

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, May 17th 2017

The debate in Acts 15 about whether the Church should follow the Jewish practice of circumcising males as a sign of how deeply they are committed to keeping their covenant with God is laden with both meaning and context. With respect to context, the Church was new. Paul and the Apostles were concerned with growing the Church and perpetuating its message beyond their generation.

Circumcision is not only an incredibly personal and undeniable sign of adherence to the faith, it is also for some a very high price to pay for joining the faith. As with any event, if the cost of admission is too high, the organizers are left with an empty arena.

Converting the Gentiles was a priority for the early Church, and taking a softer line than the Jews on the requirement of circumcision would help in this process. It turns out that meaning could be a way to do this. While physical circumcision was certainly welcomed as a manifestation of one's commitment, it was not emphasized as much as keeping the covenant by following the teachings of Jesus. Adherence to those teachings amounted to a metaphorical circumcision – redirecting one's spirit and daily life toward Christ.

Jesus says as much in John 15 through his parable of the vine and branches. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit." Following His word not only keeps the covenant (bypassing circumcision) by keeping one on the vine of Christ, but also grows the Church (the context the early fathers worried about) by multiplying adherents as new branches on that vine. As the vine and branches grow, the Church grows.

We don't need to make the obvious comparison between circumcision in Acts 15 and pruning branches in John 15, because Jesus lets us escape that: "You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you." Indeed, His wisdom and that of the early Church fathers has been borne out – Christianity today has upwards of 2.2 billion adherents, 1.2 billion of which are Roman Catholic.

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