shot back, ***[Matthew 16:17] "Blessed are you, Simon son of John...[18] I also say to you that you are Peter (i.e. - the rock) and upon this rock (i.e. - the "rock" of Peter's confession) I will build My church...[19] I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."***

With these ***"keys"*** Peter opened the door to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost with his sermon of Acts 2.

Then, God allowed Peter to unlock the door for the Gentiles when he went to Cornelius' house (Acts 10) and saw the Holy Spirit poured out on non-Jewish people for the very first time.⁸

With respect to the issue at hand (acceptance of Gentiles into the church), Peter said, ***[8]... "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us."***

God, he said, made ***"no distinction"*** between Jews and Gentiles, ***"cleansing their hearts [and ours] by faith"*** (i.e. - NOT through obedience to the Law!).

Peter then accused the Pharisees of putting God ***"to the test"***, asking them why they would place ***[10]... "upon the neck of the [Gentiles] disciples a yoke*** (a reference to the Law of Moses) ***which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"***

⁶ This is a clear display of "Jesus +" Christianity. But eternal life comes to the one who has faith alone in Christ alone.

⁷ Early on, these church councils helped define essential Christianity. When the question arose, *"Who, exactly, was Jesus?"* the church convened at Chalcedon (AD 451) to hash out a statement about the God/Man. When the church needed to grapple with how Father, Son and Holy Spirit all functioned together within a framework of monotheism, The Council of Nicea was convened. (AD 325)

⁸ We believe that this occurred around A.D 49, about ten years after the event involving Cornelius.

And he wrapped up with this very gracious, not Jewish-centric statement, **[11] “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”**⁹

Next up to speak were Paul and Barnabas, recently returned missionaries to Galatia. Their role in these proceedings is to tell stories, to relate “God sightings”.

Paul and Barnabas - who saw God work powerfully among the Gentiles - speak up about their experiences in Galatia (v. 12)

[12] And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Wouldn't you have loved to have heard them tell the stories?

No doubt they told about being mistaken for gods and of Paul's stoning in Lystra and the other hardships of the journey.

But they would have mainly told about the healthy churches and the many new converts and the changed lives they had left behind.

Then, the final speaker stepped to the podium: James. Not the Apostle James, as he was killed earlier by Herod (Acts 12). This is James, the half-brother of Jesus.¹⁰

Earlier, James didn't believe that his older Brother, Jesus, was anything special.¹¹ However, after Jesus' death and resurrection, he became convinced that Jesus was indeed Savior and Lord.

Now James has become a leader in the Jerusalem church.

James - who was Jesus' half-brother - speaks up from experience and Scripture (vv. 13-18)

From experience (vv. 13-14)

[13] And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. [14] Simeon¹² has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.”

So, Christianity was never intended to be a strictly Jewish thing. What Peter and Paul and Barnabas have all said make it clear that God has called Gentiles to be part of the church of Jesus.

So, the first words of James relate to experience. And experience is important. But then James turned a corner and spoke from Scripture.

From Scripture (vv. 15-18; quoting Amos 9)

**[15] “And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,
[16] AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,
AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,
AND I WILL RESTORE IT,
[17] IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,
AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,
[18] SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD.”**

James says that what they were seeing in Gentile conversions to Christ was what the Jewish prophets had been predicting for centuries.

The Gentiles had always been on God's heart. He had always loved them.

⁹ A somewhat wooden, but literal, translation would read, “*But through the grace of the Lord Jesus we believe and are saved, just as these also are.*” A more Jewish-centric way of saying it, but less gracious, would have been, “*They are saved as we are.*”

¹⁰ This is also the James who wrote the letter of James.

¹¹ See John 7:1-5.

¹² Peter's name is given as “Simeon” a very Jewish way to say or spell “Simon,” appropriate to the Jewish context and setting in Jerusalem. Peter is referred to in this way only here and in 2 Peter 1:1.

And the point of the words James quotes (from Amos) is that Gentiles, AS GENTILES - not as Jewish converts - will be accepted into God's family.

So...

...since God has given to both Gentiles and Jews eternal life in Jesus;
 ...since both Jews and Gentiles make up the church;
 ...since Jews and Gentiles need to love each other to show a watching world the love of Jesus...

...it is critical that they figure this thing out. And now James suggests a way forward.

This all happened nearly two thousand years ago, but what we are about to read is one of those places where we see how timeless and relevant the Bible really is.

And if you are interested in how to protect and maintain unity in the church, what James says is for you. If you are interested in how to welcome outsiders in, what James has to say is for you. If you want to be a great welcomer to the newcomer and if you want our church to be a great welcomer, what James has to say is for you.

First, he gives a word to the Jews about how they are to treat Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus.

What to Do with the Newcomers? (vv. 19-21)

#1: Don't be annoying (v. 19)

[19] "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles..."

Literally, James says, "Don't annoy the Gentiles." The word we translate "**trouble**" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that describes Delilah's treatment of Samson. She annoyed him.

The Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ were to not be annoyed by things like circumcision. The Jews were not to attach Jewish baggage to the Gospel and then expect Gentiles to carry it.¹³

In other words, don't require that these newcomers conform to culture that is not required by the Gospel. In other words, don't demand assimilation to the way "we" do things. Or, in other words, don't make it any more difficult to follow Jesus than you have to.

The Jews were the dominant culture in the first century church and that's what the Jews were to do. Don't be annoying.

Second, James has recommendations about how Gentiles, for their part, should behave as they connect to the church.

So. Here we go. This is where James is going to bring down the hammer on the Gentiles. Right?

#2: The fewer the rules, the better (vv. 20-21)

[20] "but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood."¹⁴ [21] For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."¹⁵

You and I would probably agree that what James has listed are important enough to mention. But it is an interesting - and a short - list.

¹³ After all, as Peter just pointed out, the Jews, themselves, hadn't done all that well obeying Moses...

¹⁴ "**Strangled**" has in view a form of death for an animal in which the blood is not drained. Thus, when cooked, the blood is cooked with the animal and the blood is eaten. The last words "**and from blood**" speaks of eating or drinking blood, a practice condemned by the Jews because they understood that **[Leviticus 17:11] the life...is in the blood**. Eating/drinking blood was tantamount to eating life, which is sacred.

¹⁵ At the end, James is probably telling the Gentiles that since Moses is read each week in the synagogue, they should therefore be sensitive to Jewish concerns. Or he might be saying, "If you want to know about Jewish sensitivities, go to the synagogue and listen as Moses is read and you'll find out all about them there."

For one thing, given that the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ had been deeply involved in idolatry, it makes sense to prohibit certain kinds of worship practices.

That is the thought behind keeping away from idols and from fornication (likely a reference to worship rituals involving sex).

The message? **WORSHIP GOD.**

The second set of guidelines concerned blood. The Jews considered blood sacred. Blood was not to be consumed. To do so would be disgusting to Jews.

So, out of respect for Jewish sensitivities, **DON'T EAT BLOOD.**

And that's it.

- Nothing is said about Sabbath-keeping.
- Nothing is said about tithing.
- Nothing is said about tests for leprosy.
- Nothing is said about kosher-keeping.
- Nothing is said about observance of Jewish festivals.
- Nothing is said about circumcision.

And these **omissions** speak volumes about what essential Christianity is all about.

Christianity is not Judaism + Jesus. And our faith is not Jesus + a certain set of cultural norms.

James urges the newcomers (the Gentiles), *“Leave your idolatrous past in the past AND be careful to not offend your Jewish brothers and sisters (by things like eating blood).”*¹⁶

¹⁶ As Darrell Bock says in his commentary on Acts, *“There is a cultural sensitivity [being urged] here where the issue is not establishing a fixed set of practices. The issue is establishing respect for the [culture] of others and making a commitment to not force one’s own [culture] on others.”* Paul addressed this in 1 Corinthians 8-10, identifying many practices as not necessarily sinful in and of themselves, but wrong if they caused a (weaker) brother to stumble. See Romans 14 as well.

And, to the dominant culture (the Jews), he says, *“Don’t make things harder than they need to be to follow Jesus. Don’t annoy the Gentiles. Make accommodations for them.”*

So, will James’ advice fly?

Will the delegation from Antioch buy it? What will the church in Jerusalem say about these extremely minimalist requirements for Christian behavior?

Well, **EVERYBODY** bought it. Case closed. They heard James’ proposal and something went “click.” It all rang true.

The Council’s Resolution (vv. 22-29)

[22] Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren...

They decided to draft a letter with the guidelines all spelled out. The letter is included right here in the Bible.

[23]...“The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. [24] Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction¹⁷ have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, [25] it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, [26] men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [27] Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas¹⁸, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

¹⁷ Notice how the letter purposefully distances the church from the **“men of Judea”** who went to Antioch with the toxic teaching.

¹⁸ Silas (later to become a major player in Acts) is mentioned first here. This is typical of Luke’s habit of foreshadowing. He did the same thing with Stephen (mentioning him in Acts 6 before detailing his martyrdom in chapter 7) and with Paul (showing his part in Stephen’s stoning before telling of his conversion).

[28] For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit¹⁹ and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: [29] that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

The letter carriers made their way to Antioch and were welcomed with open arms. They got the church together and read the letter.

Celebrating the GREAT News of Accommodation! (vv. 30-35)

[30] So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. [31] And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. [32] And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. [33] And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [34] [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] [35] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

And they lived happily ever after...

Well, not exactly. There will be lots more adventures and challenges for the church. But the Jerusalem Council accomplished much.

And here is some of what it accomplished and some of what I believe it says to us, today.

For one thing, the gathering of leaders in Jerusalem clarified the Gospel.

¹⁹ And just HOW did they discern what the Holy Spirit was directing? As we have seen before in Acts, the thought is that when the church, in submission to God and in prayerful waiting on God comes to consensus it can just as easily be said “we agreed to such and such plan of action” or “the Holy Spirit is leading to such and such plan of action.” See Acts 13 and the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul for the First Missionary Journey for another example of this.

Conclusion:

- *Clarity regarding the Gospel*

Peter said that God cleanses the hearts of Jews *and* Gentiles **[9] by faith**. He made clear that all who are saved are saved **[11] through the grace of the Lord Jesus**.

Neither good genes, good works, nor good intentions cut it.

Faith alone in Christ alone saves forevermore. That was true for Gentiles from Antioch and Pharisees from Judea, just as it is true for you and me today.

- *Cultural inclusiveness*

The Jerusalem Council also clarified that Christianity was not a Jewish sect. Following Jesus didn’t involve following Moses.

This meant that the Christians in Judea were free to continue with their Jewish culture - as long as it didn’t conflict with following Jesus, AND the Christians in Antioch could hold to their Syrian culture - as long as it didn’t conflict with following Jesus.

It turns out that God really enjoys the diverse cultures of the world. He likes to see us here in San Antonio gather for a Labor Day BBQ and He likes to see Chillenos gather for an *asado*.

In fact, among my favorite scenes in the Bible is one found in Revelation 21 (the next to the last chapter in the Bible) where we read, **[24...the kings of the earth will bring their glory** (i.e. - their culture) **into** the New Jerusalem.

We delight in Mexican talavera and the *abrazo*, Chinese music, Arabian markets, Japanese architecture, African sculpture, French cuisine, Russian ballet.²⁰

²⁰ Our church’s overseas partners in India incorporate as much of Indian culture as they can as they seek to lead Hindus to faith in Jesus. They are using culture to build bridges for the Gospel.

Artifacts of culture that show the fingerprints of a Creator will endure and should be celebrated. So, people who come to Christ can follow Him and maintain their cultural identity.

One implication of this for us, today, is that the most beautiful picture of a church is not a picture of cultural sameness.

It is a picture of diverse cultures coming together, loving and respecting and valuing each other, united in Jesus to carry out the Great Commission.

The goal of a church is not to see to it that everyone adopts a common culture. That is, to assimilate.²¹ The goal is to accommodate as much diversity as possible under the Lordship of Jesus.²²

I'll wrap up with a thought or two about accommodation.

- *A call to accommodation (not assimilation)*

Unity is relatively easy when there is not much cultural diversity. But, as we are seeing, nationally, with increasing diversity, unity becomes more challenging.

Unity is an essential adornment of Jesus' church. He said in John 17 that when the world sees our unity, they'll believe that the Father sent Him (vv. 21, 23). That's stunning. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that the demonstration of a diversified unity is one of the main tools Jesus gave us for evangelism.

Over the past year, I'm thankful to God that there has been progress in our experience of diversity here at Northwest.

The presence of Encuentro is allowing us to welcome people - Spanish speakers - who have not been here before.

We've had joint worship services with Encuentro. Those services have been exercises in accommodation where we sing and speak in English and Spanish. We are learning accommodation in the use of the building and in style of ministry.

It's even been a bit messy at times. Messiness always accompanies diversity.

But I'll take the messes over not experiencing the richness and the beauty of a diversified unity every time. Amen?

In the first century, Jesus' followers discovered that there was room in the church for Jews and for Samaritans and for Gentiles - it just took some accommodating. The dominant culture had to make adjustments so that every Christ-follower knew, *"I belong here."*

For whom is there room in the church of 2017? For whom is there room at Northwest? For whom will we make accommodations?²³

I think we have only just begun to explore the richness of a diverse unity here.

In the months to come I see us being more and more welcoming - more accommodating - to the young and to the old, to the infirm, to other ethnicities, to the poor, to those who are different than the dominant culture here.

Acts 15 was a watershed event in the story of Christianity. I'm praying that our consideration of it will be a watershed in the story of our church.

²¹ Think of the Star Trek "Borg", enemies of The Star Fleet Federation. The Borg's goal is to assimilate everyone/everything and against whom "resistance is futile." Very, very bad.

²² John Newton, the author of the hymn, Amazing Grace, put it this way, *"Be an iron pillar when it comes to the Gospel and be a reed blowing in the wind when it comes to nonessentials."*

²³ This idea that we should accommodate ourselves to others' preferences and even to their weaknesses finds its source in God. The theological theme of Accommodation says that God, while being in His nature unknowable and unreachable, has nevertheless communicated with humanity in a way which humans can understand and respond to.