

# What Do We Do With Religious Customs?

by Bruce Hostetler

## FAITH STORY:

Acts 15: 1-35

## SESSION FOCUS:

The first century followers of Christ were faced with assimilating the Gentiles, who were non-Jewish believers in Christ, into the church. The Pharisees, the “Religious legal purists”, wanted the Gentile believers to conform to the Jewish law. They were insistent that circumcision of all males, as commanded by the Mosaic Law, be practiced in order for them to experience salvation.

This narrative shows us the difference between the Mosaic Law, with a high emphasis on exterior physical rites, and the Gospel message of grace through faith, which focuses on a transformed inner life. We also see in this text the art of compromise to encourage believers from different cultures to accept change as a positive part of church growth. Even though they did not fully understand exactly what God was doing at that point in time, they followed a new direction, led by the Holy Spirit.

## SESSION GOAL:

To help students understand how religious customs can sometimes help and sometimes hinder the main goal of helping new believers experience acceptance and fellowship in the church community.

## SESSION OBJECTIVES:

At the conclusion of this session the students will have had the opportunity to learn:

- People matter more than religious customs
- It is the Holy Spirit alone who transforms every believer’s life
- See how customs in your church can “get in the way” of church growth
- How to make it easier for new people to join our faith groups.

## MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- Bibles

- Newsprint and markers
- 3 x 5 index cards
- Note books and pens
- Bandanas

## SESSION OUTLINE

### FOCUS:

Welcome students and check in about their week—happenings in their personal, family or school lives.

Divide the class into four groups and hand out name tags and markers. Groups are identified as follows:

- 1 I represent a charter member of this church. The way we've always done things is perfect. My name is: I DO NOT WANT CHANGE (write this name on a name badge and put it on.)
- 2 I represent a member of this church. I think we need to drop some of the old outdated customs. My name is: I AM WILLING TO CHANGE (write and apply)
- 3 I represent a church Elder, chosen to lead. I am responsible to God, and the people, for how we do things in our church. My name is: I WANT THE RIGHT CHANGE. (write & apply)
- 4 I represent a new believer in Jesus. I've just started coming to this church

**My name is:** I NEED CHANGE (write and apply)

Ask each group to list 3 customs, traditions, or practices that they think are important in the life of the church. Then they should write down several reasons, from the perspective of their name tag, why change should or should not be considered.

### Possible Ideas:

- Should we have church on Saturday night instead of Sunday morning?
- Should we have church on Sunday evening & Wednesday evenings?
- How people should dress for Sunday Worship: Formal, casual, jeans or shorts?
- Singing four-part harmony or contemporary praise songs.
- We should have all acappella singing because instrumentation is a distraction.
- Use only the King James Version of the Bible.

- Bible reading from the Old Testament is irrelevant.
- Form Sunday School classes based on age groups, topic centered, or drop SS altogether..
- Use different styles of baptism, communion or church holy day celebrations.
- A democratic vote is the best way to decide issues; the majority is right. Losers just have to “deal with it.”
- The Pastor and Elders decide major issues. The people have elected us to make decisions.

## CONNECT:

Bring the groups together to share their lists. Discuss how the role that they are playing affects how they feel about the change within the church.

### Continue your discussion with these questions:

- Can you think of a real life event where you have had to change to help someone with different customs or rituals fit into your group?
- Have you ever had the experience of becoming a student or member of a new school or church? How did that feel? How did you change to fit into the new group?
- Has that experience changed how you relate to other people who are new?

## EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Ask students to get into their groups again, read their Bible passage, and write down what they learned from their passage.

- 1 Group 1, read Acts 15: 1-5. Why is the practice of circumcision a “big deal” to those of the Jewish faith? What is “the custom of Moses?” Look up Genesis 17:10-14 to see if you can discover why the Pharisees want the non-Jewish believers to undergo this rite.
- 2 Group 3. Read Acts 15: 6-11. Can you see how the new believers, from the Gentile population, are experiencing salvation somewhat differently than those of the Jewish tradition? Do you sense the emphasis moving from keeping the letter of the law, to the gift of the Holy Spirit(v.8,9) to cleanse their hearts? Look up Deuteronomy 10:12-16. Is it possible the intent of God, even in the beginning, was to change the “inner person,” or the hearts of people? Does verse 16, “Circumcise your hearts and do not be stubborn any longer,” mean God wants our “inner being” changed? What kind of changes are the Jews going to have to deal with to “blend” the Gentile believers into their church?
- 3 Group 2: Find and read Acts 15:12-21. It is easy for us to see, but hard for the Jews, that their nation was intended to lead the way for all races of people to experience salvation.

Check out Luke 2:30-32 to see how Simeon's vision of the baby Jesus was directed toward the salvation of not only the Jews, but all people.

- 4 Group 4: As you read through Acts 15: 22-35, pay attention to the process by which these leaders came to a decision about solving the division in the church over the issue of circumcision for the Gentile believers. Notice in verse 28, they said "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no greater burden than these essentials." Do you suppose they came to a decision that was agreeable to everyone? How is the Holy Spirit involved in such a decision?

Bring the groups together to discuss. Summarize with these points.

- Imagine you had been raised in the Jewish tradition. How would you feel about a different culture being granted an exception to a fundamental rite you have been taught to believe was essential?
- Can you see similarities to symbols or traditions you have identified today in your faith upbringing that could stir up hostile feelings if you were asked to abandon them?
- Just as change had to happen in the early church, change happens to us. It is possible to change some things but not others?
- It is important to know which things to change and which things not to change. How is that decision made?
- The process of Elders and Leaders along with the "whole assembly" (vs.12) is a good model for the modern church.
- The "overriding issue of importance" that takes precedence over the "way we've always done it," is bringing God's purpose of Salvation to all people.

## APPLY

### Ask:

- What helps us let go of old traditions we love, and accept new ways of experiencing God's presence?
- How can we help new people feel more "at home" when differences in opinion come up?
- Even if a custom is important to you, or your church, should we ask new people to observe them?

Gather in the groups that the name badges indicate.

- Groups 1 & 2, choose several customs, traditions, or practices from those identified in the FOCUS segment and write them on index cards.

- Give the “new believers” the bandanas and ask them to wear them somewhere (head, arm, ankle, etc)
- Members of groups 1 & 2, stick the index card in the bandanas of the new believers. Explain that the church is asking the new believers to follow these customs.
- Group 3—Elders and Leaders—will initiate dialogue between the groups to decide if the custom should be kept or abandoned.

Discuss the process, including:

- Why was each custom dropped or retained?
- How do the practices either help or hinder the purpose of helping God create “a people” out of all peoples?
- Was the decision-making process we used effective? How was our way different or similar to the “Spirit rule” of Acts 15:28?

## **RESPOND**

Hand out notebooks and pens for students to do journaling. Ask:

Do you believe it’s worth the effort of inviting Jesus to help change one thing in your church or in your life? What one thing would you change first? Your own attitude? In what areas could you open your mind to understand another person’s perspective? How could you take an honest look at the “big picture” and not just your own issues? Are you willing to ask the Holy Spirit to change your “inner picture”?

Close with a prayer.