

# HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love  
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

8

SIGNS AND WONDERS:  
The Gentiles and the Council of Jerusalem

ACTS 15:1–33

**National Gay and Lesbian**  
**Task Force**



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by David R. Weiss

This resource was created for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources in partnership with the ecumenical Welcoming Church Programs:

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Dedicated to

**Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.**

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as  
Executive Director and National Field Organizer  
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers  
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),  
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the  
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

## Introduction to Reader’s Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader’s Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn’t require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader’s theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader’s Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader’s Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God’s abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader’s Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God’s surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader’s Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants’ intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the “cultural sensitivities” that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word “Jewish” isn’t quite accurate; historically, we’d need to say “Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons” as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God’s surprising welcome, it’s an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it’s very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news” — *it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss  
Easter 2013

# Introduction

This script invites you to explore Acts 15 from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Luke, the evangelist and author of Acts, (2) Paul, an apostle, (3) Barnabas, a missionary, (4) Peter, a disciple, (5) James, a disciple, (6) Silas, a missionary, and (7) the Narrator. The Narrator part can be shared by two persons, or you can combine a couple smaller parts in order to accommodate a group size of either six or eight.

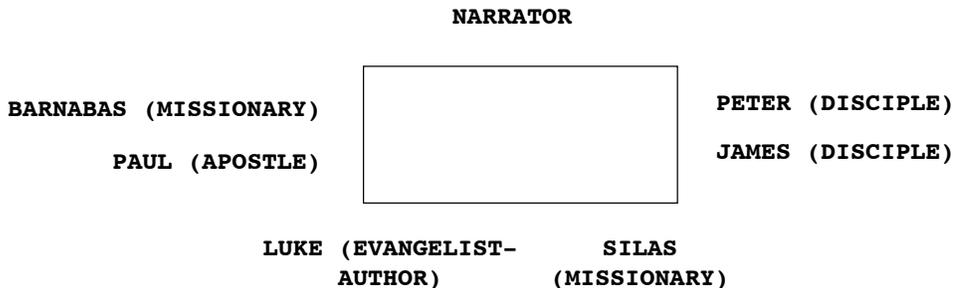
The three largest roles are Paul, James, and the Narrator. The roles of Luke and Barnabas are a bit smaller, and Peter and Silas have the smallest roles. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

(Note: like too many of the biblical narratives themselves, this script features only male characters. I deliberated whether to create/insert a female character here, but although women undoubtedly played a more significant role in the early church than is often recorded, in this passage it does seem that the main voices were likely all male. As in all the scripts, people of any gender should feel free to take on any role. ~DW)

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Acts 15 and introducing each brief conversation. The Narrator likely hasn't seen any of this material before either, so this person isn't the "expert," their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to free to take notes along the way, but follow the script until you're invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn't a play where the goal is "perfect performance;" rather, it's a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of Luke's text.

**Suggestion:** *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Peter and James to one side and Barnabas and Paul to the other side. Luke and Silas might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



**READER'S THEATER SCRIPT****NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit Luke's record of the Council of Jerusalem and reflect on it from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

**PAUL:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Paul**, the most well-known missionary in the early church. Paul was not one of Jesus' disciples; in fact, he was a devout Jew who initially persecuted the early church. But his life was re-directed after a vision of the risen Jesus in which he was sent to preach to the Gentiles (non-Jews). He became the loudest voice in the early church for their full welcome into the Christian church without needing to become observant Jews first.

**BARNABAS:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Barnabas**, an early Jewish Christian and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

**NARRATOR:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator**. In this role I will read much of the direct biblical material. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

**PETER:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Peter**, one of the original twelve disciples. Peter was often seen as a leader of the disciples (and of the early church). Along with the apostle Paul, Peter gets special credit for helping to open the church to the Gentiles.

**JAMES:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **James**, one of the original twelve disciples. James (along with Peter and John) is portrayed in the Gospels as one of the "inner three" disciples and

was regarded as a particularly central leader in the early church.

**SILAS:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Silas**, one of Paul's missionary companions.

**LUKE:**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'll be reading the part of **Luke**, the author of the Gospel According to Luke and the Book of Acts. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments.

**NARRATOR:**

The Council of Jerusalem occurred around the year 50, about 20 years after the ministry of Jesus and still quite early in the church's life. Most Christians at this time were still observant Jews, meaning they regarded themselves as Jewish in every sense of the word. And they viewed their commitment to Jesus as the (Jewish) Messiah as an expression of their *Jewish* faith.

**LUKE:**

Remember, Jesus himself was an observant Jew – as were all his original followers. His occasional departures from the Law (like his choices to heal on the Sabbath or to interact with outcasts) created such a fuss precisely because he was seen, even by his adversaries, as a *faithful Jew*.

**NARRATOR:**

But as Paul's missionary work extended farther into the Roman Empire, more and more Gentiles became followers of Jesus. This raised the question for which there was *no clear precedent*: does a Gentile need to become *Jewish* in order to follow Jesus? It was clear that if a Gentile converted to Judaism they needed to adopt the observance of the Torah, but... was choosing to follow Jesus the same thing as becoming Jewish? We might easily think, "Of course not!" But, since every original follower of Jesus was Jewish, the answer was not nearly so clear 2,000 years ago.

**LUKE:**

Lastly, remember that I wrote both my Gospel and Acts around the years

80-85. So I had the benefit of 30-plus years of *historical hindsight*; I knew something of how these issues had played out by the time I related how they began. Of course, I also had the advantage of those same 30-plus years of *theological insight*. In those early years the Spirit's guidance was often as "subtle" as it must seem for you today.

**PAUL:**

Think about it: just 30-40 years ago some of you were asking whether to ordain women (some of you probably still are). Go back another 20 years before that, and the question of civil rights for African American people divided many churches within themselves. By now the Spirit's leading might seem pretty clear to you on both of those issues, but it wasn't always so clear. So don't underestimate how subtly the Spirit's guidance unfolds in the life of the church. What was true for you 30-50 years ago, was just as true for us 2,000 years ago. And I suspect it's still true on other issues today.

**NARRATOR:**

Let's begin the passage now. We start at the beginning of chapter 15: "Then some Jewish Christians came down to Antioch and began to teach the believers, 'Unless you follow exactly the traditions of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (Acts 15:1 *TIB*)

**PAUL:**

Can you believe this?! I've been carrying the gospel across the Empire for more than a decade. Beginning in synagogues with Jews, but convinced as well that this news was just as good for Gentiles. If we're truly saved by grace, then no matter how important circumcision is to the Jews - I am, after all, Jewish myself - it *cannot* be set up as a requirement for salvation.

**BARNABAS:**

But these characters from Judea - Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, no doubt - brought words to our churches that were not gospel at all. They sowed doubt in the hearts of those to whom we had preached grace.

**JAMES:**

I'm the leader of the Jerusalem church. We never "dispatched" those men to go and stir up trouble. We knew Paul's message of a Torah-free

path to salvation was unsettling to many. As Jews, our whole identity as children of God is bound up with the details of the Torah. We didn't see it as a burden put upon us. It was... more like a ritual of courtship between God and us. Not always easy, but in fulfilling each of the 613 commandments in the Torah we *wed ourselves to God*. So we wondered – some of us *anguished* – over how this man, Paul, could be so quick to say “Grace, only grace, only faith, nothing else.” I wasn't surprised to learn that some of our members had gone down to Antioch to challenge his teaching.

**NARRATOR:**

We continue with the passage: “Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed with them and hotly debated their position. Finally, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas and some others should go up to see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question. All the members of the church saw them off, and as they made their way through Phoenicia and Samaria, Paul and Barnabas told how the Gentiles had been converted. Their story was received with great joy among the sisters and brothers.” (Acts 15:2-3 *TIB*)

**PAUL:**

I'll be honest; I was disappointed that the Gentile Christians at Antioch were shaken so quickly in their faith. I said, “I am astonished that you have so soon turned away from the One who called you by the grace of Christ, and have turned to a different gospel – one which is really not ‘good news’ at all. Some who wish to alter the Good News of Christ must have confused you. For if we – or even angels from heaven – should preach to you a different gospel, one not in accord with the gospel we delivered to you, let us – or them – be cursed!”\* (Galatians 1:6-8 *TIB*)

\*These are Paul's actual words written to the Galatians facing a similar crisis of faith.

**BARNABAS:**

Luke says we “strongly disagreed with” and “hotly debated” these men – that's for sure! Paul called them “dogs,” “troublemakers,” and “mutilators” (Philippians 3:2 *TIB*). I can still see their eyes widening when he exclaimed, “You're so intent on wielding the knife against these people so new in their faith – how I wish that when you

were being circumcised as babes the knife had *slipped and taken the whole thing off!*"\*\*

**PAUL:**

Immediately, we resolved to send a delegation, led by Barnabas and myself. We would settle this once and for all. Many in the church, even many of the Jewish believers, were overjoyed at the conversions of the Gentiles. They saw that the hand of God moved mightily across the region.

\*\*Paul's words here are a vivid paraphrase of actual words written to the Galatians when he was battling those in that community who would make circumcision a requirement of Christian faith. He didn't mince words; The Inclusive Bible translates it thus: "And as for those who keep harassing Gentile Christians to submit to the Law and become circumcised: may their knives slip!" (Galatians 5:12 *TIB*)

**NARRATOR:**

Our passage continues as the delegation reaches Jerusalem: "When Paul's group arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by that church, and by the apostles and the elders, to whom they gave an account of all that God had accomplished through them. Some of the converted Pharisees got up and demanded that such Gentiles be forced to convert to Judaism first, before being baptized, and be told to follow the law of Moses. Accordingly, the apostles and the elders convened to look into the matter." (Acts 15: 4-6 *TIB*)

**BARNABAS:**

We were excited to share the rich harvest of hearts we had been blessed to receive among the Gentiles. But we were immediately challenged by these Pharisees – as though we were harvesting fruit that wasn't really ripe.

**PETER:**

Are you surprised that there were *Christian* Pharisees? The earliest Christians came from almost every segment of the Jewish population. As Jews, our hunger for justice and faith and for the Messiah was very real. While Jesus' message resonated most with the peasants, it certainly echoed in the hearts of others as well. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both Pharisees and sympathetic to Jesus. So was Gamaliel, who offered his voice of tolerance for the early Christians before the Jewish council of the Sanhedrin.

**PAUL:**

I myself was a Pharisee – indeed, near the end of my life, while on trial before Herod Agrippa, I declared not that I “once was,” but that “I *have lived* the life of a Pharisee.” (Acts 26:5 *TIB*)

Nicodemus appears three times in the Gospel of John (3:1-21; 7:45-52; and 19:38-42). Joseph of Arimathea appears alongside Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (19:38-42) and in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 15:42-47; Matthew 27:57-61; and Luke 23:50-56). Gamaliel appears in the Book of Acts (5:34-39; 22:5).

**LUKE:**

The Pharisees saw themselves as inheriting the mantle of the prophets. In contrast to the priests, whose “turf” was the Temple, the Pharisees studied the Torah and strove to weave devotion to the Torah into daily life. While some were exceedingly strict, others were both practical and compassionate. Like their contemporary counterparts, rabbis, they were as likely to be warm and wise as to be rigid and legalistic; you can’t paint every Pharisee with the same brush.

**JAMES:**

But these particular Pharisees, the ones taking issue with Paul and Barnabas here, felt that every follower of Jesus was called to keep the Torah with great care. They took deep offense at Paul’s suggestion otherwise. But Paul was bringing far more Gentile converts to follow Jesus than we were managing to convert from among the Jews. These two branches of the church were on a collision course if we didn’t find a way to reconcile them.

**NARRATOR:**

Peter’s words to the assembly are the first ones reported, beginning with verse 7: “After much discussion, Peter said to them, ‘Friends, you know that God chose me from your midst a long time ago – so that the Gentiles would hear the message of the Gospel from my lips and believe. God, who can read everyone’s heart, bore witness to this by granting the Holy Spirit to them as the Spirit has been granted to us. God made no distinction, but purified their hearts as well by means of faith. Why, then, do you put God to the test by trying to place on the shoulders of these converts a yoke which neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? But just as we believe we are saved through the grace of Jesus Christ, so are they.’ At this, the whole assembly fell silent.” (Acts 15:7-12a *TIB*)

**PETER:**

Remember, I had received the vision of unclean food – food that God declared clean – leading me to go preach to Cornelius, the Gentile. There, with my own eyes and ears, I saw God pour out the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his entire household – even while they were all uncircumcised and in other ways unobservant of the Torah. Yet God showed me – and all the believers from Joppa who were with me that day – that God can see clean hearts even where we see “unclean” bodies, *and that God’s sight renders the whole person clean.*

The story of Peter’s vision and his subsequent encounter with Cornelius is recorded in Acts 10:1-48 and is the subject of Session 7 in this series.  
~DW

**PAUL:**

I appreciated the forcefulness of Peter’s words. He and I did not always see eye-to-eye on these matters – I remember a particularly painful encounter earlier in Antioch – but on this day his voice was clear: after the ministry and message of Jesus, to set up *anything* as a requirement for salvation was “putting God to the test.”

When Peter came to Antioch, however I [Paul] opposed him to his face, since he was manifestly in the wrong. His custom had been to eat with the Gentiles but, after certain friends of James arrived, he stopped doing this and kept away from them altogether, for fear of the group that insists Gentiles must convert to Judaism first. The other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, and even Barnabas felt obliged to copy this behavior. When I saw they weren’t respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of everyone, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not a Jew. So why do you want to make the Gentiles adopt Jewish ways? We know that people aren’t justified by following the Law, but by believing in Jesus Christ.”  
(Galatians 2:11-14, 16 *TIB*)

**JAMES:**

I agree, although I wish that Peter had chosen his words a bit more carefully – more for the sake of future Jews than future Gentiles. He almost seems to be saying that the Torah is a yoke even to the Jews. It’s true that some Jews have used it as a “requirement” to be right with God – in the same way that some Christians have made all sorts of “requirements,” misrepresenting the Christian message as being about something other than grace. But it’s equally true that for many

Jews, the Torah *is* a means of grace. It *is* the way they experience the gracious claim of God on their lives.

**PAUL:**

So *all of us* (as I will argue in my Letters to the Galatians and the Romans) are saved by grace. For Jews that grace is linked to faith in the promise to Abraham in the Torah; for Christians, both Jew and Gentile, that grace is bound up with faith in the promise of Jesus. Truly, "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the offspring of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised." (Galatians 26-29 *TIB*)

**LUKE:**

After Peter was finished speaking, "[The assembly] listened to Barnabas and Paul as they described all the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them." (Acts 15:12b *TIB*)

**BARNABAS:**

"Signs and wonders." Take Peter's vision and his encounter with Cornelius. Multiply that encounter by a hundredfold or more and you begin to glimpse the signs and wonders we've seen. In our travels, we've seen Paul's words take on life. Jew and Greek at worship side by side, praying for one another. Slave and free coming to the Eucharistic meal side by side, with the world's distinctions forgotten in that holy moment. House churches where men and women serve as equal partners in God's new work. Who could have imagined such things?

**PAUL:**

We witnessed them, again and again. So as we spoke to the elders and apostles we didn't go back to the Torah or even to the prophets. While these texts proclaim a God who does new things, they can hardly describe the "new things" that God *had not yet done* at the time of their writing. I knew the Torah as well as any of those gathered for the assembly, but I knew that the question of welcome to the Gentiles could not be settled by measuring verse against verse, as though the newness of God could be limited to the fixed words on a scroll. No, the

Torah and the prophets point to a God who occasionally leaps *beyond* their pages – a God, “who gathers the diaspora [the “scattered ones”] of Israel” and who promises that “*There are others I will gather besides those already gathered.*” (Isaiah 56:8 TIB)

**BARNABAS:**

So we didn’t debate circumcision by going to the texts – there *weren’t* any specific texts that we could go to. Instead we told *stories* of *uncircumcised* believers: one after another whose lives so carried the mark of God’s presence that to insist on circumcision would have been – as Peter said – putting God to the test.

**JAMES:**

I’ll admit it. I would have preferred a *text*. It would’ve made it easier to go to my own kin and show them in black and white where it says this is okay, this is God’s will. But I also have to admit that *in the story the Torah tells* of our life with God we are seldom told in much detail about things around the next corner. Abraham received a promise, but it was *long years* before Isaac was born. Joseph was sold into slavery, and it was years before purpose could be seen in that deed.

**PETER:**

And while our ancestors showed up in Egypt as Joseph’s honored family, we wound up in bitter bondage as slaves. Later, when Moses led us out of Egypt, it wasn’t long before we started murmuring about the predictability of our life as slaves – as though that could ever be better than the unpredictability of our newfound freedom.

**PAUL:**

When Joshua was told to lead the wandering Hebrews into the land of Canaan... when David volunteered, as a mere youth, to battle the giant Goliath... when we were first sent into Exile and later brought back to our homeland...

**JAMES :**

... *There were never any texts to map out our way.* For the first thousand years of our faith we had no written texts at all – only stories told and retold. Only Spirit-filled intuitions leading us along. And even when we had texts to keep us company, their promises boiled down to these two: that God *will be faithful* and that God will be faithful *in surprising ways*. What Paul and Barnabas shared, confirmed this.

**NARRATOR :**

Then it was James' turn to address the assembly: "When [Paul and Barnabas] finished their presentation, James spoke up. 'Sisters and brothers, listen to me,' he said. 'Simon has told you how God initially became concerned about taking from among the Gentiles a people for God's name. The words of the prophets agree with this, since the scriptures say, "After that I will return and rebuild the fallen house of David; I will rebuild it from its ruins and will restore it. Then the rest of humankind, all the Gentiles who are called by my Name will look for God,' says the Most High, who makes these things which were known so long ago." It is my judgment, therefore that we shouldn't make it more difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God. We should merely write to them to abstain from anything polluted by idols, from sexual immorality and from eating meat of unbled or strangled animals. After all, for generations now Moses has been proclaimed in every town and has been read aloud in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'" (Acts 15:13-21 *TIB*)

"On that day, I will set up again the fallen tent of David. I will mend its tears and restore its ruins, and rebuild it strong as it was in the days of old." (Amos 9:11 *TIB*)

"Who announced this from the beginning, and foretold it from long ago? Was it not I, YHWH? There is no other God but me, a just and saving God – there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all of you – even those at the ends of the earth, for I am God." (Isaiah 45:21-22)

**JAMES :**

I found a text! Waiting silently in my heart, I found those words, drawn from Amos and Isaiah. Of course, they don't "prove" anything. Texts rarely do. They don't say *how* Gentiles should seek the Lord. But they reminded all of us that we have long known that God's hope reached beyond our own kin. Much as we have wished at times that only

those *just like us* – only fellow Jews and those willing to live like Jews – were God's chosen people, I reminded my fellow apostles and elders that God has always wished to choose... *everyone*.

**LUKE:**

I'm careful with my words when I write, and sometimes your English muddies what I tried to keep clear. In my original Greek, James does *not* say (as some of your translations, like the NRSV, render it), "This – (God's reaching out to the Gentiles) – agrees with the words of the prophets." As though God needs the prophets' approval to act. No, the way I wrote it, it says, "The words of the prophets agree with this – (God's reaching out to the Gentiles)." It's a small thing, but it matters. James quotes the prophets not to give God "permission," but to acknowledge that now – thanks to God's new activity – we can see in the text something we couldn't see there before.

**JAMES:**

See, Peter began the assembly with a bold declaration of God's gracious freedom: that salvation comes as a *free gift*, both to Jews and to Gentiles. Then Paul and Barnabas testified to the gracious freedom of God that they experienced in their mission to the Gentiles. Now, I'm trying to figure out the *practical implications* for this gracious freedom: *how will Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians live together in the new church?*

**SILAS:**

James is the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church. His gift was to hear all sides of an issue and then propose a wise way forward. If you read Luke's entire Book of Acts closely, you'll find that James is the only leader in the early church whose words are never challenged by another person. He didn't speak quickly, so when he did finally speak, his wisdom was evident and respected.

**JAMES:**

We agreed: no circumcision for the Gentiles. But because we knew that both Jews and Gentiles across the Roman Empire heard the teachings of the Torah regularly in the synagogues, we felt it important to identify the few things that we *would* ask of the Gentiles.

**NARRATOR:**

We'll hear more about those "few things" in a moment. First, the passages continues: "Then the apostles and elders decided, in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church, to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading members of the community. They were to deliver this letter: 'From the apostles and elders, to our Gentile sisters and brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings! We hear that some of our number, without any instructions from us, have upset you with their discussions and disturbed your peace of mind. Therefore, we have unanimously resolved to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of Jesus Christ. So we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will convey this message by word of mouth: it is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours as well, not to lay on you any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary – namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from meat of unbled or strangled animals and from fornication. You will be well advised to avoid these things. Farewell.'" (Acts 15:22-29 *TIB*)

**SILAS:**

Knowing the harm that had been done by those who preceded us in Antioch, it was decided – unanimously – to send more than just a written message. Judas (of course, *not* the man who betrayed Jesus!) and I were honored to be sent. And unanimously? That's virtually unheard of in any church, especially the early church. It shows the earnestness of the leaders to heal this rift before it widened any further.

**PAUL:**

I was mildly ecstatic. My words to the Gentiles and my calling by Christ were finally being fully confirmed. Did you hear them call me and Barnabas "beloved"? That's not how we often felt in those early years, but perhaps this did signal the start of a new day.

**PETER:**

The first crucial thing is to notice what's not even mentioned: circumcision. The debate is *over*. The subject is closed. God's

gracious freedom cannot be hindered by human rites. No further discussion needed. We asked only that the Gentiles "abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from meat of unbled or strangled animals and from fornication."

**JAMES:**

Listening in, 2,000 years later, you might think we're sneaking a few "requirements" in on the Gentiles through the back door. But that's not the case. Our stance was clear: salvation comes as a free gift, received through faith, without any other requirement. We were creating a church that would consist not only of Jews, who continued to embrace the Torah as central to their expression of faith, but also Gentiles, for whom the observance of Torah is *not* part of their faith. But these few "essentials" speak to aspects of pagan culture and belief that *do* conflict with Christian faith itself.

**BARNABAS:**

Idol worship was everywhere in the Roman Empire. Every city had temples to a handful of gods. Most were Roman, but there were temples to foreign cults, too. It was a big Empire, and there was no shortage of gods to be worshipped. In many cases, "worship" involved sacrificing an animal to a god, and often feasting on the meat or drinking the blood in an effort to fully claim the benefit of the sacrifice.

**LUKE:**

Well, if you're a Gentile Christian and you continue to "hedge your bets" by offering sacrifices to idols and sharing in temple feasts, where is your faith that *all good things* – both in this life and the next – come from God as a free gift? Even Gentiles need to make a clean break with idolatry because idolatry is *unfaith*. It's actively choosing to rest your heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace.

**SILAS:**

My task as a delegate was to help the Gentiles understand this. So... let me ask *you* Gentiles a few uncomfortable questions today. Were the clothes you're wearing made in a sweatshop? Was the meat in your freezer factory-farmed? Were the fruits and vegetables you last bought grown and harvested using excessive chemicals and poorly paid

workers? If so, I'd consider them all "things sacrificed to idols." True, you don't have a temple on every corner, but today your market-driven economy itself is like a temple. The drive to produce things as cheaply as possible and to buy as much as possible, without consideration for the toll this takes on your fellow humans, or your animals, or the earth itself... *is idolatry*. Like Luke just said, "It's actively choosing to rest your heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace." Ouch.

**LUKE:**

And, fornication. The Greek word is *porneia* (the source for your word, "pornography"), and while it can have a pretty wide range of meanings, the best translation for it is *harlotry*. The ancient Israelites used this word to describe the worship of false gods – and also to describe sex with a person to whom you have not pledged your fidelity: in other words, prostitution or adultery. In fact, *that's why it works as a metaphor for idolatry*. We Jews have pledged our fidelity to God; to chase after any other god is harlotry.

**PAUL:**

Pagan temples often featured "sacred prostitutes" – both men and women available for "temple sex." By "merging" with these prostitutes you could supposedly merge with the temple's god. In these temples harlotry happened both literally and metaphorically all the time.

**SILAS:**

That might strike you as very strange today, but think about joining in the frenzy of fans at a music concert or an athletic game, or attending a movie packed with heavy doses of graphic violence or exploitive sexuality, or playing a video game in which the goal is to kill as many "enemies" as possible. Those activities all offer vicarious experiences that have the power to shape – or misshape – your deepest values. But many Christians simply see them as part of today's culture, without seeing them as potentially at odds with your faith. Temple prostitutes were deeply embedded in Gentile culture; they could easily be taken for granted. But clearly that, too, would mean "resting their heart on the false promise of something other than God's grace."

**JAMES:**

So, now you see, these weren't a handful of "requirements" tossed in to satisfy the Jews who had wanted us to require circumcision. They weren't a compromise. Much more importantly, they clarified what was at stake in aligning their faith with Jesus – and the freedom gained by that faith.

**NARRATOR:**

Luke concludes this passage with these words: "The party left and went down to Antioch, where they called together the whole community and delivered the letter. When it was read, there was great delight at the encouragement it gave them. Judas and Silas, themselves prophets, spoke for a long time, giving encouragement and strength to the sisters and brothers. The two spent some time there, and then returned home bearing greetings of peace from the sisters and brothers to the apostles and elders who sent them." (Acts 15:30-33 *TIB*)

**SILAS:**

Luke calls me a prophet. He isn't saying that I predicted the future. He means that I was recognized within the early church as someone with the gift to *discern the leading of the Spirit* and the ability to offer "encouragement and strength" to the believers by helping them see the faithfulness of God, even when that faithfulness took new and surprising turns. Here in Antioch I helped the Gentiles see that they were indeed now part of the story of God's widening love – exactly as they were.

**LUKE:**

The Council of Jerusalem didn't settle everything once and for all. The early church was a work in progress – still is, I'm guessing. But the stories shared by Paul and Barnabas, combined with the strong words of both Peter and James, and, not least, the buffeting winds of the Spirit, all worked together to throw the doors of the church wide open. I wonder if they still are... what do you think?

\* \* \*

*[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]*

**NARRATOR:**

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you've experienced in this Reader's Theater. Many persons today find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, those struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome those who, like the Gentiles in the early church, seem so other to us today, speaking as Luke, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, Silas, or the Narrator, what would you say?*

*[Go around the circle and invite each person to say as much or as little as they wish.]*

*[Note: If more than one small group has been reading a script, this next question is a chance to briefly collect some insights that you'll share with the whole group when you re-gather. Even though each small group will have read the same narrative, each group's experience of it will have been unique, so it's important for to each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]*

**NARRATOR:**

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either this passage from Acts 15 or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
2. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
3. Of the main characters in the script (Luke, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and Silas) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
4. What difference would it make if every church went through this passage like we did?

*[Take just a few minutes to do this, recording a few thoughts to share with the whole group.]*

A final word of thanks is in order. It is both a risk and a gift to step into such close engagement with a biblical text. In these encounters with God's radical love we may well find ourselves challenged and encouraged, but we will hardly find ourselves unchanged. Thank you for taking the risk.