



Theme: Circumcision Not Required (Acts 15:1-35)

Materials: Candles, matches, bibles

The theme for this month of cells is belonging. How does one belong to a group? To a church? To Christ? Are there those in your midst who feel that they do not belong? Do you need to believe anything or behave in any way in order to belong to a Church or cell group?

welcome

See who can come up with the most ridiculous ceremony that someone would have to perform to become a member of your cell. (Don't actually ever use these ceremonies!) How would you feel if you had to perform one of these rituals the first time you came in, in order to belong to your cell group?

interact

This final week of advent, you will be lighting all four candles. Before you do, read out Luke 2:8-20, and Matthew 2:1-12. This is the story of how rich and poor, scholar and peasant came to the bedside of the newborn Christ to worship him. It is the announcement of joy and hope to a despairing and desperate world.

We have that same message today. As you light the candles, reflect on the beauty of what God has done for us, and think about how we can spread the glory of that message throughout our whole world.

Sing "O Come All Ye Faithful".

read

Read Acts 15:1-35.

Why would some people at the time of the formation of the first Christian churches be saying that new Christians needed to get circumcised? Might that not be a pretty serious obstacle for some people?

Why do you think that Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James fought so hard for the requirement of circumcision to be lifted?

What kind of things do new Christians have to do in order to belong to our Churches now? Are there certain behaviours that new members have to drop from their former lives, or new ones they have to adopt, in order to belong?

Are these requirements good, or bad? In other words, should there be requirements for belonging to the Church?

If not, what is the difference between belonging and not belonging? Can people just act however they like and still belong to the Church?

If certain requirements are necessary, who decides and how do they decide what they are?

What requirements did the Church in Acts finally decide to give to new believers?

Would you live up to these requirements? Are they requirements for belonging now? Why or why not?

What do you think of the last bit of the story, where Paul and Barnabas go their separate ways? Do we always have to agree with one another?



think

Read John 17:20-26. This prayer asks that we will be brought together in complete unity, and that by our lives and unity the world will believe and know about Jesus. How is your love for one another? How does that love play out every day? How is your love especially for those around you especially for those around you who don't "fit in" quite as well, for those who are different? How can we ensure that it is not difficult for people who are turning to God to join with us in community?

live & pray

Do you have certain personal requirements in your life for people who want to be your friend? Be honest with yourself, and take a look at your friends. Do they all resemble one another – and you – in their culture and assumptions? If so, you may well have some unspoken but very real cultural requirements to be your friend. Are these requirements good and necessary? Have you erected any unnecessary barriers for people around you, any unrealistic expectations? Ask yourself and the Lord this question, particularly with regards to people you find it difficult to be around. Does the Lord want any change in behaviour from you?

useful resources

- Book: *The Vision and the Vow*, by Pete Greig
- Book: *The Normal Christian Life*, by Watchman Nee
- Book: *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

leader's guide

There was a clash at the beginning of the Christian Church over the identity of this new "sect". Were they a branch of Judaism, or were they something new entirely? The issue came to a head because the message of Jesus was being rapidly spread amongst the Gentiles (non-Jews), and the fear was that the "Jewishness" of the movement might get lost.

Circumcision was one of the most obvious signs of being Jewish, and a fairly steep obstacle for most Gentiles wanting to convert, so some people were insisting upon it as a requirement. Had that side of the argument won, it would have reinforced within Christianity a preference of sorts for those who followed the Jewish Law and those Gentiles who were now coming in. Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James found this inequality to be unacceptable. Peter remembered how the Holy Spirit was poured out amongst some Gentiles he was ministering to (and who, as a law-observing Jew, he should not really have been around). If God would give them His Spirit, how could Peter deny that they belonged?

There were still requirements laid down, however. Not eating meat sacrificed to idols, not eating blood or strangled animals, and not being sexually immoral. Paul writes down other expectations of behaviour in his letters. The stuff about meat and blood were brought forward from the Torah Law, but are mostly discarded now. We still retain the emphasis on sexual morality, though there are people wanting to change how that is defined as well. It was the leaders of the early Christian movement, in Council, who made decisions like these. Now we often have denominational requirements for membership.