

Acts 15 And The Bifurcation Of Gospel Movements

A Missional White Paper

Abstract

When the gospel of the Kingdom comes to a cultural context, a set of secondary features typically emerge over time which become part of 'the message' going forward. As a result, both the believer and the hearer become confused as to what is core in both the essence and the dimensions of the gospel. The movement of the gospel from the Jewish scene to the Gentile scene, recorded in Acts, provides essential, and mostly overlooked, insights in how to separate our cultural wrappings from the gospel itself. And further, illustrates how to suspend these wrappings and move into new contexts with a more pure message about Jesus. Whenever this does not happen, we observe a decay into 'religion.' When it does happen, the transforming, life-giving gospel thrives and extends relationally to, in and through all kind of contexts. Acts 15 provides missional leadership a template for accommodating cultural diversity and the extension of the gospel to every nation.

Western Christendom As Cultural Wrapping

We are living in an era when Kingdom-centered missiology is redefining the constructs of our ecclesiology, and it is certainly long overdue. Kingdom mission is redefining church all over the world.

It is no longer appropriate to start with a discussion of the relevance of the church, when the term itself is so narrowly used in the scriptures and so broadly confused in cultures worldwide, particularly the West.

The need to begin first with the ultimate intentions of the Kingdom has never been more profound.

The church in the West is among the most syncretized in the world and has evolved to become a substantial institutional force in some nations, with varying degrees of adherence to the core ethos and message of Christ. And, while many adherents to denominationally sponsored congregational churches and mission societies have a deep and sincere faith, it is also a trend that those structures are proving neither sustainable nor fruitful. Indeed, many adherents are leaving organized churchianity in order to preserve their faith, and as a step of obedience to the leading of God's Spirit.

The Old And The New

Acts 15 provides us insights and a precedent for how to think rightly about the legitimate birthing of a new expression of the Kingdom within an existing expression.

Whenever an institution or organization seeks to 'contain' *the new* within *the old* there is a defacto risk of still birth. It may be happening far more than we realize. Imagine, what if the early Jewish Christ followers from the Pharisaic tradition had succeeded in insisting that Gentile converts be circumcised!¹

If it were not for the Jerusalem council, portrayed in Acts 15, the movement of the gospel among Gentiles could have looked very different.

The challenge for any established Kingdom expression (denomination, organization, congregation, etc.) is that it can quickly forget what inspired its conception and growth.

Acts 15 reveals how a Jewish-based-faith metamorphosed into a Christ-centered faith

Acts 15 shows how first generation Christ followers from one tradition can make room for new followers to emerge into other traditions

Acts 15 was preoccupied on what was central to gospel messaging, not preserving or defending secondary cultural distinctions

Acts 15 was a watershed in helping Kingdom citizens distinguish how to suspend secondary cultural differences for the sake of the gospel

Acts 15 gives us a process for recognizing how new movements can be birthed and blessed

Acts 15 is not a one-time occurrence, but a pattern for Kingdom advance through the ages, through nations and even family networks and neighborhoods

Acts 15 gives us tools and insights for how to preserve the purity of the gospel of the Kingdom as it moves from one cultural setting to another

Acts 15 alerts us to how invisible our own culture is to ourselves, but how problematic it can be for others and for the gospel

A Cascade Of Meaning From Acts 15

There are many elements and nuances that come from this historical council:

1. It confirms that what Peter experienced in Joppa, the account of the 'sheet coming down' in Acts 11, which had a transforming impact on his ministry perspective.²
2. It shows how the law must now be interpreted through the person and work of Christ, and not the other way around.³
3. It elevates the primary influence for informed God-centered choice, not to the informed will of man, but the mind illumined by the indwelling Holy Spirit.⁴
4. Field data confirmed that Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. This was cause for celebration since most of the first generation of converts were of Jewish origin.⁵
5. The fact of these Gentile conversions was problematic for the believers who had a Pharisaic tradition, who were insisting on circumcision as a marker for faith.⁶
6. The Jerusalem council of Acts 15 was a nexus for hermeneutical confusion. It should have been about how to 'interpret Christ' in the light of the field reports, not how to interpret Moses in the light of Pharisaic tradition and bias.⁷
7. This council represented an inflection point in the flow of God's revelation of the scope of the new covenant in Christ, by helping to define which items had continuity vs. discontinuity between the old and the new covenants. e.g. circumcision, etc.⁸
8. Beyond the one time Jew-Gentile distinction in the first generation church, this passage provides for us a template that can facilitate necessary bifurcations in real time, and for the future.
9. The entire incident affirmed that there were two legitimate expressions of the message of Christ in that day, holding in common the gospel of the Kingdom, which Jesus preached. The Jewish believer track and the bifurcating Gentile

believer track were both real, contextual and messy. One track was not superior or to be preferred to the other. They each had origins in complex multi-faceted and differing contexts.⁹

10. Acts 15 anticipates that the movement of the Kingdom over generations to come would lead to such bifurcations from time to time, if not routinely.

Definition of Bifurcation

Definition of *bifurcation*: the point or area at which something divides into two branches or parts.¹⁰

Bifurcation is common to the realm of biology. We see it within the anatomy of the lungs. Inversely, we see it in how the branches of a Maple tree emerge. The development of the blood circulatory systems from embryo to mature adult in an animal, is another such example. Imagine an elephant with just a large aorta connected to the heart pump, but no branching of bifurcating blood vessels to supply oxygen and nutrients to the extremities of the body!

Bifurcation is an organic norm to a growing expression, not the exception. It is about branching out. It is true for the bodies of turtles and elephants and human bodies, and it is true for the expansion of the gospel.

The Presenting Issue in Jerusalem

First, let's imagine how the 'presenting issue' in Acts 15:1 could have worked out.

A Christ follower from a Pharisaic tradition chooses to circumcise male children as a sign of personal faith out of a Jewish family tradition. In that sense he does it as a personal choice and out of a cultural memory or family preference. He may or may not be aware as a New Testament believer that it adds nothing to his standing with Christ. That is point one!

The extension of this point is that it would be *expressly wrong* for this man to insist on circumcision as a sign for Gentile believers with which to comply. Full stop.

The lifestyle choice of this believer is just that. He has freedom, but must not confuse it as the other man's *obligation* in Christ. In other words, one is free to circumcise and the other is free not to, in this context.

A Man(ifestation) Called Mordecai

I will use the name Mordecai to symbolize a Kingdom-sensitive Jew who is a Christ follower and who, like his namesake in the book of Esther, even understands exile and pilgrimage themes.

He comes, as we all do, with his package of background, belief structure, biases and preferences. Mordecai is probably best to operate in his own cultural scene. When there are a lot of Mordecai's around, they represent a force to contend with, in that a bundle of habits, traditions and preferences travel together in this 'community.' Everyone else is, effectively, an 'outsider.'

We must remember that the first generation followers of Christ were a unique bunch. As one of them, our fictitious Mordecai learned that it was not always clear what was to remain and what was to be left behind for the sake of following Christ.

It is the question of what is to continue, and what is not to continue. Do I still worship at the Temple? Do I keep offering sacrifices? Do I avoid eating what Leviticus called unclean animals? Do I keep circumcising my male sons? etc.

The question of continuity-discontinuity is profound. In Christ there is continuity between the covenants to love and obey God, love one's neighbor, etc. but what does Mordecai do with all the other things he has inherited? And, what is the 'good news' he is going to pass along? e.g. Come to Jesus + the works of the law. Or, come to Jesus + adopt my culture or church traditions? Or simply, come to Jesus and walk with Him and others who do so.

It is not always clear what is to be left behind. If anything, our human tendency is to add to the gospel with lavish amounts of our cultural background, almost unconsciously.

We see this no more clearly than with the roots of the clergy-laity distinction that has bound up Christendom.

Clergy-Laity Model As Cultural Construct

The historical development of the clergy-laity distinction in the Roman Catholic Church which successfully followed into Protestant denominations and mission agencies is not strictly a Jew-Gentile equivalence, but bears some similarity, in that a new leadership structure, borrowed from the Roman governance scene, became a fixed norm.

The flat structure of koinonia in the New Testament facilitated by the 30+ “one anothers” and the mobile and local expressions of APEST (Eph 4:11-12) leadership were all that were needed for dynamic movement of the gospel throughout the world.

When Constantine baptized the Roman civilization in 300s AD, the APEST dynamic of the early church was squeezed into a pyramidal hierarchy, reflecting civil government of the day, and evolved such that in many traditions today we see a dominance of the T (teacher) leader in denominations, congregations and organizations.

At best, what was left after the clergy-laity distinction set in was apEST, and at worst and in most cases ..eST or ...sT orT with no AP except in nominal form.

Holy Robes, Holy Days, Holy Buildings

Mordecai’s community may dress and gather with certain practices, acknowledge certain days of the calendar as special and unconsciously add all this as an unspoken bundle of obligation and expectation for the new convert to adopt. But, Mordecai loves his friends and is committed to the lost. Imagine that he wins to Christ his friend Stephanus. Stephanus is from another culture altogether, be it Gentile/secular/ethnic or whatever.

A Man(ifestation) Called Stephanus

Stephanus loves Christ and deeply cares for his friend Mordecai, beyond words. But, the incubator into which Stephanus was introduced involves several customs and habits in Mordecai’s world which Stephanus cannot find supported directly or by inference in the Bible.

Eventually Stephanus realizes that in order to thrive in Christ he has to break out of Mordecai’s world, which has put too many rules, customs and expectations on him to be life-giving.

Stephanus leaves the fellowship.

Mordecai experiences this as relational betrayal or rebellion. Stephanus tries several times to assure him that what is in play here is not personal, but a response of obedience for him. He seeks to bless Mordecai, and would love Mordecai’s blessing, but that is withheld.

Stephanus moves into a period of isolation and obscurity, trusting God for new friends for the journey. He seeks to be right with all men,¹¹ but is now largely tagged as an outsider to that fellowship. The withholding of blessing from Mordecai makes it feel like he has been excommunicated, even if he has not been officially.

On a deeper level, Mordecai did not recognize that Stephanus was a called and gifted person in the APE side of the APEST bouquet.¹² He loved people deeply and handled the Scriptures carefully. Mordecai was also a godly, seasoned person deep in the Word, but in the ST spectrum, and was suspicious of any reference to the A and P, the apostolic and prophetic for today, because he was wary of so much abuse and silliness among many who claim those functions.

Mordecai's group should have or could have blessed Stephanus forward to create a new expression for doing Kingdom in his new context. Instead, Stephanus went forward without support from his home base context. He tried to stay but no one in leadership, nor even *he* in the early seasons, recognized that a bifurcation was in the works! An organic Kingdom bifurcation was quietly emerging.

Indeed, Stephanus could have branched off with new freedoms and remain relationally connected at the organic level of leadership encouragement and support. But a gulf emerged between them.

Unity In Diversity

Organically, all true ministry is rooted back in Christ. We who labor in Christ are bifurcated out of many spiritual generations, since Abraham.¹³ In that sense, though there are many bifurcations, there is only one body of Christ. So there is always a unity in Christ which is organic, though bifurcations continue.

However, organizationally, there are times when the requirements of 'membership' may mean that I cannot be a member. e.g. to be a member of one congregation I was part of many years ago there was a statement of faith but also a position of abstinence from alcohol by which to abide. And, while I might have an occasional drink the situation proposed a dilemma to me as a young follower of Christ.

I knew that the Scriptures forbade drunkenness, but did not teach abstinence. Yet, I succumbed to their abstinence position and taught it to others, despite some 140 references in the bible which infer moderate use of alcohol. I had to import social and health rationale to defend abstinence because the scriptural basis was not there. I was a Stephanus in a Mordecai world. This experience taught me how cultures are capable of ignoring/twisting scripture to maintain cultural 'order.'

The entangled issue was that well-intended teaching pastors were controlling their congregations doctrine and liquid consumption, enforced by membership roles in a pyramidal structure, backed up by a non-profit legal charter.

This bible teaching denomination was reaching and helping a lot of people, but it ultimately was not a place where a Stephanus could stay and thrive and be fruitful. He could only be compliant to the status quo, and stay if he would become a Mordecai.

Culture Wars

I grew up in a home without faith and discovered Christ at age 20 in a campus ministry context. Having studied biology I was grounded in an atheistic worldview until that time. The idea of going to seminary was thought of as a higher calling than science, so off I went with a big black Scofield Dispensational Bible gifted by the congregation. Little did I know that it was a Mordecai training centre. They didn't quite know what to do with me, as most everyone was graduating out as a teaching pastor, and I couldn't figure that out.

After graduation I sought out the campus context where I came to faith, as it seemed to be freer.

Soon I found myself and young family signed up 'full time' to go and pioneer a new campus work. It was really oikos (church) planting, but could not be called that. It involved going to Mordecai type congregations to raise financial support, in order to try and help more Stephanus types on campus come to faith, plus to help rescue the faith of 'burned out on religion' children of Mordercai.

God blessed and many did come to faith. Over the years I was asked to recruit and serve more staff (clergy), raise more money, learning compliance to the history and tradition of this group which was rich in many ways. I experienced that serving the needs and expectations among many staff in fixed operating patterns all while trying to maintain Kingdom focus was daunting and unsustainable.

One day the government challenged our charter as a religious order, which was the basis for our clergy housing tax credit. Some five years were spent dying on that hill, including appearing in Federal Tax Court. We eventually won a complete win for our staff, but distraction to our Kingdom mission was a consequence of the total package we were culturally bought into. Defending our identity as a religious order by the definition of the Income Tax Act was a battle front that was costly in terms of time, energy and dollars. At the time, it seemed like Caesar was against us as a 'Christian organization.' It was a tempest in a teapot, looking back.

During this period I came to see how the layers we add to our mission, can take on a life of their own and require maintenance far beyond our original intents. Clergy housing is one such layer which denominations and agencies have made the norm. Fundraising culture adds another heavy layer. Tax deductible giving adds another layer. Tax free congregational buildings another layer. Clergy-laity distinctions another layer. Mordecai wears so many layers that it is sometimes hard to see the real heart of Mordecai under the layers! I, arguably, excelled as a Mordecai.

New Sustainable Forms

Parallel to all this, a number of peers within the organization were convinced from scripture that we needed to plant new sustainable forms for the Kingdom. We needed the freedom to go and plant small fellowships among the lost, what some call local churches.

While everyone who jumped in at the start were enthusiastic, we found out how hard it was to make this transition.

We had sought the support of our international team, board and fellow staff over an 18 month period, but what we thought we could birth and keep in the organization was a Stephanus bifurcation. We were in Acts 15 territory and didn't know it!

One of the biggest threats to keeping this fledgling work inside the organization was the threat it potentially posed to the donor support of some staff who were its early enthusiasts, until learning a price would have to be paid to be in this bifurcated expression. i.e. financial security in a clergy role would need to be surrendered and willingness to find/create work in the marketplace as an alternative.

I was part of a small circle that bifurcated with this vision outside the organization, which involved starting over, once it was clear it would not move forward within.

What we found in the new workgroup, this Stephanus expression, was:

1. Pioneering was tough work and many did not factor the degree of risk in repositioning.
2. The distance between ideation and implementation was huge. Verbal risk-taking was no substitute for experimentation, execution, failure and trying again.
3. The work of the Stephanus initiative, largely house churches in our context, became misunderstood as a reaction to the work of congregations and a counter-point to the organization.
4. We were no longer part of the 'circle of trust' among the Mordecai leadership circle of which I was once a part, though many others encouraged our steps of faith.

There was no Jerusalem council at the key inflection point we were all at!

What have been some of the lessons learned repositioning for the Kingdom?

1. Our move into the marketplace has been a discovery of putting all our resources at risk in order to learn how to be value-creators on marketplace terms with others. (Our focus has been in office rental market.)
2. The marketplace puts us on level ground with the people we meet and serve and work with. To seek the peace and prosperity of the city.¹⁴
3. Moving into the marketplace has deprogrammed our habits and expectations coming from the clergy-laity environment. e.g. reorienting to not imagining everyone as a donor (my benefactor) to imagining the opposite, etc.

4. Finding that the scriptural APEST leader pattern provides a template for local, and trans-local initiatives as well as long-distance missional relationships.

Can Mordecai organizations birth and keep Stephanus movements? I believe that it is theoretically possible if there is a real depth of maturity and experience to process issues in an Acts 15 way. However, this is not always possible.

Organizations are always in flux, leaders can be in transition or even crisis at times, setbacks occur, etc. Sometimes there is simply not the leader energy required to work through all the issues, even if they really care. This is one big reason why Mordecai works cannot manage the Stephanus leaders or expressions that emerge.

It takes additional maturity to recognize the bifurcation, and be willing to release it with real favour and blessing, and not lay on it a burden to stay within, comply with all kinds of layers and quietly acquiesce. A Mordecai leader, which I became in spades, loses sight of the customs, leadership paradigms, financial considerations, calendar obligations which silently become part of the total package to be in that congregation, agency or whatever. The Stephanus expression can be quietly choked within, if not permitted to launch to the outside. Trying to keep it within, for good motives, can be the kiss of death in the end.

APEST & Bifurcating Expressions

Bifurcations can take many different forms. Sometime they follow an emerging ethnic track, a demographic opportunity, a people group or etc. Generally, I would put forward that it will be prophetic (P) yearnings that speak to a need, e.g. we need to reach the Muslims in our city, or teens in the inner city, or a First Nations community in Australia. It will be the entrepreneurial apostolic (A) types who imagine ways to win relationships and win a hearing. The evangelists (E) weave into that, and shepherds (S) and teachers (T) (not many¹⁵) follow in time. APEST emerges! The bifurcation thrives and extends God's Kingdom!

The AP is key to getting things started in the new thrust. If there is no A, there is a good chance it will not succeed. Sometimes we don't know if we have an A in place, just a heart to innovate and serve, but we still need to risk sponsoring the bifurcation for their learning and ours.

I believe that in many ways the new Stephanus expression will one day become a new Mordecai expression as layers settle in and new leaders emerge.

Any Mordecai expression has the potential to launch many Stephanus expressions in its history and should expect this, pray for this and embrace this as an underlying organic work of God, validating new field data and making room for new APEST leaders to emerge ... with freedom to succeed, to fail, to create their new support systems, to not report in, etc.

Eight Principles For Mordecai Sponsorship Of Stephanus

1. Recognize that new field reports need to be given the benefit of the doubt. Go and visit the new converts in their context, but don't bring your package or look for validation of you, your role or organization.
2. Listen carefully to the frontier workers. Discern what their bouquet is within the APEST mix.
3. Do not lay organizational burdens on the new work.
4. Encourage separate financial strategies for the emerging work, even if it is costly for you.
5. Do not permit organizational strategy to shape the frontier expression. Be willing to lose staff and donation revenue as they redeploy using new vehicles.
6. Recognize that past Stephanus types that left the organization years ago were not always getting sidetracked, anti-organizational or in rebellion. Grant that some could have been dying on the vine inside the organization and both they and you did not recognize this at the time.
7. Be willing to own missteps that may have taken place on your watch and that these brothers would be well served by you reaching out. Make the effort to bring estranged original parties together to process the Acts 15 matters in play as well as any personal offences in play.
8. See yourself as a champion of new gospel movements that will outgrow your capacity to lead, manage or be relevant to!

Kingdom continuity

What Acts 15 offers is the hope of each generation and each iteration capturing the essential dynamic of the Kingdom.

Jesus came to preach the gospel of the Kingdom, which in every generation and in every organization becomes encrusted by layers of barnacles that require a shake up. The new wine of the Kingdom does not stay long in old wineskins.

The messaging of the gospel requires our highest attention. We can no more settle for a reductionist *4 Spiritual Laws* or *Bridge To Life* message than we can a revisionist health and wealth gospel or a high and lofty formulaic sermon approach as adequate to express the glory of God and the fullness of His Kingdom.

The bifurcations are not an end in themselves but a safety mechanism, anticipated by God, for the movement of the gospel over generations and the purity of the message and its ability to jump over the walls of culture, religion and ethnicity.

Even at a local level, bifurcations must be nurtured in order to follow where the gospel is moving relationally among the lost.

What we must not underestimate is that every generation is fighting a battle of the bible and a battle for the purity of the gospel. When you no longer feel there is a

fight for the gospel, that is a sign you may be acquiescing to a layered bundle which is not working and not bearing fruit.

Acts 15 sponsored bifurcations may be the only hope for the movement of the gospel among the lost wherever established ministries have plateaued. A new kind of bifurcation-sponsoring leadership is required characterized by a maturity, a depth in the scriptures, a discernment about people and the ability to be nimble. It requires a capacity to own our histories and our structures, but not be owned by them, for the sake of a Kingdom that is pulsing in these days so that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."¹⁶

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Ross and Sandy Rains are involved in the rental of office properties in their local marketplace as a context from which to 'rethink Kingdom' and help facilitate a network of friends who are making disciples through house fellowships, marketplace and online outreach.

References:

- 1 Acts 15:1, 5
- 2 Acts 11:1-18
- 3 Acts 15:10-11
- 4 Acts 15:8
- 5 Acts 15:3
- 6 Acts 15:5
- 7 Acts 15:6-11
- 8 Acts 15:19
- 9 Acts 15:15; Amos 9:11-12
- 10 www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bifurcation
- 11 Rom 12:18
- 12 Eph 4:11-12
- 13 Rm 4:16-17
- 14 Jer 29:7
- 15 Jas 3:1
- 16 Hab 2:14