

No Small Debate
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
August 29, 2021-AM Service
Acts 15:1-21, 28-29
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We're approaching the end of our summer series on Acts. We've been thinking together about how the Gospel engages the world of the early church, and how it engages our world now. Today we turn to Acts 15, one of the earliest major church conflicts, in a time when we may never have been more aware of our need for the fresh wind of God's Spirit to help us navigate conflict. What's worth fighting about, and what's not? Should I speak my mind, or hold my peace? And, how long, oh Lord how long will we all be walking around with this ache in our chests at all the conflicted places—in our world, in our city, in our church, in our families, in our hearts?

Somehow, Paul and Barnabas had learned to manage physical hardship and emotional whiplash. There they were, back in Antioch sometime after the first missionary journey through Asia Minor.

They'd seen high highs: preaching the good news; healing in Jesus name; seeing many--both Jews and Gentiles--turn in faith to Christ. They'd seen low lows: stoning by an angry mob, running for their lives when their message was rejected.

After coming back to Antioch, they'd shared with the followers of Jesus there how "God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." (Acts 14:27). God first cracked that door open through Peter's visit to Cornelius; now through Paul and Barnabas the Holy Spirit was bringing many Gentiles to Christ.

But now, all of that good news for the Gentiles is called into question. Now, Paul and Barnabas find themselves at home defending the very gospel they've preached on the road. A group of believers from Jerusalem has trekked 250 miles north to Antioch and is systematically teaching the Christians there that they must become Jewish in order to be saved. "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1). Luke says this teaching "brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with them." Older English versions say they had "no small dissension and debate." Don't let Luke's understatement fool you, this was a very big deal.

If you turn over to Paul's letter to these churches—Galatians—you can hear his passionate concern that the good news of a crucified, resurrected Messiah receive no alterations, no substitutions, and no additions. Paul and Barnabas preached Jesus, simply Jesus, and faith in him as wholly sufficient for salvation.

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified...⁵ So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?" "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. "And we who have come to faith in Jesus two thousand years later read the Acts 15 decision of the early church with the end already in mind: *Of course* those who come to faith in Jesus aren't saved by being circumcised or keeping kosher. But the believers of Barnabas and Paul's time didn't know the end of the story. *They* didn't know how the debate would turn out. They had labor through the arduous process of working out their collective salvation with fear and trembling.

When Barnabas and Paul dispute with the Jewish believers at Antioch and later at Jerusalem, it's not at all clear that the gospel they've risked their lives to preach will be the gospel adopted by the mother church in Jerusalem. Of course God knows. But they don't. Few debates we face have higher stakes. For these first century believers, the decision of the Jerusalem Council had implications about who was "in" and who was "out" of God's community for time and eternity.

Lest we be too hard on the Jewish believers, remember this. For millennia, God's people had traveled a well-beaten path to bring outsiders into the community of faith. Members of other nations became God-fearers, people of the covenant, by being circumcised, following the laws and customs given by God to Moses Israel. A good first-century Jew knows that he isn't supposed to look like a Gentile or sound like a Gentile or follow along with the habits of Gentiles. God's holy people are...set apart from Gentiles. They're Jewish.

Except for Jesus. Jesus, who in a totally unexpected way entered human history. Jesus, who kept company with unclean people--tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, who came with salvation—first for the Jew and then also for the Gentile. Jesus--whose coming did not establish a Jewish nation on earth but instead

heralded the eternal Kingdom of God. The early church had to work out the implications of what belonging to God through Jesus meant.

So on the one hand you have the side that says, “Since the time of Abraham, God has placed the sign of his covenant in our bodies forever. This is how it’s always been.” And on the other hand you have the side that says, “In Jesus, God has done something new. We’ve seen his Spirit come upon uncircumcised Gentile believers, just as the Spirit came on us. That is evidence of God’s grace on them.”

Which argument resonates with you? Thankfully for all of us listening, that connection to God’s action in the past is not the only indicator of God’s will that the Council considered. If tradition and history alone had directed the church into the future, many of us would still be on the outside of God’s kingdom looking in.

So how did they do it? How did the dyed-in-the-wool Jewish believers and the up-and-coming church planters to the Gentiles discern the action of God and recognize a path forward together when it seemed like they were preaching different gospels? Luke doesn’t give us 15 pages of nitty-gritty meeting minutes. But there are some things he reports that are worth our noticing for our own conflicts.

- 1) Notice at the outset how neither group dismisses the other out of hand. When Barnabas and Paul can’t solve this soul-wrenching dispute with the group from Jerusalem in Antioch on their own, they ask for help. They don’t leave town to plant another church. They recognize their connection to other people of God. And so they go together to see the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the issue.
- 2) They gather a deliberative meeting with tested and trusted leaders of the church. They walk through a process. Listen. Think. Deliberate. Hold and steward conflicting emotions. Reflect and pray in the pauses. Rely on the testimony of Scripture. Invite the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the process. The Pharisees bring the question. Peter provides his testimony. Barnabas and Paul tell, for the third time in Acts 15, what they’ve seen God do in Asia Minor. And James, the brother of Jesus, moves a proposed solution. Their process recognizes that none of them alone is in charge--that by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the head of the church.
- 3) They keep the message of the gospel and mutual concern for one another at the forefront of their discussion. They develop a workable compromise that centers on the truth of what God has done in Jesus. “God, who knows the heart,” Peter says, “showed that he accepted [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. . . . We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Although there are distinctions and differences between the groups within the church now—the Gentiles don’t have to become Jews, the Jews don’t have to become Gentiles--there is no longer an “us” and a “them.” There is only “us,” people saved by grace and purified by faith. In sensitivity to the distress of the Gentile believers, the Council determines they can become Christians without becoming Jewish. They don’t have to undergo circumcision or bear the entire law of Moses. They need not be burdened with anything more than a few prohibitions—which are made out of sensitivity to the concerns of the Jewish believers. The Gentiles must refrain from habits that would turn them away from the true God and cut them off from fellowship with their conscientious Jewish siblings. They are to abstain from anything associated with idolatry: meat sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality especially in the context of pagan temple prostitution, and eating anything with the blood still in it. That’s it.
- 4) The council communicates decision to the churches in a unified way. The details of the debate were not rehashed in the letter. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” the letter to the churches says. Through their deliberations, the apostles and elders come to agree and endorse this compromise as God-directed and God-honoring. At the end of the day, the Jerusalem Council’s decision doesn’t rest on the best logical argument. It doesn’t reflect any one constituency’s interests alone, or the most persistent voices. It’s not based solely on tradition or culture. It’s based on the work of the Holy Spirit in individual hearts and in a group of people gathered in Jesus’ name as they listen to each other, look at Jesus, and reflect on his Word. I want to come back to something. In his speech Peter refers to God, who knows the heart. The Greek word order puts a little more emphasis on this phrase: Luke literally writes, ‘the heart-knowing God.’ In all our debating and all our deliberating, there is something key about keeping ourselves attentive to the heart-knowing God. The heart-knowing God knows your

heart. He knows my heart. He knows the heart of the person I disagree with vehemently. As Christians we believe that what we say and what we do is always before the face of God.

So when we enter the council room, when we walk into the neighborhood meeting, when we wade into a discussion with our colleague, or spouse, or friend, we do that with the help of the Holy Spirit. We do it before the face of the heart-knowing God. Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest and author. In one of his many books, *In the Name of Jesus*, he writes: "I have the impression that many of the debates within the Church...take place primarily on a moral level. On that level, different parties battle about right or wrong. But that battle is often removed from the experience of God's first love which lies at the base of all human relationships...." (30-31).

Nouwen goes on, "Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject. But when we are securely rooted in personal intimacy with the source of life, it will be possible to remain flexible without being relativistic, convinced without being rigid, willing to confront without being offensive, gentle and forgiving without being soft, and true witnesses without being manipulative" (32).

What do you think? Does the good news of the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ make such a thing possible? I believe it can and does. If ever we needed the grace to deal with burning issues from a place of rootedness in personal relationships with God, we need it now. If ever we needed the humility that comes from knowing ourselves held by the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving source of life, it's now. If ever we needed tools to remain tethered to Christ in the midst of conflict, it's now. Working this out together is one way we can be the fragrance of Christ in a world that is perishing. The Lord we serve did not stand far off from the conflicted places in his creation. He entered that creation, took on its weakness, shouldered its sin. He sent us his Spirit, the living flame of his presence, into our hearts so that his presence would light the world everywhere we go. And in his promise to be faithful, to complete the work he has begun in and around us, we place our hope.

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