Twenty years ago the Mennonite seminary where Ted and I have been teaching decided
to start a course on faith and sexuality. But in all those years teaching that course we never talked
about circumcision. In working with the Acts 15 story these past weeks, I’ve learned more about
male circumcision than I ever wanted to know. Actually I was surprised at what I found, and it
deepened my appreciation for the difficult, discerning work of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

In this chapter there’s a serious conflict brewing. Some people from Judea start
poking their noses into mission church life in Antioch, a congregation that Paul and Barnabas
were mentoring. When the Judeans teach the Gentile converts that they have to be circumcised in
order to be saved, Luke says there was “no small dissension and debate.” (Acts 15:2) We hear
that there was also “much debate” in the subsequent meeting in Jerusalem.

As I’ve read over the years the description of the Jerusalem meeting I’ve noticed the
deep listening that marked the decision making process. The apostles and elders kept silence
while there was narrative reporting of all the signs and wonders that Paul and Barnabas had
witnessed. They had heard about Peter’s vision and listened as he explained his understanding of
the signs of the Holy Spirit and his theology of grace through Jesus. The whole Assembly heard
James’ summary of what had likely been major points in the debate about how to interpret
Scripture in relation to what God seemed to be doing among the Gentiles. And this space for
speaking and hearing led to a resolution, a way forward.

But what I noticed as I began to study the text this time is that we contemporary
Christians are quite unprepared ourselves to do deep listening in relation to this debate. It is
hard for us to understand what was at stake for everyone involved—and especially what was at
stake for the circumcisers. On the one hand, as 21st century people—in a time when circumcision
is a medical or social practice and is performed primarily on infants—we don’t have much
emotional investment in circumcision. On the other hand, when we come to Acts 15 we’re
already on the side of Peter and Paul. After all, we’re Gentiles. We’re on the side of those who
want change. We see those who were insisting on circumcision, in the face of what the Holy
Spirit was doing in Acts 1-14, as people who were clinging to an outmoded practice focused, of
all things on male genitals.

And Luke doesn’t help us. He was so interested in readers understanding the rationale
for the momentous decision welcoming Gentiles without circumcision into the Jesus movement
that he made sure that in the book of Acts we hear the story of Peter’s and Cornelius’
conversions three times. The he gives Peter, Paul and Barnabas, the majority of the floor at the
Jerusalem Council. We don’t hear one person in favor of retaining circumcision provide their
reasoning or speak up at the Council, not even once. How are we to understand all that was at
stake in this debate?

Without deeper listening to the circumcisers, we can hardly see why some of the
Jewish Jesus-followers would want to hold on to the practice of circumcision—other than their
being stubborn traditionalists, fearful of change or just plain narrow-minded. Avoiding this kind
of caricature of “the other side” is one of the challenges we face in this text; it’s also a challenge
we face in our conferences today as we struggle to find our way in relation to the blessing of gay
unions. So I tried to practice some deep listening in relation to those “circumcisers,” trying to
hear something of what Luke’s text leaves out. I found that such listening was also important for
understanding the compromise that James proposed as a way forward.
To understand the passion motivating the circumcisers at the table, we need to recognize that circumcision had an “extraordinarily rich” cultural and religious significance (I 1025 Anchor Bible Dictionary – ABD). It was a kind of “tattoo”—not easily changed—that over time had gathered many layers of meanings for thoughtful Jews. I will mention five.

1. Circumcision was associated with marriage and fertility—it became a symbol of God’s blessing and of humility before the Creator. Only after Abraham’s circumcision did Sarah bear a child: it became a sign of the “goodly number of offspring promised and blessed by God.” This bodily mark reminded married men and women that it is not we/our genitals that create life, but God. It was an immediate, visible reminder of God’s promise and blessing through the gift of children and of our humility before God.

2. Circumcision was also associated with deliverance from evil and death, becoming over time a symbol of the Exodus. Later Jews drew an analogy between circumcision and Passover blood. Circumcision was a “sacrificial act” that recalled the blood on the doors that thwarted the angel that killed the firstborn sons in Egypt, reminding them of God’s protection and liberating acts. Other theological developments associated circumcision with liberation from the evil spirits that rule the nations and liberation from exile.

3. Third, circumcision was a practice associated with covenant making, a knife rite that sealed an agreement. It became a symbol of the covenant sealed between God and Abraham. Circumcision was a body mark that reminded a man regularly that his household’s and his community’s loyalty to God and God’s loyalty to them defined and guided their lives. Their primary loyalty was to God, not to idols or to human authority apart from the Spirit of Jesus, a theme we’ve seen repeatedly in Acts.

4. Fourth, circumcision was a practice that carried profound metaphorical weight—it symbolized circumcised minds. Because of Israel’s own failures to uphold the covenant (“a yoke that neither our ancestors or we have been able to bear” as Peter puts it in his speech in Acts 15) and because some pagan nations also practiced circumcision, it became clear that the physical act in itself was not enough. Covenant faithfulness required “circumcised minds” which delight in the obedient love of God (Deut 10:16; 30:6). The OT speaks of a circumcised heart, lips, and ears. “With circumcision Israelites commit[ted] themselves to living in the sphere of the covenant.” (ABD I-1027) Only those who also have circumcised hearts “can experience the blessing of the covenant of Abraham (Jer 4:4; cf 4:2) or return from exile (Lev 26:41; Deut 30:6).” (ABD I, 1026)

5. Finally, circumcision was linked with a sense of national identity; it was a mark of belonging to a politicalreligious community that stood apart from
“uncircumcised nations” like the Philistines, the Babylonians or the Greeks. The circumcised were those who had covenanted with Yahweh—not worshipers of other gods. Faithfulness to this covenant meant that this community was “fit to participate in Yahweh’s activity” in the world. Those formed by the faith and practices of the community of Yahweh—including converts—were marked by both literal and metaphorical circumcision. (AB I-1026-27) And they were called to be “light to the nations.”

As we read Acts 15 we see the uncircumsized Greek converts as the outsiders, the ones who are vulnerable to rejection by the more powerful circumsized Jews. That’s part of the story. However, power is relative. In relation to the Greek and Roman worlds, it was circumcision that made the Jewish followers of Jesus outsiders and vulnerable to rejection.¹

1. Greeks and Romans were repelled by the idea of circumcision. They thought it was disgusting to see the glans or end of the penis, and circumcision became the “target of horror, contempt, scorn and ridicule throughout the [Greek and Roman] period” ABD I-1027] Male Jews were stigmatized because of circumcision—and women in the community along with them.

2. Nudity was involved in going to the Roman baths and in Greek athletic exercise and competition. In Alexandria having Greek heritage and doing training that included going to the gymnasium was part of becoming a citizen. Circumcised Jews who would not go naked to the gymnasium did not have the privileges of citizenship. “After the war (66-72 CE) Rome levied a tax on all circumcised men to support the worship of Jupiter Capitolinus.” Circumcision placed a financial burden on Jewish men, tested their commitments regarding idolatry, and made it impossible for them to hide the stigma of being Jewish by ceasing to practice Judaism.

¹ Information on circumcision in relation to the Greek and Roman periods (In 63 BCE Romans made Jerusalem subject to their political supervision until the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 132-135 CE. Luke written 80-90 CE. From Anchor Bible Dictionary.)
3. There were different responses from Jews given this cultural situation.
   a. Some held fast to the practice—given its deep meanings.
   b. “In the face of severe social pressure against it, many Jews quietly bowed out and joined the dominant culture, ceasing to practice circumcision.” ABD - 1029.
   c. Some tried to hide their circumcisions by surgery.
   d. Some parents asked for a very small cut so it would hardly show when their sons participated in cultural life. Debates arose among the Jews about what constitutes circumcision; is cutting off a minute piece sufficient or only the whole foreskin?
   e. Others turned to metaphorical interpretation: what is important is circumcising your passions, not your heart. ABD I-1029

4. This context raised urgent questions of faith and culture for Jews: when is it okay to compromise significant practices of faith [e.g. in our time flags/pledges of allegiance] and when is it important to hold to them for the sake of the mission of the church? It’s also a context ripe for people to judge one another. I can imagine some of the circumcisers thinking: so are those Greek converts trying to hide their identity as a member of the Yahweh/Jesus community and escape taxes and persecution? Shouldn’t they be standing boldly beside the cross of Jesus as we are? So we give up circumcision; what part of our identity will we give up next? It’s a slippery slope. Are disciples of Jesus now going to defect from the faith whenever the going gets tough?
It takes work to understand the other side. But I hope you can see more empathetically what was at stake for both sides in the debate. This deep listening also helped me understand the resolution of the conflict.

After all the speaking and listening, James proposed a compromise and its rationale. It was this compromise that led the Jerusalem “conference” of churches away from what could have been hardened positions and a church split.

a. The compromise respected the differing perspectives and experience of those in Jerusalem and Antioch. The council did not “do away with physical circumcision” as we might think. (That view we see in Ephesians where Paul says that in abolishing circumcision among other such commands, Christ has included Gentiles and Jews in one new body with access to the Father). Rather, this council agreed that Jewish followers of Jesus who read from Moses every Sabbath and understand its formative importance, will continue to be circumcised. However, Gentiles who are newly turning to God should not be troubled by it.

We see an example of this distinction in relation to Timothy and Titus who accompanied Paul on some of his journeys. In Acts 16:3 Paul took Timothy and “had him circumcised” because his mother was a Jew (his father was a Greek). However, the church did not expect Titus (Gal 2:3) to be circumcised, because he was a Greek. We also see evidence of this agreement in Gal 21 where James and the elders in Jerusalem report to Paul that rumors are circulating that he has been teaching “all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and . . . not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. (Act 21:21 NRS). They ask Paul to go through the
purification rites with four men who will be taking vows, demonstrating that Paul
does observe and guard the law—and he does this.

b. To some degree the compromise honored the deep symbols that motivated the
circumcisers to retain their practice. Baptism and communion for Gentile converts
could begin to take on some of the deep meanings of circumcision—gratefulness for
the gift of life/bread and humility before our Creator, deliverance from evil and the
liberating power of God in the Exodus, covenant making and commitment to the way
Jesus. Baptism and communion could serve as identity markers of the community of
Yahweh-Jesus in distinction from the nations. These treasured meanings did not need
to be given up in the teaching, ritual and worship life of the mission communities.
Peter and Paul, both formed in the Jewish tradition, would understand their
importance and would make these theological emphases and narratives part of the
initiation teaching for Gentiles. Happily, in our view, baptism and communion are
also practices relevant for both women and men.

c. While there was not agreement about the place of the law in the life of the emerging
Jesus movement, the compromise included the understanding that the traditional
rules for “aliens” who wanted to live in the Hebrew community would remain in
place for Gentile converts [i.e. they would not eat meat dedicated to idols or killed
in pagan ways—such meat was often later sold in the marketplace—and also they
would reject fornication]. These were not just a sop to the traditionalists. James calls
them “essentials.” The regulations were important in order for Jews and Gentiles in
the community to be able to eat together and in order to make a clear witness in the
context of Greek and Roman religious cultures that these communities were loyal to
Yahweh and the exalted Jesus—not to other gods. They also wanted to uphold covenant faithfulness in the family in relation to these foreign, neighboring cultures.

So what might we glean from this early Christian narrative for decision making in our church conferences today regarding the performance of gay marriage by Mennonite pastors? I’d like to leave you with two questions—and I’d be interested in hearing your responses.

• The decision regarding circumcision was not made by local congregations alone (in either Jerusalem or Antioch) but in conversation and discernment at what we would call a conference level. This is not just of strategic importance but is a matter of the nature of the church and the gift of the Holy Spirit. A local congregation is not in itself the “body of Christ.” The Spirit of Jesus was given to the church, a body that extends far beyond any one congregation or denomination. This suggests that if we truly want to allow the Holy Spirit to work on and in us we need to value and engage the larger body of Christ—including interchurch and global levels—as we proceed in local decision making on matters that impact the whole church. In this way we open the way for the Holy Spirit to transform us and others beyond our imaginings. How much time and energy are we willing to invest in deep listening and engagement beyond our local congregations?

• Second, what would represent a genuine compromise in our conferences in relation to the performance of gay marriage by Mennonite pastors? What are the underlying essentials that we can agree to honor together? We might also ask, what are we willing to compromise?

Near the end of the meeting James, a respected leader, summarized what he believed was a reasonable compromise, a way forward and said, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit
and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials . . .” In Acts we find the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus—all over the place causing havoc and resolving conflicts. God’s Spirit was the source of astonishing miracles and conversions, of visions and bold prophetic preaching. The Spirit initiated prison breaks and missionary journeys, and was evident in the community's wisdom in choosing the right people to assist the apostles. The Holy Spirit warned Paul against traveling in certain areas and of upcoming persecution; the Holy Spirit is not to be lied to (Ananias and Sapphira). The Spirit of Jesus was given to those who obeyed God, whose hearts and minds were circumcised, who spoke in tongues and praised God, who in time came to consensus over urgent matters. Our forebears in Jerusalem were convinced that the Spirit of their resurrected and exalted messiah Jesus was present and evident in the unanimous resolution of a profound conflict regarding faithful practice, a way forward that emerged through testimony, deep listening, debate, discussion and compromise. It is a story that offers us hope.

The Holy Spirit still alights on God's church today in these various ways. The Holy Spirit hovers as we, like the differing Jews and Gentiles who first made up the body of Christ, remember our baptisms, sincerely and joyfully eat and drink the Lord’s Supper, offer deep listening, and live compassionately together in the name of Jesus.