

ACTS 15: DISAGREEMENTS, DEBATES, & DECISIONS

Acts: The Holy Spirit and His Unstoppable Church, Part 14

Acts 15:1-16:5

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Summary: In this week's section, we examine several conflicts that arose in the church as they spread "to the remotest parts of the earth". With gentiles now becoming a large part of the community of faith, the chosen people of God, how ought they operate? New situations and clashing cultural habits lead to some difficult conversations and decisions. As we look at how the church handled these situations, we gain insight into how to handle disagreements and decisions in our churches today.

INTRO

In order to understand the dilemma in today's passage, we should try and get our minds into the cultural context of the people of God. For 1500 years Jews lived under the law that Moses brought down from the mountain Israelites in the desert. For nearly 200 years the Pharisaic tradition had attempted to live under those laws in a very strict manner.

Even for Jesus's followers, at the time, Christianity was a predominantly Jewish thing. They did not see themselves as a new religion. They saw themselves as part of the Jewish people. The mystery and amazement that Peter and the other apostles have been discovering the last five chapters is that now Gentiles (non-jews) were being allowed in to the family! Allowed in to the promises of God to the Jewish people!

So when Paul and Barnabas's missionary work of evangelism and church planting among the mediterranean world is successful and many gentiles are brought into the fold, new problems pop up and raise some confusion about issues they've never had to deal with before: "what must one do to be saved?"

The author of Acts, Luke, has already recorded Peter's answer this question, very directly, in his account of the growth of the early church. "What must we do? Repent and be baptized." - That is, turn away from your sinful unbelief, turn to Christ, and join with his people in the church.

That was all well and good when that message was given to an entirely Jewish crowd. They were already doing many other things that were integral to the Jewish culture: food laws, marriage laws, sanitation laws, ceremonial practices, that needed no questioning. They continued.

But now, communities who did not share those cultural practices were being brought into the family of God. How should they conduct themselves? That is the conflict we find ourselves in in Acts 15.

Another quick note which will help frame the story today, we're about 20 years into the narrative of Acts. Acts 1-9 covers about 10 years, and 10-15 covers about 10 years. So Peter here is going to refer to "the early days", 20 years prior.

False teachers unsettling the sheep, and argument ensues. They seek help.

Acts 15:1-2

1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Paul and Barnabas explain the situation

v3-4

3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Hasty opinions are aired based on traditions

v5

5 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 of Moses."

Much debate

v6-11

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate...

Peter reminds the church of the gospel

...Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter stands up in the noisy crowd, (...think: a public debate in crowded town-hall, like in the movies when the townsfolk all get together because they're upset, mad, or scared about some new problem that has entered the town...) and his first concern is to center their thinking on the gospel of grace.

How were we saved? He reminds them. Faith! How were our hearts cleansed? Faith! Not the law! Neither we nor our ancestors were able to keep that! Why would we be so eager to lay that on them? We are saved, and they are saved, by faith in Jesus's work! Not through our work! "We are not made clean by our observance of the law, but by faith."

Humbled reflectiveness as Paul and Barnabas recount the facts

v12

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

James frames the discussion in terms of historical biblical theology

v13-21

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 " 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.' 19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

James now stands up and says "Simeon (Peter) has reminded you of Jesus's message, let me remind you that all the scriptures point to the idea that the gentiles will be saved through faith." And then he makes a proposal, which seems to be accepted by all, and is written in a letter that is then circulated through the churches.

A decision is reached, a declaration is articulated

v22-29

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, 23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

Why this list?

- James is not addressing the way to salvation, that is clear. It is also clear that he is not addressing a way to be more righteous. "Hearts are cleansed through faith alone!"
- The question is: how can a Jewish-Christian community, which has such a distinctive culture, accept gentile-Christians into it, and hope to have any sense of harmony? There were many practices of the rest of the world, the gentile world, that the Jews find detestable, unclean, un-stomach-able. How can we have a peaceful, ordered, mutually loving community?
- The list James gives is his judgement of what the most strategic aspects of Jewish-specific cultural traditions are that will help with unity among the church.
- These things ARE part of the law of Moses, but are written for ethnic Israelites. They are not a matter of salvation or holiness.
- It was a burden, and did not add to salvation, but rather by doing them, they would "do well" - at living together in harmony and mutual acceptance, toleration, and brotherhood.
- 1 Cor 10:23 - everything is permissible, not everything is beneficial

The church is strengthened

v30-35

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

So to recap:

1. Confusion stemming from a never-before-encountered situation
2. Hasty opinions offered based on tradition
3. Much debate
4. Reminder of the gospel
5. Humbled reflectiveness on the facts
6. Framing the problem in light of the whole scriptures
7. Decision reached by the elders, with the whole church in mind, in order to reinforce the gospel of grace, but also provide for order and harmony among a church that has a wide range of cultural practice, conviction, and understanding.
8. Decision is communicated well
9. The church is strengthened

I am not saying that Luke's purpose in including this passage is a prescriptive playbook for handling tough situations, but I've seen this sort of thing play out on several occasions in the church, and I can't think of a better playbook.

And most astounding to me of all: that Luke says it wasn't merely the elders and apostles who made this decision, but in fact it was the Holy Spirit who made the decision. (There is a variant possible reading that you'll find more clearly in the CSB translation, that it was the Holy Spirit's decision *and not ours...*)

Last week we looked at Acts 13, where the church was gathered together, and "the Holy Spirit said.." To set apart Saul and Barnabas. How did the Holy Spirit "say" these things to the church? I believe this is part of the reason Luke records Acts 15 in detail with the conclusion that "it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit..." - that this sort of progression is one of the normal ways the Holy Spirit speaks to the church.

I find this very encouraging. Very comforting. That in the counsel of believers in the church, we can take a difficult and confusion problem, discuss, debate, reflect, frame in terms of the gospel and the whole scriptures, and come up with a clear direction, and have confidence that it is from The Lord.

To apply this section:

How to handle careful conversation?

- Gospel as the lens
- Careful eye for the facts
- Discussion and debate (sometimes heated!) can be possible
- Decision of the leaders in plurality and consensus

DISAGREEMENT LEADING TO A PARTING

Acts 15:36-41 (ESV)

36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." 37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

1. A sharp disagreement arose among apostles!
2. Not much detail given to who was right and who was wrong (often assumed that Paul and Silas were in the right,)
3. Often see this referenced when there are irreconcilable differences in church issues.
 1. Often both sides assume they are Paul and Silas, and the other Barnabas and Mark.
 2. Mark and Barnabas were cousins.
 3. Both sides contained authors of scripture
4. They did reconcile in the end (we know this from Paul's later epistles.)
5. This is a call for humility, and patience in these debates

To apply this section:

- Sharp disagreements can lead to ministry separation for a season, which can lead to fruitfulness for both parties.
- God may be seeking to use each party in different ways, so be patient and humble about declaring who is “right and wrong” and who is “at fault”.
- Look for opportunity to reconcile the relationship, even if ministry partnership is not maintained.

A DECISION ABOUT CIRCUMCISION

Acts 16:1-5 (ESV)

1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 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. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

- Paul, Silas (aka Silvanus), and Timothy - a powerhouse ministry team, present when he wrote the letters to the church in Thessalonica.
- What is up with the circumcision thing here?
 - Paul had Timothy circumcised, but he refused to have Titus circumcised *because it would contradict the gospel* (see Galatians 2:3-5).
 - Titus was a Greek, Timothy was a Jew (“Jewishness” was counted through the mother’s lineage), who was for some reason uncircumcised. So culturally, Timothy would have been expected by the Jews to be circumcised.
 - Paul taught strongly that circumcision was not relevant for salvation or holiness, but he also knew it was important to not put unnecessary cultural stumbling blocks in the way or to get in unnecessary arguments, so when dealing with Jewish cultural custom, he knew that the best way to “become all things to all men” was to make sure that his Jewish companion was following the secular Jewish cultural convention.

Application points:

- Avoid unnecessary arguments / debates over cultural matters
- Follow cultural conventions to help avoid debate
- Unless doing so would contradict the gospel

CONCLUSION

Today we saw three decisions that required faith, humility, a mind soaked in the scriptures, a heart oriented to the gospel, and a will to advance the mission. As we find ourselves frustrated in confusing circumstances, remember where we can find clarity:

- **The Gospel of God's grace** toward us through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Nothing else is required of us, so take care about laying other requirements on others. Never add anything to the phrase "We are saved by faith, AND ____". And be very very slow to add things to a list that all true Christians will do, or things that will make you more righteous or holy.
- **The Truth of the Scriptures** - that we should seek to live in loving and differential community with one another, in order to glorify God and not seek our own gain and comfort. The scripture contains truth about right and wrong. Righteousness and unrighteousness. And its implications are far-reaching and apply to every situation of human life. We don't need to add specifics from human wisdom or tradition to it. And neither should we remove, alter, or change what is written there.
- **The importance of the mission** - that the whole world would hear about and see the love of God for all mankind as we preach the good news about forgiveness of sin through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, and by "living such good lives among the gentiles, that they see your good works and glorify God on the day he visits." (1 Peter 2:12)