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ACTS: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRAXIS IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

ABSTRACT

Although early Judaism was a diverse movement, the vast majority of Jews at the time would have agreed on a set of core convictions, including the persuasion that non-Jews could not simply join the people of Israel as non-Jews. Rather, they had to become Jews. During the two or three decades after the ministry of Jesus, one early Jewish group – at least some of its members! – denounced this consensus and started to accept non-Jews, based on their belief in Jesus as Messiah. According to Acts, the change came about not by theoretical reflection, but by a new “praxis” – a new praxis not by people, but by God who accepted non-Jews as non-Jews. Theoretical reflection followed, in order to understand what had happened and to draw out the implications for non-Jews and Jews. While some early followers of Christ “integrated praxis and theory”, others drew different conclusions. This article uses the theme of integrating theory and praxis to shed light on developments in early Christianity.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the ancient sources and their modern scholarly assessment, early Judaism was a diverse movement. However, the vast majority of Jews at the time would have agreed on a set of core convictions, including the persuasion that non-Jews could not join the people of Israel as *non-Jews*. Rather, they had to become proselytes, that is, become Jews, be circumcised and keep the Law. Within two



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decades after the ministry of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, one early Jewish group – at least *some* of its members! – denounced this consensus and started to accept non-Jews as such into their communities of followers of Christ, based solely on their belief in Jesus.

Acts traces this development. In its presentation, the change came about by a series of events, by a new “praxis” – a new praxis by God who accepted non-Jews as non-Jews¹ and by people who sought to draw the conclusions from the way God was acting and leading them, that is, from this new praxis, and who sought to align the events – which they witnessed happening in their midst – with Scripture, their early Jewish tradition and heritage as well as the teaching and example of Jesus. Theoretical reflection followed practice, divine and human, in order to understand what had happened and to draw out the implications for non-Jews and Jews. To understand this development properly, the focus needs to be on God's activities and on the human learning process. This study offers some insights into the “workshop of early Christian theologising”, so to speak, and indicates what we may learn from their manner of theologising for our way of doing and teaching theology.

In some sense, this development was a “new thing”, to draw on the question raised in Isaiah 43:19: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”² It was new enough to not be discernible for some, and new enough to be controversial, as is the case with many innovations. This development was *not without precedent*. While it was a “new thing”, it was at the same time in line with previous events and opportunities.

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- 1 The manner in which the events are narrated in Acts 10 presupposes and emphasises divine agency in the events (vision and angelic command to Cornelius, Peter's vision, guidance by the Spirit, the coming of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues; the latter observed by several witnesses). This portrayal (“God initiated all this”) and the claims it implies (“in this way God sets a new pattern which we must follow”) presuppose a certain type of theology (for example, God intervening in history, revealing His salvific intentions and purposes to people, steering individual people to do his will, and so on). Those not sharing these presuppositions among Luke's ancient and modern readers will either question the historicity of the events (they never happened and are a mere literary and theological construct of the author to serve his intentions [on signs and historiography in Acts, see Keener 2012:320-382]), or will explain the events otherwise (for example, with recourse to psychology) or claim that the wrong conclusions were drawn and draw different conclusions from them (they were for some reason exceptional and do not indicate a new paradigm).
 - 2 Other passages in Isaiah warn against “keeping on hearing and not understanding, against keeping on seeing, but not perceiving” (6:9). Later on, God announces miraculous interventions in nature so that Israel “may see and know, and may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this” (41:20).

Throughout the Old Testament era, non-Jews could live as aliens among the people of Israel (Zehnder 2005) or join the people as proselytes.³ This continued in the Second Temple era. In addition, there were non-Jews who worshipped Yahweh, the God of Israel, and kept living among the nations (Haarmann 2008). Throughout the Old Testament era, God did not confine his presence and activity to the land of Israel and its people. In addition, during its existence in different diasporas, where Jews lived as a minority among non-Jews, they had learnt to safeguard their sacred traditions and Jewish identity, while interacting with, and adapting to their non-Jewish surroundings, where possible. In pointing out this *continuity*, we follow a trend in recent research on early Christianity, which rightly emphasises the continuity of the new movement with its early Jewish origins.

Before turning to Acts, some methodological issues need to be raised.

- What is “the thing” we are seeking when examining the integration of theory and praxis in one portrait of early Christianity? *Theory* is commonly defined as

a formal statement of the rules on which a subject of study is based or of *ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event* or, more generally, an opinion or explanation.⁴

We follow this understanding: “theory as the formal statement of the ideas that are suggested to explain a fact or event”. While Acts does not offer abstract statements, it offers statements in narratives, which explain a fact and events and draw conclusions from these (Acts 10:47; 11:17; 15:19-29).

Things are more difficult with regard to *praxis*. In theology, *praxis* is often understood as the “application of faith in action, as contrasted with mere thought, although it implies reflective action” (Patte 2010:1001). While the events narrated certainly involve an *application of faith* in action (Peter goes to Caesarea, proclaims the Gospel and the Antiochene missionaries set out), *praxis* refers to the specific “Christian” *situation and activities and divinely initiated events and the human perception and experience of these events as the basis for theorising, in this case, theologising*. In this instance, rather than being a consequence of the theory, this kind of *praxis* impacts on, and alters the faith – the deep convictions – of the protagonists and leads to new

3 See the regulations in Leviticus 18:26; 19:33-34 and Numbers 15:14-16. For a survey, see Burns (2010).

4 See <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/theory> [3 August 2020, italics CS].

faith in action (systematically evangelising non-Jews in Antioch, the endeavours of Barnabas and Paul during the first missionary journey).

In contrast to a broader understanding of context/situation of a *whole society* or one of its particular groups (such as impoverished *campesinos*), as the point of departure, we focus on a change of the specifically Christian context initiated/wrought by divine prompting. For instance, the hermeneutics of liberation (in Latin America and South Africa) take the larger context as a point of departure that needs to be carefully and critically analysed. From this perspective, questions are posed to the Bible/Christian tradition as to whether it provides criteria to discern and change the situation. Then action is required in church and society (the classical three-step model of *ver – julgar – agir*) (Hahn 2006:399-404, and the contributions in Rowland 1999). This is usually understood as an *immanent* process. Following Acts, our focus is on *divine* initiative and prompting, which led to a new praxis and, in turn, sparked and required a change in theory.

- This study concentrates on the *literary portrayal* of religious conflict. I do not discuss the historical validity of this portrayal⁵ and its contribution to the reconstruction of early Christian history.⁶ The study cannot address all exegetical issues. It focuses on crucial moments in the accounts of when theory and praxis meet.⁷
- Care is also needed as the account of Acts is selective. We have available for analysis only what the author chose to convey of the events that occurred over a longer period of time and a larger area – and we have it only in the manner in which these developments are presented in the larger apologetic purpose of Acts. Acts underscores that this new way of salvation for non-Jews and their inclusion in the people of God did not originate with the controversial Paul, as some of his opponents may have claimed. This salvation was initiated and clearly indicated by God himself and by the Christians of Jerusalem. Paul joined this movement at a later stage and became a faithful follower and proponent of this pattern. Therefore, those who challenge him and his disputed ministry challenge God, Peter and the Hellenists.

5 For recent surveys of the issues and debate, see Keener (2012:90-220).

6 However, for the author of Luke-Acts to achieve his purpose of providing certainty (Luke 1:4), and probably writing at a time when some of the eyewitnesses were still alive (for the date of Acts, see Keener 2012:383-401), this portrayal, despite the nuances and selectivity, due to Luke's overall apologetic purpose, could not be too obviously or too far removed from what had happened and how it was remembered.

7 For detailed treatment, see the recent commentaries on Acts by Peterson (2009), Schnabel (2012); Haacker (2019), Jennings (2017); Keener (2012; 2013; 2014).

- Throughout this process, the narrative presupposes the guidance of the Holy Spirit and of the exalted Lord of the Church who intervenes at some points in the narrative (for example, Acts 10:19-20; 15:28: “For it has seemed good for the Holy Spirit and to us”). To be on the safe, minimalist side, I emphasise this aspect only when it appears explicitly in the text.

A final section will attempt to apply this portrayal to the challenges of the church at the beginning of the 21st century.

2. SETTING THE STAGE: GOD “AT WORK” PRIOR TO THE “NEW THING”, PRIOR TO THE INCLUSION OF NON-JEWS AS SUCH

In addition to the continuity between the “new thing” and the Old Testament and early Judaism, it should also be noted that the development that concerns us came at the end of a whole *series* of new developments. They started with the coming and controversial ministry of Israel’s Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, his unexpected death and resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-36).⁸ After Pentecost, the gathering and restoration of Israel, which Jesus initiated in his ministry, was continued by the apostles and other followers of Christ in Jerusalem and Judea – embraced by large numbers and severely criticised and hindered by others.⁹ The “new thing” was part of this series and a yet further step in drawing the conclusion from these events, not only for the people of Israel, but for all of humanity.

In their missionary speeches in Jerusalem, the apostles had already indicated that the Christ event would have universal implications. Faith in Jesus, the Christ, would from now on be the decisive criterion for all people: “*everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21). Also,

The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people ... and in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed (3:22-25).

8 Throughout, Luke-Acts emphasises the divine prompting and impetus behind these events. See Keener (2012:495-496) and Squires (1993).

9 I have traced this in Stenschke (2017b).

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (4:12).

In his apology, Stephen reminded the people that, in Israel's past, important events happened outside of the land of Israel and independent of the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 7:2-53). The Jewish Christians of Jerusalem witnessed the outstanding response of the Samaritans to the Gospel preached by Philip and the coming of the Holy Spirit upon them (8:17); they also may have heard about the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and the miraculous circumstances under which this took place (8:5-40; there was nothing that prevented him from being baptised, 8:36). Soon afterwards, their adversary, Saul, was overcome by divine intervention and joined the Christian community (9:1-30). Rather than dire judgement – as over some adversaries in Israel's past – there was divine grace and a commission even for the Messiah's staunchest adversary. These events happened outside the traditional Jewish heartland.

Peter started his ministry outside Jerusalem in Lydda and Joppa and was affirmed by God through two outstanding miracles (9:32-43). The end of Acts 9 finds Peter in the house of Simon, a tanner – a man with an unclean profession (9:43; Keener 2013:1725: "Peter was thus residing in a low class area, and with one of very doubtful repute in Jewish eyes"). Through this *series of events*, Peter, the Jewish followers of Christ who came with him to meet Cornelius, and the believers in Jerusalem were well prepared for a further "new thing" which God was to do among and through them.

3. ACTS 10:1-11:18

The account in Acts 1:1-11:18 describes in some detail how the "new thing", which God was doing, came about *in several steps, over a period of time*, and through divine action. Arguably, Acts 10 recounts Peter's conversion more than the conversion of Cornelius, as the story is commonly called. Cornelius, a God-fearing officer of the Roman occupation forces, lives at the Roman headquarters in Caesarea. An angel of God visits him and tells him that his prayers have been heard and his alms ascended as a memorial before God. He is instructed to send for Peter to Joppa. To this command, Cornelius responds immediately and sends off three people (10:1-8).¹⁰

While the envoys travel to Joppa, Peter receives a divine vision during a time of prayer. He falls into a trance, sees the heavens open and a large sheet with all kinds of (clean and unclean) animals that he is instructed to

¹⁰ For Cornelius, see Stenschke (1999:148-164).

kill and eat.¹¹ However, three times Peter refuses to do so: “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean”. His refusal is based on Old Testament dietary law and Jewish tradition.¹² Each time, a heavenly voice instructs him not to call common (unclean) what God has made clean (10:9-16). While Peter ponders the meaning of the vision, the men from Cornelius arrive. Peter is given instructions by the Spirit regarding these men. He is to go with them without hesitation, as they have been sent by the Spirit. The men explain why they have come and Peter invites the three non-Jewish men to be his guests. This breach of Jewish custom may be the first inference drawn by Peter from his own vision and from the envoys’ report of Cornelius’ character and experience.

The next day, Peter travels with the envoys and Christians from Joppa to Caesarea. Cornelius gathered his relatives and close friends to his house. Peter describes his initial hesitance: “You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with non-Jews.” (10:28). However, he has understood [in the meantime since the vision in Joppa] that God has shown him that he should not call any *person* unclean. What concerned animals at first sight has wider implications. Thus, Peter has come without objection (10:29). Cornelius then recounts the events and why he had summoned Peter. There is great expectancy on the side of the audience:

Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord. (10:33).

Before proclaiming the Gospel, Peter shares the conclusion which he had drawn from the vision and the ensuing events:

Truly I understand that *God shows no partiality*, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him (10:33).¹³

This understanding matured in the two days between receiving the vision, welcoming the envoys of Cornelius to the house in Joppa, and travelling with them (one devout soldier, 10:7) and Jewish Christians

11 Recent commentators note that Peter actually does not eat anything. He is not instructed to eat indiscriminately from all animals. Rather, he is to choose the *clean* animals, according to the stipulations of the Law. While he distinguishes between animals and should continue to do so, Peter is to realise that God does not distinguish between people (10:34-35).

12 See Harrington (2010).

13 See Keener’s survey “The God of all humanity” (2012:495). This insight has no direct implication for circumcision and the observance of the Law.

from Joppa for two days to Caesarea (10:23-24).¹⁴ Acts does not indicate what was discussed on the way and whether these people contributed to Peter's new understanding of the nature of God (showing no partiality) and humanity (people who fear God and do what is acceptable to him in every nation).

Peter expresses his insight in the language of the Old Testament: "God is not one who receives/beholds the face" (10:34), a common character trait of God in the Old Testament, for example, in Deuteronomy 10:17-18 (Keener 2013:1796-1797). This is an interesting indication of the *interaction* between Scripture/tradition and the events and the experience thereof. On the one hand, the experience is interpreted in light of Scripture and theology and expressed with recourse to the language of Scripture. On the other hand, the experience leads to new "theologising", that is Scripture and tradition are also interpreted in a fresh way in light of the events and the experience thereof.

While Peter still proclaims what God had done through Jesus and indicates that "everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43), the Holy Spirit falls on all who listen to Peter (10:44). The non-Jews speak in tongues and extol God, just as Jesus' Jewish disciples did on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (2:4). There is no explicit mention of the audience's repentance, conversion, response in faith or the like, which one may have expected from previous accounts in Acts.

The Jewish believers react with much surprise:

And the believers from among the circumcised [up to then the physical token of a covenant relationship with God, emphasising their Jewish identity] who had come with Peter [and who serve as witnesses to the exact course of the events] were amazed.

They immediately recognise what happened, "because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the non-Jews" (10:45). These non-Jews now experience what the Jewish believers in Christ had experienced previously: reception of the eschatological Spirit.¹⁵ This becomes the visible token of belonging to the people of God, gathered and restored by the Messiah and now represented by his followers.

14 A crucial "on the road" discussion appears in Luke 24:13-35 between Jesus and the disciples as they journey to Emmaus.

15 This is emphasised in Peter's later first report in Jerusalem: "and the Holy Spirit fell on them *just as on us at the beginning*" (11:15).

As God had clearly acted in the whole process, and as this is clearly discernible now, Peter concludes: “Can anyone withhold water for baptising these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47). The event is understood to indicate that faith and the reception of the Spirit now becomes the basis for belonging to the people of God. “And he commanded them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

Cornelius and those gathered invite Peter to remain for some days (10:48), which Peter (and presumably his fellow Jewish Christians) does. On this occasion, Peter eats what is set before him, although Cornelius as a God-fearer (10:2) will have known and probably respected Jewish dietary regulations (Keener 2013:1816).

While not without long-term and short-term preparations and intermittent times for reflection, the “new thing”, the reception of the Holy Spirit by non-Jews as such and their inclusion into the people of God, took the Christ believers from Joppa by surprise. However, as God’s interventions in the course of the events were so evident, the believers immediately adapted their theory (who could be baptised, who could belong to the people of God) to this unexpected praxis.

That this process was not without recourse to theory, in this case to the teaching of Jesus, becomes clear from Peter’s later report of the events and his reflections in Jerusalem (Acts 11:16-17):

And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said: ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit’.¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?

His report in Acts 15:10 relates the event to the Law, as this was the contested domain (15:5). Other than in these remarks, Acts does not recount the process or content of further theoretical reflection (see above on the selectivity of the account) of this bold new praxis with far-reaching consequences. Its focus lies on the result.

16 Nowhere in the account is this insight/command related to the question of circumcision and the Law. Was it clear from the events, and if so, how, that both, that is becoming proselytes, are no longer necessary?

17 Curiously, this quotation does not relate to the situation in Caesarea or to non-Jews. Jesus announces that his *Jewish* followers would receive the Spirit. The Jesus tradition is remarkably silent as to these issues which were pressing in the 40s and 50s of the first century. This is one indication that it is more or less a reliable summary of the teaching of Jesus than a collection of the reflections of early Christian communities in the second half of the first century, as is often argued by critical scholarship.

Peter quoted Joel's prophecy regarding the coming of the eschatological Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32) at the beginning of his speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). While he and probably others proclaimed that the announcement that the Spirit would come on "your sons and daughters"¹⁸ was fulfilled on that day,¹⁹ Peter also quotes at the very beginning from Joel 2:28 that the Spirit would be poured out "on *all* flesh" and continues to quote from the prophet until Joel 2:32: "And it shall come to pass that *everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). Peter is presented in the narrative as knowing this prophecy. It is difficult to discern whether and to what extent he eventually expected what happened in Caesarea.²⁰ Perhaps it is telling that the believers who had come with him are described as being *amazed* (10:45), not Peter.

Crucial in this process were people well prepared (Peter and Cornelius both receive instructions while at prayer), willing to listen and to act; there was divine guidance and prompting through visions, angels (?), heavens opened, the Spirit and God creating a *fait accompli* in bestowing the Spirit on non-Jews and doing so in an audible way that recalled the Jewish believers' own prior experience at the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (2:4). Peter could relate the coming of the Spirit to the teaching of Jesus.

It is noteworthy that, when Peter returns to Jerusalem where he is questioned by the Jewish followers of Christ (11:1-18), – at least on the surface – the disputed issue is *not God's and Peter's new way of including non-Jews* into the people of God,²¹ but the *implications of these events for Jewish identity and behaviour*,²² that is, Peter's breach with Jewish tradition: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3).²³ Was the "new thing", at least at that point in time, too evident to be disputed? Did they not dare to challenge Peter's decision?

18 "... and *your* sons and daughters shall prophesy, and *your* young men shall see visions and *your* old men shall have dreams" (Acts 2:17).

19 The Spirit came on the 120 *Jewish* disciples, men and women, who had come to Jerusalem with Jesus (1:15).

20 See the insights gained from his vision and the encounter with the envoys of Cornelius on the way to Caesarea (10:34-35).

21 The issue is raised later in Acts 15 when some Jewish believers seek to align the new praxis with theory and demand that that non-Jews must also become Jews (15:1, 5).

22 See my analysis of the disputed domains in this conflict (Stenschke 2020).

23 Keener (2013:1816) notes: "the Fourth Gospel claims that Jesus accepted Samaritan hospitality for several days (John 4:49); and Acts has recently reported Peter's time in Samaria (Acts 8:14-25, esp. 8:25). Further, Jesus and his disciples ate with "sinners" in the Gospel (Luke 5:29-30; 7:34; 15:1-2); why not with Gentiles whom God has clearly accepted?"

4. ACTS 11:19-14:28: GOD AT WORK AMONG THE NON-JEWS

The account in Acts 11:19-14:28 covers a longer period of time. The way in which the events are presented affirms the decision and course of action taken at Caesarea. Throughout the account, divine initiative and approval of the developments along these lines are clear.

Through Jewish Christians from Jerusalem with a Diaspora background,²⁴ the Gospel comes to Jews and non-Jews in Antioch. “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” (11:21). They followed the path pointed by God at Caesarea and approved of in Jerusalem (11:18). For *the non-Jewish believers* there is no mention of circumcision and keeping the Law. Upon his arrival, Barnabas, a leading follower of Christ from Jerusalem, affirms the events and the course of action taken there. While not becoming Jews, the new believers in Antioch later follow the instructions of a Jewish prophet and send a gift to the followers of Christ in Jerusalem, thus expressing their allegiance and loyalty to the Jewish roots of their faith (11:27-30).

Peter receives further divine affirmation in Jerusalem as an angel miraculously rescues him from prison (12:19). During the first missionary journey, missionaries from Antioch, appointed by the Holy Spirit (13:1-3), proclaim the gospel and establish more churches that include Jews and non-Jews (13:4-14:27). In different places and contexts, they follow the new “Caesarea/Antioch paradigm”. There is no mention of non-Jewish Christians becoming Jewish proselytes. Paul and Barnabas perform impressive miracles, indicating divine approval of their activities. In all this, “God was active with them and opened a door of faith to the non-Jews” (14:27).²⁵ He affirmed this mission. The events underline that God’s decision at Caesarea was not an exception and that the course of action taken in Antioch and by believers from Antioch carries his approval.

5. ACTS 15:1-34: CHALLENGE AND AFFIRMATION OF THE NEW PRAXIS

Acts 15 recounts how, after some time, this new theory and new praxis were challenged and affirmed in Jerusalem. Surprisingly and, on the other hand, not surprisingly in view of what was at stake, the Jewish followers

24 Cyprus and Cyrene are mentioned (11:20).

25 Throughout Acts, signs affirm and authenticate the Gospel, those who proclaim it and perform these miracles. See Keener’s survey (2012:546-549).

of Christ come from Judea/Jerusalem (15:24) to Antioch and demand the circumcision of the new non-Jewish believers there. They are not against non-Jewish believers as such, but they insist that they must become proper Jews. These people have the “old theory”, Scripture and tradition, on their side as an enabling factor in this conflict.²⁶ The matter is transferred to Jerusalem and Paul, Barnabas and a few others (presumably from the ranks of those making the demands) travel to Jerusalem. On the way, there is approval of the new paradigm (15:3-4; this is where Luke’s focus lies). Some Jewish followers of Christ in Jerusalem support the old paradigm and back up those who had gone to Antioch.

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said: ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law’ (15:5).

After much debate (15:6), Peter eventually recalls the events in Caesarea that led to the new paradigm (15:7-11, narrated for the third time in Acts). He presents a summary and theological interpretation of the events in Joppa and Caesarea (15:8-9):

And God, who knows the heart [a major Old Testament theme] bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them.

Peter insists that *God* cleansed the non-Jews’ hearts; they are thus clean and need not be burdened with any purity regulations. To do as demanded by the Pharisaic Jewish followers of Christ would mean to put God to the test, to question His decision and course of action. This is followed by statements critical of the Law. This is an amazing contrast to Peter’s earlier refusal to kill and eat, based on the Law (10:14; Lev. 11:2-47; 20:25; Deut. 14:4-20). Peter describes the Law as a “yoke on the neck”, which neither the Jewish ancestors nor the present generation could bear. Why should it then be imposed on non-Jews? In this instance, Peter argues not only on the basis of the course of the events in Caesarea but also with what *he* presents as the common experience of Jewish people with the Law, at least from a Christian perspective. Salvation does not and cannot come by the Law; rather, it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus for Jews and non-Jews alike (15:11). It is, therefore, not necessary to demand circumcision and impose the Law on non-Jewish followers of Christ. They need not become Jews.

²⁶ Acts 15:2 speaks of “no small dissension”.

This is followed by Barnabas and Paul's reporting the divine affirmation of this new praxis during their journey: "the signs and wonders God had done through them among the non-Jews" (15:12) (Keener 2012: 537-549; a summary of Acts 13:4-14:27).

The final speech at the council is by James, a leading figure in Jerusalem. James summarises the account of Peter, highlighting divine activity: "How God first visited the non-Jews, to take from them a people for his name" (15:14). What conclusions are to be drawn from this? James combines this new praxis – initiated by God and followed by people – with theoretical reflection. He reads Scripture in a new way in view of the events.²⁷ Amos 9 is quoted, but there is no detailed interpretation.²⁸ According to James, the restoration of Israel, the fallen tent of David, has occurred in the ministry of Jesus and the establishment of the eschatological community in Jerusalem, narrated in the early chapters of Acts. As this has been completed or is well on its way in the mission to *Diaspora Jews* and non-Jews, the time has come for the remainder of humanity and all the non-Jews. All this has been decided and announced for a long time. James concludes from this Scripture that non-Jewish Christ-followers should not be troubled with the Law and with becoming proselytes (15:19). They are merely to follow the Old Testament stipulations for strangers living among Israel, in order to facilitate fellowship between them and Jewish believers (15:20-21). In this way, the new praxis is affirmed, while the unity of the church of Jews and non-Jews is safeguarded. While not necessary for salvation, Jews may follow the old pattern for themselves.

The decision is then communicated by letter and messengers sent to Antioch (15:22-34) and, eventually, to the churches founded during the first missionary journey as well as in Syria and Cilicia (15:36-16:5):

As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem (16:4).

27 Keener 2012:483-491. In doing so, James follows the pattern of Jesus in Luke's Gospel and the interpretation of Scripture by Peter, Stephen and Paul earlier in Acts. On Luke's use of the Old Testament, Keener (2012:491) notes: "In arguing that the Gentile mission was a legitimate extension of Israel's faith, Luke presents the biblical heritage positively, emphasising continuity with this heritage wherever possible. He finds discontinuity only where necessary and where confirmed by clear divine sanction (from the biblical God of Israel), such as the divinely arranged meeting between Philip and the African treasurer or the corresponding visions to Cornelius and Peter. Luke finds in Israel's Scripture both promises and patterns fulfilled in his own day. For him, the ministry of Jesus, the Jesus movement, and the Gentile mission climax and continue the biblical history in his own day."

28 For a detailed analysis, see Marshall (2007).

In this way, the new praxis is affirmed once more (11:18); there is further theorising (reassessment of the Law and its limits, claim to prophetic testimony).

6. SUMMARY

The endeavour of *integrating theory and praxis* sheds fresh light on ancient sources. When read from this perspective, we note how a new praxis, a “new thing” which God was doing, well prepared for a long time and through a series of recent events (in which God was at work) and which pointed in this direction, led to a new praxis, that is, accepting non-Jews as such into the people of God – as God does not distinguish between Jews and non-Jews: “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35). These events (witnessed by the followers of Christ) and the new praxis, which they implied and demanded, were defended in view of the words of Jesus and of Scripture and led to new “theory”.

The paradigm shift indicated and initiated by God in Caesarea and recognised and followed by Peter was followed by the followers of Christ in Antioch and by Barnabas and Paul on the first missionary journey, all of them Jews. It was recounted and reflected at the Jerusalem council, which settled the matter by deciding that non-Jews need not become Jews. This led to a decree that regulated the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ.

Are we able to observe something fresh in the ancient sources from the perspective of the integration of theory and praxis? While studies of Acts usually focus on the results and rightly ascribe great importance to the account of the “apostolic council”, they often miss how Acts invites its readers to follow this process of theologising and in this way to understand on what basis the council came to its conclusion/decreed, its approval of the new mode of the inclusion of non-Jews and to own the conclusion which these followers of Christ drew from the event.²⁹ While it continued

²⁹ For the readers of Acts, see Keener (2012:423-434). The emphasis on narrative criticism of various types (what narratives are, how they are constructed, how they function, and how they must be interpreted) and the discussions of the genre of Acts as ancient historiography and the implications for the purpose of Acts has raised awareness that some narratives seek to guide and convince their readers as much as argumentative genres, such as letters aim to do. See Keener (2012:51-220).

to be criticised by some Jewish followers of Christ, the new practice was by no means arbitrary or lacking precedent.³⁰

We have studied *Acts' portrayal* of this process. Other books or *corpora* of the New Testament also contain this pattern. Paul's letters indicate that he also had to integrate theory and praxis – that is, his own experiences and his Hellenistic-Jewish heritage, including the Scriptures of Israel and his Pharisaic concern with the Law –, in order to gain radically new perspectives on Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God, on salvation for Jews and non-Jews alike, on his mission to non-Jews, on their inclusion into the people of God, the role of the Law and other aspects of his theology and anthropology. His interaction with these experiences, the Scriptures and his Jewish tradition and the interaction with other Christians eventually led to what we call Paul's theology (Stenschke 2019), which in its comprehensiveness reached great depth and had and continues to have a strong impact on Christian theory and praxis.

Acts paints a harmonious and perhaps harmonising picture of the events. We know from Paul's references to some Jewish followers of Christ, commonly included among Paul's opponents (more precisely, the group(s) of Judaisers among them), that the consensus reached at Jerusalem was either not accepted by all from the very beginning or not lasting in politically tense times. Some Jewish Christians questioned or rejected the acceptance of non-Jews as such, as it meant overcoming prejudice, renunciation of Jewish privileges, status and power and pressure from other Jews in the politically increasingly tense quarter century before the first Jewish war (66-73 AD) (Reicke 1968:197-251).

These challenges are not unique to the situation then and there; some also apply to later efforts to integrate theory and praxis or praxis and theory.

7. DISCERNING A NEW PRAXIS

What is reported in *Acts* is part of a larger development: the *sacred* beginnings of what came to be – in a longer process of “the parting of the ways” – Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism. Centuries later, several major Christianities were established and, for centuries, the parameters were set, allowing only for minor adaptations, if new movements were to be accepted by the churches. Yet, fully aware of the salvation historical uniqueness of the events described in *Acts*, Christians believe

³⁰ *Acts* contains three longer reports of the “conversion”/calling of Paul, but also three accounts of the “conversion” of Peter/Cornelius in *Acts* 10, 11 and 15.

that God is still actively at work in history and at least able to do new things in their midst. What are we to make of this study of transformation in Acts?

The process of integrating theory and praxis, of the well-defined, accepted, proven and cherished “heritage” and the “new thing” involves the challenging questions of where, when and how God is at work; how this can be recognised,³¹ in particular, if and when God’s activities are not as *programmatically*, impressive or obvious as in the early decades,³² and what conclusions must be drawn from it?

Due to this different temporal position and in contrast to Peter and the others back then, we have to consider, in theological reflection and education, not only Scripture and early Jewish tradition, but also the rich heritage of the church in doctrine, practice and experience – gained in its long history and at all heights and depths. While some view this as an opportunity for, and a source of inspiration and guidance (a Roman Catholic or Orthodox position), others will take a more critical stance (a Protestant position). This heritage abounds with examples of how new and, at times, unexpected events and experiences (by individuals or groups) led to new theory. It also abounds in examples of where such praxis and theory was and remains divisive. In most instances, the “new thing” was not obvious to all.

What are we to learn from all this? It is easy to look back and see in *hindsight* what the “new thing” was that God was doing in the first century AD and that is recorded in Acts. It was a new way of conceptualising the people of God, of Jews relating to non-Jews in view of what God had done in Jesus, and so on. However, it is much more difficult to determine what the “new thing” is which God is doing *in our day and age*, if indeed God can be expected to do “new things” in each generation. If there are such things, are they as clearly discernible as they were in Acts? The old question of the prophet Isaiah “*Do you not perceive it?*” should caution us against thinking that it will be all too obvious and easy to recognise for us.

If the clear pointers of divine action are lacking (there is no biblical warrant that each generation will witness them!), what might God be conveying through *human* developments or how might fully secular developments – in society and in church – challenge us to rethink and

31 Obviously, in this process, personality and culture play a major role. Also, whether the “new thing” is perceived to be liberating or promoting one’s own cause and desires or whether it is perceived as threatening long-cherished customs and positions.

32 The history of reception indicates that the “Caesarea paradigm of including non-Jews” won the day. The events were programmatic. In this regard, no further divine intervention is necessary or to be expected. However, this paradigm might still be programmatic for accepting other people.

adjust our theory? The 21st century will bring no fewer challenges for the people of God than the past centuries did. Some are already pressing on us, while others are appearing on the horizon. Some examples will have to suffice. There is a context of increasing secularism for some Christians; for others, continued or increasing persecution. We all face the digital age in one way or another. We all live on a burning planet – and there is an urgent need for radical rethinking, change and commitment to sustainability on all levels. Some recent events recall the portents of eschatological culmination as we find them in the eschatological discourses of Jesus. Is this what we need to note and reflect on nowadays? *Where* is the voice of the church in a dying world? *What* does she have to say, and *how* will this voice be heard and heeded?

The *larger debates in society* of the past and current century have forced some churches to rethink and change their positions on a number of issues such as, for instance, positions related to sex and gender – perhaps related to the acceptance of the non-Jews in Acts. An assessment of whether at all, and if so, to what extent God was and is both behind and in this process obviously varies. Are these issues and the reflections they triggered one of the “new things”, which God is doing in our day and age to which we must respond, or are these *mere human processes*? What might be God’s doing? What might He be saying? Whatever answers we give to these questions, we must respond to these challenges and theologise, for the sake of God and the world. What adjustments and transformations are needed *in theory* to adapt to a very different world and its praxis – and ours? What new praxis challenges and enriches our theory? What does all this mean to our understanding of our “theory”? Will the classical content (Scripture, creeds, systematic theology) do, or must we widen this, and if so, how? How can we integrate praxis into theory?

In our case study, the divine prompting and a corresponding human praxis directly questioned Scripture (that is, the stipulations regarding the inclusion of non-Jews) and eventually led to a new understanding of the Hebrew Bible; it became the Old Testament and was retained as such in the canon. The vast majority of Christians are relaxed about such changes when they concern parts of the Old Testament, as happened in early Christianity. When it comes to statements found in the New Testament, they are more hesitant. However, following the New Testament’s own trajectories towards these “new things”, over the centuries, on a number of issues, Christians have moved beyond New Testament practice regarding, for instance, slavery or the role of women (Blomberg 2004:107-144).

Our focus is on integrating theory and praxis *in theological education*. What are the implications of this study for *the way in which we do theology*

and for theological education? Obviously, before anything can be taught to others, it should be understood and practised by those who teach. Students are not interested in theory alone (if ever they were!), but they want to know how it is to be done – and how their instructors practise the content. We need teachers who not only know how to integrate theory and praxis but also actually practise this integration.

We also need to reflect on how we teach this process to our students. To do so, they will need to know theory – the Scriptures, the traditions of the church at large and of their particular denomination – and they need to know how to recognise and discern the “new thing” that God is doing among us or that our context presses on us, how to evaluate and how to relate it to theory. What are the criteria which we advise our students to use for doing so?

My impression is that, traditionally, in the Western tradition of theological education, we have been strong on theory. This might be even truer in theologically conservative contexts of whatever colour. While we are good at passing on theory (Scripture, doctrine), academic theology has often left the process of theologising, of applying theory to praxis and relating praxis to theory to the church and its debates and has not prepared its students well for engaging the crucial issues of our times.

Looking back on my own evangelical training, I appreciate that I was taught how to apply Scripture to the life and ministry of individual believers, the church and – to some extent also – to society at large. “Application” was taught, as far as I remember, mainly in homiletics classes. That was more than other students received in different contexts, and I am thankful for it. However, rarely were the steps from praxis/experiences to theory discussed systematically, never mind any reflection on how the two meet and must be integrated. To put it bluntly: *we learnt theology, not theologising*. For me, an eye-opener was Marshall’s (2004) slim volume *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to theology*.

In closing, it is helpful to remember that Acts indicates some factors that may inspire us in the process of integrating theory and practice:

- Integrating a new divine and human praxis in early Christianity did take time for reflection, even if the time was, in some instances, short.
- The events themselves were not ambiguous.
- There were witnesses to the events/experiences from which conclusions were drawn.

- There was a willingness to be held accountable (Peter) and to explain the events and the conclusions drawn from them in some detail.
- There were tensions, but also a willingness to resolve them;³³ independent initiatives (due to the course of the events, Peter's conclusion drawn in Caesarea) were presented, discussed and embraced by the community.
- The whole community was involved in or at least could witness the process.
- Continuity with Scripture and the teaching of Jesus was emphasised.
- The results were clearly communicated (Acts 15).

We need to work on praxis and how to integrate it – and even more to the point – how praxis should inform and challenge theory. Is this what students learn at university/seminary? Can it be taught in a classroom and, if so, how? If not, where do they learn then?

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