

“Disagreements are Opportunities for Unity”

Acts 15:1-35

When we were last in Acts we finished Ch. 14 with Paul and Barnabas wrapping up their first church planting trip by revisiting the churches they planted in the province of Galatia (modern day Turkey) and then reporting back to their sending church in Antioch where in 14:27,

they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

While we saw that they first entered synagogues where that gave them open invitations to share Jesus was the Messiah, we also saw how that often angered some of the Jews resulting in Paul spreading the gospel to Gentiles as well as Jews. While the salvation of Gentiles brought much joy, it also created controversy with some Jewish believers, particularly those with Pharisaic backgrounds who struggled to see that they were free from keeping the Laws in Exodus-Deuteronomy.

So, not surprisingly, Ch. 15 begins,

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

I’m glad God records the imperfections and the problems of reality church in the Bible. This chapter begins and ends with Paul having disagreements with people. God’s people will find themselves in controversies and disagreements with each other at times. How do we handle problems, controversies and disagreements that inevitably come? While we all hate confrontation, the reality is that many times when we deal wisely with controversies and disagreements they can actually become opportunities for unity. This was a crucial moment in the life of the early church. This issue about Gentiles needing to be circumcised (Jewish converts) on top of accepting Christ was a real game changer. How they handled it would create serious problems if not handled wisely.

And that’s the first thing we learn here about dealing with problems and controversies. We can’t avoid them. They will not go away. We can’t just pray them away (because that is not how the apostles handled it).

Don’t Ignore it; Deal with It **(15:1-21)**

Ignoring problems is not a solution. Jesus never said, “*Blessed are the conflict avoiders*”, He said ‘Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.’ Many translations have tried to move away from the ‘mankind’ and ‘men’ language and make it people or children; and in a lot of cases that is okay. But not always. Here the word is clearly sons and since Jesus is the Son of God, I believe Jesus is saying be like Me. A proactive peacemaker. Now, Jesus didn’t make peace with people by sacrificing truth but by declaring it while also sacrificing Himself so that peace can be achieved.

While Paul and Barnabas were sharing with the Antioch (northern Israel) church about God's grace to the Gentiles, some Jews from the Jerusalem church said, 'did those Gentiles convert to Judaism first?' And we read in v.2 "*Paul and Barnabas had a sharp dispute and debate with them*". Or 'heated argument'. The word is often translated 'uproar' as in you take your stand and refuse to budge.

So how do you proceed? At this point we need to ask some questions:

Does it contradict or agree with Scripture? (vv.1-12)

Since these men came from Jerusalem, supposedly representing the elders and the apostles (however, read v. 24) Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem where a meeting is held with the leaders of the church, apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas use their travelling time to share what God was doing among the Gentiles to other churches along the way. We read that the brothers and sisters were responding with joy to the news of the gospel advancing. Okay, good sign. Doesn't seem to agree with these Jewish leaders.

They arrive in Jerusalem. Again Paul shares what God was doing with the Gentiles but some Jewish believers state,

The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Combining that with what was said in v.1, this was a test of salvation. How is one saved? Only by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ? Or by faith **and** obedience to the Mosaic laws? Both sides use Scripture and probably the sayings of Jesus to sound their arguments. But just because one uses Scripture to prove a point doesn't mean they quote it accurately. At a standstill they ask Peter to give an account. Why Peter? Because Gentile ministry essentially started with him. In v.7 he summarizes all of Ch. 10-11, of how God revealed this to him in a dream while also communicating with Cornelius, a Gentile Roman centurion to go to Peter and listen to his message. Peter says they heard the Word and believed and God confirmed it through the Holy Spirit's coming upon them.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Peter knows the heart of God and so he boldly points out what's at stake here:

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Paul reminds these Jewish believers that law-keeping was never a requirement for salvation. Faith in the promised words of God has always been the way. Why force Gentiles to do what neither Jew or Gentile were ever asked to do?

Peter's testimony silences the crowd. Then Paul and Barnabas share their testimony of seeing Gentiles come to faith in Christ and sharing with them the many miracles God did to affirm what He was doing. This of course brings up another test question:

Is it consistent with the testimony of God's work? (vv.13-18)

James – the Lord’s step-brother (James the apostle has been martyred) – appears to be the head of the Jerusalem church. All the apostles were Jewish. They grew up with the Law. What will he think? The silence of the crowd speaks volumes. People were listening. James summarizes this and says what the prophets say and what these men have shared are consistent with one another. He quotes a prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 that explains how Gentiles will be included among the people of God through David’s descendent, the Messiah. James wisely concludes,

“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

It’s a good statement yet a sad one at the same time. We can sometimes make some issues a test of fellowship that aren’t about salvation. We may differ in spiritual practices or bible translations or eschatology but these aren’t necessarily issues of salvation. Faith in Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection from the dead results in salvation; not faith and something else. This was a crucial moment in church history. And so this is a serious issue for all of us today. What defines faith salvation? Can we genuinely fellowship with others who add something to the gospel or take something away from the gospel? If we agree on the gospel, yet disagree on other things, another good question to ask is

Are there areas of agreement that we can both work on? (vv.20-21)

James does make a request to the Gentiles.

telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”.

All four of these issues were related to idolatrous practices that many Gentiles formerly engaged in. When they made sacrifices they accepted strangling the animals and eating the meat with blood in it. God clearly stated in the Law that animals must be slain and the blood drained because the blood represents life. Many idolatrous practices involved sexual immorality. James says you’ve been saved out of that so change the way you live. Believers are also commanded to be holy as God is holy, to avoid sexual immorality of any kind and the proper way of eating and partaking of meat sacrificed to God. The temple was still standing at this time. The Jerusalem believers still used it as a place of worship and prayer. In time they would see they would no longer need to make sacrifices. These weren’t tests of salvation but commands to keep from idolatrous practices for those who are now saved. The old life has gone, the new life has come.

So this issue is now agreed upon. Those Jewish leaders who felt strongly that Gentiles should become Jewish in addition to believing in Jesus, seemed to have been satisfied. The whole church (v.22) has agreed to this but that doesn’t mean everyone understands this. So once an agreed upon decision has been reached, how will all believers know?

Communicate Clearly So the Issue is Resolved or Understood (15:22-35)

I say understood because this continues to be an issue as we read Paul’s letters. Everywhere he went he was hounded by Jewish people claiming to have faith in Jesus yet accusing Paul of getting rid of the Law. At this point so that as many people as possible can know what the apostles hold to when it comes to Gentiles accepting Christ, they choose

choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.²³ With them they sent the following letter.

Notice they sent all well-respected Jewish leaders so that Jewish believers would understand that Gentiles don't need to come under the Law; and neither do the Jews, The Law is not part of the gospel. When resolutions on serious issues are reached, its important that good communication takes place so people are not in the dark about important issues. Like the apostles and elders, its important for us also to

Enlist trustworthy messengers (vv.22-23)

... People who are in the know and are respected by others. Communication is always the key to handling tough issues. At various times down through church history, key synods or councils have taken place so that they can clarify doctrinal issues. The Nicene Creed is a good example. At that time in history when the deity of Christ was being challenged, an agreed upon statement of faith was written so people would know what constitutes Christian faith. The Creed was written in a poetic format so it could be memorized and passed along. Communication is always key to sharing truth.

They picked trustworthy messengers who would

Explain the issue thoroughly (vv.24-29)

Paul, Barnabas, Silas and one named Barsabbas had a letter from the leaders of the Jerusalem Church that clearly explained the issue. Notice they cleared up false information.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

Things haven't changed a whole lot since then. False information or rumours or outright lies confuse people, even Christians. We can take this false information and share that in an unhealthy manner. James and the apostles sought to terminate that. They clear up the confusion.

And at this point we need to trust God and

Pray for a peaceful response (vv.30-35)

We're not told they prayed about this but I can't imagine them not praying about this. We pray because we want God to do the peacemaking, that God would bring about reconciliation between two Christian people or groups.

³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord

The people were glad, encouraged, strengthened and sent the messengers off with a blessing of peace. This is a miracle. Only God can bring about reconciliation between His estranged people when both are willing to see and accept the truth of His Word.

The principles used by the apostles and leaders of the early church to bring unity in disagreements are equally applicable to differences of opinion that we as believers find ourselves in on occasion. Do you have an unresolved issue with a Christian friend that has damaged your relationship? Is it that way because you've ignored it and hoped it would improve through prayer alone? Prayer is always crucial but peacemaking the Jesus way means dealing with the problem not pretending it will go away.

Is it theological? Are we truly open to hearing what God says and doing it, even if we are wrong. I have had Christians tell me 'Yes I know what the Bible says about this but I'm not doing that. I think that's putting God to the test, saying I know what the Bible says but I'm special; it doesn't apply to me.' Humility and listening is all part of doing what God wants.

Most of our damaged relationships usually come from a misunderstanding or misinformation. Wouldn't it be healthier to ask to sit down and discuss it with them, looking for common ground based on God's truth and our testimonies, so we can find healing and be strengthened and at peace? So often people don't really listen or use empty, impersonal conversation to avoid dealing with a problem or discussing serious spiritual issues of disobedience. Saying we believe the Bible is not the same as obeying the Word of God. Blessed are the doers of the Word and not hearers only.

If we believe the Word of God is God's very words that are beneficial for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in right living, then let's humbly allow God to speak to us about those relationships that need healthy healing and pursue unity. And then we too, after resolving the issue, will be glad, encouraged, strengthened and part in peace, looking forward to serving and fellowshiping together through the combined gifts God has given each of us for His church and glory.

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If you have any questions or comments about this message please
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