

THE GENTILE QUESTION

ACTS 14, 15



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A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Gentile Question: Acts 14, 15
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Introduction to Acts 14, 15

Paul's first missionary journey was a success. Of course, he met with plenty of opposition, and no small amount of personal danger; nevertheless, many believed, many churches were started, and the Kingdom of Christ began to take root in more parts of the Roman world.

By the time Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they would have had many exciting stories to relate about the ongoing work of Christ, and how the Lord had used them and this church to open new beachheads for Kingdom expansion.

But trouble awaited them in Antioch as well. Opposition to the Gospel can arise from anywhere, even from within the Church itself. Paul and Barnabas would need the counsel of the larger Church to help settle a dispute about the true nature of the Gospel. But this, too, is simply one more aspect of the ongoing work of Christ.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Blinded by Religion

Pray Psalm 115.1-3.

Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us,
But to Your name give glory,
Because of Your mercy,
Because of Your truth.
Why should the Gentiles say,
“So where *is* their God?”
But our God *is* in heaven;
He does whatever He pleases.

Sing Psalm 115.1-3.

(Plainfield: *Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

Not to us, O God, not us, but unto Your Name give glory!
For Your love and faithfulness, ever to Your Name be glory!
Why should the nations cry, “Where is their God on high?”
You rule us, Lord, on high: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Read and meditate on Acts 14.1-13.

Preparation

1. What happened as Paul and Barnabas continue preaching in Iconium?
2. How did they respond?

Meditation

From Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas turned back to the east, arriving at Iconium. As was their custom, they went to the synagogue and waited for an opportunity to speak. When they did, they were very persuasive – because they were, as we’ve seen, very Biblical. A “great multitude” believed the Gospel, both of Jews, and of Greeks associated with the synagogue (v. 1).

But the power of the Gospel does not affect everyone alike. The enemies of the Gospel “stirred” up the Gentiles and “poisoned their minds” against Paul and Barnabas (v. 2). Despite the opposition, the brothers persisted, speaking boldly in the face of threats, and God blessed their witness with signs and wonders (v. 3). We might have expected that to calm the opposition, but it only served to fuel their anger. Soon the city was divided. Those opposing the Gospel became convinced that the only way to get rid of these preachers was to kill them (vv. 4, 5).

Effective witness-bearing does not always result in people coming to faith in Christ. We should expect some to believe, of course. But there will be many who just aren’t ready and will want to think or talk about it a little more. And there will be some who, for whatever reason, are downright hostile to the Good News and those who proclaim it. Their responses may not be rational, but they will be effective, at least with some.

Paul and Barnabas moved on to Lystra and Derbe (v. 6). The people of Lystra were so blinded by their religion that the only explanation they could offer for Paul’s preaching and the healing of the lame man (v. 8), was that their own gods had come among them. So the priest of Zeus moved to incorporate this amazing episode into the pagan religion of the Lystrans (vv. 9-13). This is as we might expect. To the snow-blind, everything looks green. To the religion-blind, everything looks like their worldview.

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Good works, good preaching, mixed responses. It has always been thus, and always will be thus. All people are *religious* in that they have some idea of ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth, and they are pursuing as much of that for themselves as they can. Christians know that God alone is ultimate goodness, beauty, and truth. But can we use the longings and hopes of lost people to “redirect” their “devotions” toward the Lord?

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Some people are blinded by religion. Others have their eyes opened by Jesus.

When we see Jesus, and we know that He sees us, we then actually care about seeing the people in our Personal Mission Field.

Do we like it when someone is aware of us? Sees us? Do we care that we have someone’s undivided attention? Well, I do, and I bet you do too.

When Paul was speaking, he was ministering to a crowd, but he was also ministering to the individuals; the parts who made up the whole. There was one chronically lame man in this large crowd who Paul observed intently and saw that he had faith to be healed (Acts 14.9). Paul was paying attention. To the crowd. And to the one man.

The first step to being mindful of others is to see Jesus. “...we wish to see Jesus” (Jn. 12.21). “But we see Jesus...” (Heb. 2.9). “...looking unto Jesus...” (Heb. 12.2).

And seeing Him, we are encouraged to see others: “I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Ps. 27.13). “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light we see light” (Ps. 36.9).

The best way to see Jesus, so we can ultimately see others, is through His Word: “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (Ps. 119.18). “The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Ps. 119.130).

There are many people in our Personal Mission Field who need us to see them, and to share the Good News with them.

We must never be so focused on a crowd, a small group, a task, or a cause (even seemingly good ones) that we ignore an individual in need. The program is never more important than the person!

Jesus told us, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another...By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13.34, 35). See them. Love them. Minister to them.

And together we “shall see His face...” (Rev. 22.4)

For reflection

1. It’s easy to get discouraged in sharing the Good News. What can you do to make sure you are daily renewed for this calling?
2. People who do not believe are blinded by their worldview. What does this mean for us as believers in trying to witness to them?
3. How can you be renewed in your love for Jesus every day?

The apostles teach them with these specific words, lest glory along with worship and adoration be conferred on themselves rather than to God, who alone is a help in times of need, and lest we worship any human being in place of God, that is, lest we place our

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confidence in the favor and power, intercession or restoration of some saint. Konrad Pelikan (1478-1556), Commentary on Acts 14:14.4

Pray Psalm 115.12-18.

Thank God for the many blessings He bestows upon you day by day. Call on Him to increase your faith, to have a greater vision of His sovereign exaltation over the world, and to be ready to praise, thank, and bear witness to Him throughout this day.

Sing Psalm 115.12-18.

(Plainfield: *Nothing but the Blood of Jesus*)

Blessings from our gracious Lord – ever to Your Name be glory –
will attend us evermore – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless all who fear You, Lord, all who obey Your Word,
all who Your Name adore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

Grant us, Savior, great increase – ever to Your Name be glory!
Bless us with eternal peace – ever to Your Name be glory!
Heaven and earth are Yours; let every soul adore
and bless You evermore: Ever to Your Name be glory!

2 Teaching, Tribulation, Tenacity

Pray Psalm 61.1, 2.

Hear my cry, O God;
Attend to my prayer.
From the end of the earth I will cry to You,
When my heart is overwhelmed;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Sing Psalm 61.1, 2.

(Quebec: [*Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts*](#))

Lord, hear my cry, heed my complaint! Hear, for my distant heart is faint.
When from the end of earth I sigh, set me upon that Rock on high.

Read Acts 14.1-23; meditate on verses 13-23.

Preparation

1. How did Paul try to connect the people of Lystra to the one true God?
2. What happened when the enemies of the Gospel arrived?

Meditation

Paul and Barnabas insisted they were not gods, tearing their clothes to show they were mere men and as a sign of dismay (v. 14). Then they declared, in effect, “You’re not hearing us. We’re not trying to *endorse* or *stretch* your religion, and certainly not to *fit in with it*; we’re here to *destroy* your useless faith!” Paul and Barnabas could be so forthright because they were bringing *Good News* of something – Someone – better than the religion of the Lystrans.

But the more Paul and Barnabas insisted on the truth, the more determined the people became to enfold them in their pagan rituals. We have the feeling this situation is about to get out of control (v. 18).

We should not overlook the witness of God in creation and culture when we are sharing the Gospel. God is revealing Himself there (vv. 15-17; Ps. 19.1-4), and that revelation, seen for what it is, can be powerful (Ps. 8.1, 2; Rom. 1.19, 20). But of itself it’s not enough to bring conviction and conversion. For that we need the preaching of the Word and the Gospel.

Tribulation began (v. 22) once the enemies of the Gospel arrived (vv. 19, 20). Stoned and looking for all the world like he was dead, Paul lay silent and motionless before those who believed, who must have been absolutely stunned. Then, getting up, *be headed back into the city!* Hit me again, man! (v. 21) Paul knew his work was not finished yet. He was no glutton for punishment, he just wanted to finish what he started, and that meant making sure the believers in Lystra were secure in the faith and properly ordered for ongoing growth.

Then Paul and Barnabas headed eastward to Derbe (v. 20), still preaching and making disciples. After many more believed, Paul and Barnabas determined that was enough for this first trip. Now they retraced their steps, back from Derbe to Lystra to Iconium, and to Antioch of Pisidia (v. 22), “strengthening the souls of the disciples” at each stop (v. 23). They were checking to make sure the fruit remained. They also appointed elders in every church – mostly “house” churches, I suspect.

No one ever said the work of evangelizing the lost, starting churches, and making disciples was easy. It’s hard

work, and requires firm commitment, not only from church leaders but from all members of the believing community.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

The praises of men, just like beauty, are passing and fleeting; but the person who fears the Lord is to be praised (Prov. 31.30).

Look at what happened to Paul and Barnabas. One minute the people could hardly be restrained from offering sacrifices to them (Acts 14.18) and the next, Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city and left for dead (Acts 14.19).

We should not seek the praise of men. We should only seek to please the Lord. As Jesus warned us: “I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.” “Beware of men.” “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10.16, 17, 28).

“The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe” (Prov. 29.25).

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12.32).

In order to be pleasing in the sight of the Lord, we must have faith, because without it, we will find it impossible to please Him. (Heb. 11.6) But through the blood of the everlasting covenant made perfect by Jesus, God will make us complete in every good work to do His will, working in us what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever (Heb. 13.20, 21).

He will make us well pleasing in His sight; but we must want it and work towards it. We must willingly participate in the change. We must present our bodies as a living sacrifice, setting aside worldly desires and the praises of people, to be instead: holy, and acceptable to God. It is our reasonable service (Rom. 12.1). People are fickle. God is not. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13.8).

*Oh let my love with fervor burn,
and from the world now let me turn;
living for Thee, and Thee alone,
bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;
Only one life, ‘twill soon be past,
only what’s done for Christ will last.
(C.T. Studd, 1860-1931)*

For reflection

1. Where does the courage come from that Paul showed in these verses? How can you have more of that courage?
2. What does it mean to strengthen the soul? What are you doing to strengthen your soul?
3. Why are tribulations necessary for entering the Kingdom of God? What kinds of tribulations?

*The grace of God, and nothing less, effectually establishes the souls of the disciples. It is true, we must count upon much tribulation, but it is encouragement that we shall not be lost and perish in it. The Person to whose power and grace the converts and the newly-established churches are commended, clearly was the Lord Jesus, “on whom they had believed.” Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Acts 14.19-28**

Pray Psalm 61.3-8.

Ask the Lord to shelter and strengthen you for this day’s work in your Personal Mission Field. Call on Him for mercy and truth, and praise Him in advance for how He will use you today.

Sing Psalm 61.3-8.

(Quebec: [*Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts*](#))

You are a Refuge, Lord, for me, towering o'er my enemy.

Let me find shelter 'neath Your wings, dwell in Your tent eternally.

Lord, You have heard what I have vowed; You have on me Your grace bestowed.

You will prolong my years, my life, keep me alive 'mid trial and strife.

I will with You e'ermore abide; let lovingkindness take my side.

Let truth preserve me all my days; I will forever sing Your praise.

3 Home Again

Pray Psalm 125.1, 2.

Those who trust in the LORD
Are like Mount Zion,
Which cannot be moved, *but* abides forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the LORD surrounds His people
From this time forth and forever.

Sing Psalm 125.1, 2.

(St. Gertrude: *Onward, Christian Soldiers*)
All who trust in Jesus, strong as Zion stand!
Naught shall ever move them from their promised land!
Like the hills surrounding safe Jerusalem,
Christ surrounds His Church and holds her in His mighty Hand!

Refrain, v. 1

All who trust in Jesus, strong as Zion stand!
Naught shall ever move them from their promised land!

Read Acts 14.1-28; meditate on verses 24-28.

Preparation

1. Where did Paul and Barnabas end up?
2. What did they do there?

Meditation

We might wonder why Paul and Barnabas didn't go back to Cyprus, to check on the work there. Cyprus seems merely to have been a stopover on the way to the Asian mainland. We don't read of any converts there, except for the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The apostles decided to head back to Antioch after having retraced their steps, except for Cyprus. They obviously felt a need to report on their work to their "home church."

The church in Antioch of Syria had graciously sent Paul and Barnabas out, so the people there would have wanted to hear about the results of the mission. The focus of the report was on the work God did in bringing many Gentiles to faith (v. 27). We see a couple of principles at work here, one of accountability and one of unity.

Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for "a long time," no doubt continuing to strengthen the churches there through their preaching and teaching. We see how important it was to the apostles that churches be established and put in order. Christ's agenda is to build His Church (Matt. 16.18), and the book of Acts shows us what this, the ongoing work of Christ, involves. Acts provides a template for launching, establishing, and dispersing the work of the Kingdom through churches that are properly ordered for worship, shepherding, disciple-making, and witness.

The work of the Kingdom – reconciling the world to God – comes through the Church, and local churches as expressions of the one worldwide Body of Christ. We can learn much from what we've seen in Paul's first missionary journey about the local church and the ongoing work of Christ.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Home is where we feel as if we belong. Cozy and secure.

On earth, God has planned for us to be in a family, in a community, in a church. These are the places we find structure, guidance, and love.

But what if home might be only an idea? Something longed for but maybe not experienced?

Then there's the community. Do we belong there either?

Finally, there's the church. But is that what it should be? Is it a welcoming, loving, and accepting place? Strike three, for some.

But God. In His mercy, has prepared a place for us. A home base. In His heart now. And eventually with Him in heaven. "I will take you as My people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6.7). "You shall be My people, and I will be your God" (Jer. 30.22).

Paul and Barnabas went back to their home church to tell them of their adventures. The people were eager to hear all they had to share and encouraged them in their work. That is as it should be.

But just in case you don't experience home as it should be, let's concentrate on God's heart as our home: "Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young—even Your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they will still be praising You" (Ps. 84.3, 4).

And Jesus says to us, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know" (Jn. 14.1-4).

Because we know what it is like to long for home, we must work hard to make sure those in our Personal Mission Field feel at home with Jesus, the church, and with us. A spiritual home. A place to settle in and be safe with Jesus. Peter said that we can cast all our care upon the Lord Jesus because He cares for us" (1 Pet. 5.7). He is the way, the truth, and the life, and the only way to Home Security (Jn. 14.6).

For reflection

1. In a very real sense, Jesus is our home, our destination, our dwelling-place. Explain.
2. What makes a local church feel like a home? What do you contribute to your church to make it a home?
3. The work of the Kingdom is "reconciling the world to God". What does that mean for your Personal Mission Field?

*As ambassadors returning from a mission usually give an account of their acts, so Paul and Barnabas give to the church a complete account of their travels, in order to show how faithfully they carried out their ministry and at the same time to encourage the believers to give thanks to God, for the actual situation was affording ample grounds for doing so. John Calvin (1509-1564), *Commentary on Acts 14.27**

Pray Psalm 125.3-5.

Pray that God will guard you against all wickedness and temptation, and that He will use you today as an ambassador of good to the people in your Personal Mission Field.

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Sing Psalm 125.1, 3-5.

(St. Gertrude: *Onward, Christian Soldiers*)

Wickedness shall rest not on this holy land;
sinfulness shall never come forth from their hand.

Trusting in the Savior, firm in His caress,
ever shall His favor on this holy city rest.

Refrain, v. 1

All who trust in Jesus, strong as Zion stand!
Naught shall ever move them from their promised land!

Lord, do good and care for those upright in heart.

All who turn to evil shall from You depart.

Sinful men may increase, on their way to hell!

Save Your people, let your peace abound in Israel!

Refrain

4 Dissension

Pray Psalm 94.1-4.

O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongs—
O God, to whom vengeance belongs, shine forth!
Rise up, O Judge of the earth;
Render punishment to the proud.
LORD, how long will the wicked,
How long will the wicked triumph?
They utter speech, and speak insolent things;
All the workers of iniquity boast in themselves.

Sing Psalm 94.1-4.

(Finlandia: *Be Still, My Soul*)

O God of vengeance, mighty Lord, shine forth!
Rise up, O sovereign Judge of all the earth!
And render recompense to all the proud!
How long, O Lord, shall they boast long and loud?
They pour forth words, in arrogance they speak;
naught but their own exalting do they seek.

Read and meditate on Acts 15.1-11.

Preparation

1. What problem arose in these verses?
2. What role did Paul and Barnabas play in seeking to resolve it?

Meditation

While Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, and Peter with them, certain teachers arrived from Jerusalem and insisted that the Gentile believers needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses if their faith was going to be valid (v. 1). It was to these men that Peter initially deferred, provoking Paul's confrontation (Gal. 2). Peter returned to Jerusalem a chastened but more mature believer. He needed to be, to take the lead in resolving the Gentiles question.

This was a matter of such importance that it could not be settled at the local church level only. The disputing parties must go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles, elders, and churches (and Church) there, for a full debate and final resolution (vv. 2-5). The sense of the oneness of the Body of Christ is so strong in the book of Acts!

Peter's stumble in Antioch was not his undoing; rather, it contributed to his growth and readiness to serve. He stood boldly to proclaim the orthodox faith (vv. 6-11).

Christianity does not seek to stifle dissent, but to hear it, weigh it, and resolve it. What Christianity must *not* do is accommodate dissent from received teachings – each person holding their own opinion about things, as if it doesn't matter all that much what people believe. These days in the church we don't like disagreements. We don't like debates. We're not too keen on theology. We don't think we should be confronting people publicly about their sin. We think every church should be allowed to believe what it wants, organize itself as it chooses, and still be allowed to think of itself as a church. Is it any wonder the Church today is nowhere near as strong as the one we're observing in the book of Acts?

The ongoing work of Christ always requires a certain amount of “back-and-filling.” We saw this as Paul and Barnabas returned to the churches the Lord had started under their preaching, to set them in order and strengthen the disciples. We saw this in Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas reported on their work. And now we see that even in the realm of doctrine it is necessary, from time to time, to review, clarify, and refocus what we believe and what we teach.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

“Peter’s stumble was not his undoing; rather, it contributed to his growth and readiness to serve.”

Peter made mistakes, but he was so teachable and so humble. He could have been upset that a newer member of the Church, Paul, had taken theological lead in the group. He could have been bitter because Paul was, after all, a former murderer of their group members. He could have been so many things contrary to what God wanted him to be. He had a right! But no. He needed to be an example to the Church, to those of us that would follow in his path. He needed to show us how to do it right. And he did.

We need to take his words, written to the Jews of the Dispersion, to heart. He has earned the right to say it: “Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world” (1 Pet. 5.5-9).

Our adversary is still walking about like a roaring lion, and one of his favorite places to wreak havoc is in the Church. So we must be on our guard, with zealous righteousness wrapped up in humility and submissiveness. Almost sounds oxymoronic. But this is what the Lord requires. To do justly. To love mercy. And to walk humbly with Him (Mic. 6.8),

Clearly, a task that can only be accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is able (Jude 24, 25). We must be willing (Jude 20, 21).

For reflection

1. Works of any kind cannot save us. Why not?
2. Yet, we cannot truly be saved without the evidence of good works (Eph. 2.10; Heb. 6.9, 10)? Why not?
3. So we could say, “We’re not saved *by* works; but we’re not saved *without* them.” Explain.

There is a strange proneness in us to think that all do wrong who do not just as we do. Their doctrine was very discouraging. Wise and good men desire to avoid contests and disputes as far as they can; yet when false teachers oppose the main truths of the gospel, or bring in hurtful doctrines, we must not decline to oppose them. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Acts 15.1-6

Pray Psalm 94.12-23.

Seek the help and blessing of God as you go out to work in your Personal Mission Field today. Thank Him in knowing that He will be with you as your Rock and Refuge, and trust Him to lead you every next step of the way.

Sing Psalm 94.12-23.

(Finlandia: *Be Still, My Soul*)

How blessed are all whom by Your Law You teach.

Relief is theirs, them trouble may not reach.

You will Your holy people not forsake;

Your righteous judgment gladly they will take.
God will for me against the wicked stand
to drive out evil from our holy land.

If God were not my help, my soul would lie
consigned to silence, very near to die.
Sure I would slip, did not You love me, Lord;
when troubles rise, You soothe me by Your Word.
What pow'r or throne against You can arise?
What foe against You evil can devise?

Though all our foes together 'gainst us stand,
us to condemn and banish from the land,
yet God our Stronghold and our Rock abides.
Our Refuge He, His grace shall take our side!
He makes the wicked bear their wicked ways,
and will destroy them ever and always.

5 Case Closed

Pray Psalm 74.12-17.

For God *is* my King from of old,
Working salvation in the midst of the earth.
You divided the sea by Your strength;
You broke the heads of the sea serpents in the waters.
You broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces,
And gave him *as* food to the people inhabiting the wilderness.
You broke open the fountain and the flood;
You dried up mighty rivers.
The day *is* Yours, the night also *is* Yours;
You have prepared the light and the sun.
You have set all the borders of the earth;
You have made summer and winter.

Sing Psalm 74.12-17.

(Rockingham Old: [*O Lord Most High, with All My Heart*](#))

Our God is King from long ago, Who works deliv'rance in the land;
He split the sea, He crushed His foes; against Him none can ever stand.

You opened the springs, fresh water flowed; to You belong both day and night.
You bound the seasons and the earth and gave the sun its glorious light.

Read Acts 15.1-29; meditate on verses 12-29.

Preparation

1. Who spoke at this council?
2. What did the council decide to do?

Meditation

Peter's argument for not troubling the Gentile believers with Jewish customs had a powerful effect. When he was finished, no one said a word. Next, Paul and Barnabas weighed in, and their report strengthened the case made by Peter (v. 12). James, the Lord's half-brother, put forward a motion for the assembly's consideration. First, he summarized Peter's argument. Then he reinforced Peter's argument, and the report of Paul and Barnabas, by grounding everything in the Old Testament, specifically, Amos 9.11, 12. Thus, based on Scripture and church practice, he offered his motion in vv. 19, 20.

The restrictions spelled out in verse 20 focus on common religious and moral practices among the Gentiles of the Roman world. If the converted Gentiles were to show themselves to be a people holy to the Lord, they would need to be conspicuous about the change the Gospel makes, precisely at those points where everyone would be most likely to observe them.

The council put its decision into writing so that it could be communicated to the churches where the problem first arose, in Antioch (vv. 22, 23). Two key leaders from the Jerusalem Church were sent along with Paul and Barnabas to serve as a kind of counterweight to those who had previously come from Jerusalem and caused the problem in the first place. Their voice, together with that of Paul and Barnabas and the letter from the council, would have reassured Jewish and Gentile believers alike.

We also notice, in the address of the letter, that the scope of its application reached beyond Antioch into Syria and Cilicia. Clearly the assembly intended its directive to apply to churches wherever Gentiles were being converted, because Cilicia covers the area of Paul's first missionary journey. We can see from this situation that, in the ongoing work of Christ, the Lord intends a kind of *connectionalism* for His churches.

We witness in the proceedings and actions of this council the powerful work of the Spirit of Christ in bringing sound doctrine to light, increasing unity within the Church, and continuing the ongoing work of Christ in the Roman world. Only the Spirit can knit the hearts of disparate people into one consensus of thought and action.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

“Known to God from eternity are all His works” (Acts 15.18).

God is eternal – previously, now, and forever. He had no beginning, and He will have no end (Rev. 1.8). And from eternity past He knew what He would create. He knew what He wanted that creation to be like, and what He wanted it to accomplish. He knew each person who ever was or ever will be and everything and everybody was made to do His will.

He put in place His Law (Ex. 20.1-17) to guide His works. And He added circumcision as a sign of belonging to Him, as His people. When Gentiles were added into the Church, He lifted the need for circumcision as a sign. The Law remained for all people everywhere to obey wholeheartedly.

As the disciples wrote in their letter to the people in Antioch: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” (Acts 15.28, 29).

The Church cannot function with sin in its midst. Joshua heard this same message from the LORD: “Get up, sanctify the people, and say, ‘Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, because thus says the LORD God of Israel: “There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you”’” (Josh. 7.13). It has always been thus. God's work must be done by God's people in a righteous way so that He will bless it.

Hubris is alive in the Church today. People think that they can blatantly commit whatever sins they choose, grace will cover it, and God will bless it, and the green grass will grow all around. But that is a lie. And we must never participate in it.

Our eternal God has morals. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness (Hab. 1.13). All His works are perfect. All His creatures are not. But we can be through Jesus, “having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (Rom. 5.9). Saved to obey.

And we, too, must keep ourselves from evil, and by this, do well in His sight.

Case closed.

For reflection

1. Does doctrine matter? Why?
2. How can you keep spiritual pride from undermining your walk with and work for the Lord?
3. Why can the Church not function with sin in its midst? What about us? Can we?

The Gentile Question: Acts 14, 15

The council listened to James because he was the first of the three pillars of the church (see Gal. 2:9). He was the leader of the church in Jerusalem until he was stoned to death at the insistence of the high priest in A.D. 62. James was the Lord's half brother, the one who did not believe until the Lord appeared to him privately after the Resurrection (see 1 Cor. 15:7). Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Note on Acts 15.13

Pray Psalm 74.18-23.

Seek the Lord for revival in your own walk with Him, revival in His churches, and a worldwide awakening to the Good News of Jesus. Ask Him to protect you and all His people as you labor in your Personal Mission Field today. Call on Him to keep His enemies at bay so that the Gospel will increase throughout the world.

Sing Psalm 74.18-23.

(Rockingham Old: *[O Lord Most High, with All My Heart](#)*)

Remember this, O Lord, our God: a foolish people spurns Your Name.
Deliver not Your flock to them, nor leave Your holy ones to shame.

Your covenant recall, renew, for violence spreads throughout the earth,
The poor and needy rescue, Lord, and we shall sing Your matchless worth!

Arise O God, and plead Your cause! See how the fools reproach Your Name.
Their voices quell, their uproar still, who Your majestic grace defame.

6 Back to the Ongoing Work

Pray Psalm 96.1-4.

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless His name;
Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day.
Declare His glory among the nations,
His wonders among all peoples.
For the LORD *is* great and greatly to be praised;
He *is* to be feared above all gods.

Sing Psalm 96.1-4.

(Mit Freuden Zart: *All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above*)
Sing to the Lord! O, bless His Name! All nations tell His glory!
Salvation's tidings loud proclaim; let earth rehearse His story!
For God is greatly to be praised; His throne above all gods is raised.
Fear Him, and sing His glory!

Read Acts 15.1-41; meditate on verses 30-41.

Preparation

1. What did Paul propose to do?
2. What caused Paul and Barnabas to split up?

Meditation

We note that the Gentile believers in Antioch did not feel put upon by the directive of the Jerusalem council. They rejoiced and were greatly encouraged to receive this word of clarification and instruction (vv. 30, 31). Following the delivery of the council's decision, Judas and Silas were given the opportunity to speak, and not just once. They stayed around for some time, doubtless so that they could answer questions, observe the situation in Antioch, and help Paul and Barnabas deal with any issues that might arise from the implementation of the council's directive (vv. 32, 33).

Their work completed, they were sent off in peace, and Paul and Barnabas were able to get back to business as usual, preaching and teaching the Word of God, together with many others who were teachers in the churches there. It seems that preaching and teaching are a continuous need in the churches (v. 35).

John Mark obviously showed some potential for missionary work – perhaps even some skills as a writer? – and Barnabas was probably hoping to encourage his further growth and development by some on-the-job training. Paul, on the other hand, remembered Mark's failure during the first mission. He could not know what troubles they might encounter on this return journey, and he did not think it wise either to expose John Mark to such uncertainty or to risk being hindered by his failing again in some way (vv. 36-38).

So Paul and Barnabas argued with one another. Sometimes believers must argue, even disagree sharply, to discern the Lord's will in a situation. As it turns out, both men were right in this dispute, but for different reasons. Paul was right to expect more difficulty on this second journey. But Barnabas was right, too. His investment in John Mark's development helped to prepare him as a useful servant (2 Tim. 4.11) in the Lord's work.

Agreeing to disagree, Paul and Barnabas set off on their different, but complementary, missions, continuing

the ongoing work of the Lord according to their separate callings (vv. 39-41).

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

Paul's idea was a good one. Let's go back to all the cities where we have preached the word of the Lord. We can visit the churches and see how everyone is doing (Acts 15.36). OK, says Barnabas. That sounds workable. How about this idea? Let's take John Mark with us so he can improve his ministry skills. And that is where these plans came to a screeching halt.

We are not charged with deciding who was right and who was wrong in this situation; but what we can see is that Barnabas is ever the encourager. This man's given name was Josep. But the apostles, early on, had renamed him Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement (Acts 4.36). He was living up to his nickname. As always.

So many personalities make up the Church. Each one, when filled with the Holy Spirit can be used by the Lord. We needn't try and duplicate someone else; we merely need to be our best us, obediently serving in our Personal Mission Field with the personality and resources that we have been given.

"Anxiety in the heart of man causes depression, but a good word makes it glad" (Prov. 12.25). We can offer that good word to encourage others in their calling from the Lord.

"...God anointed Jesus...with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good...for God was with Him" (Acts 10.38). Since we are filled with the Holy Spirit and power, and God is with us, we too can go about doing good, though the good we do may differ dramatically from what others do.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12.21). We are commanded to love, even to feed and give drink to our enemies (Matt. 5.44, 45; Rom. 12.20). We can only do this by the Holy Spirit's power that is within us. But if we can do it for an enemy, we surely can do it for a friend in the faith.

It does not matter if our personality leans toward being a Paul, or a Barnabas; what matters is that we are doing exactly what God has called us to do. "But in every great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work" (2 Tim. 2.20, 21). This is a workable plan.

Our brother Paul, later wrote, these words: "...that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me" (Rom. 1.12). Whoever we are, and whatever we are like, we can all do this for the sake of the ongoing and united work of the Kingdom.

For reflection

1. How would you summarize the calling God has for you?
2. What will that calling require of you today?
3. How can you encourage your fellow believers in their own callings today?

*The point is not that they differed in their opinions but that they accommodated themselves to each other. Thus a greater good resulted from their parting, for which this provided an excuse. What then? Did they withdraw in enmity? God forbid! Recall how after this Barnabas received much praise from Paul in his epistles. John Chrysostom (344-407), *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles* 34*

Pray Psalm 96.8-13.

Offer praise and thanks to God for all His goodness, and for the work He has set before you this day. Pray

The Gentile Question: Acts 14, 15

that He will show you more of His goodness, beauty, and glory in the creation, so that you praise Him throughout the day. Praise Him that He is coming again soon.

Sing Psalm 96.8-13.

(Mit Freuden Zart: *All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above*)

Bring offerings sweet to Him, our Lord, in holy garments praise Him!
Tremble before Him, all the earth; among the nations raise Him!
The earth is fixed, it will not move; the peoples will His justice prove.
Exalt the Lord and praise Him.

Let heaven sing with lusty voice; let earth and sea sing sweetly!
Let fields and trees in Him rejoice, for He is coming swiftly
to judge the world in righteousness, the peoples in His faithfulness.
He comes; exalt Him greatly!

7 The Hard Work of Unity

Pray Psalm 48.1-3.

Great *is* the LORD, and greatly to be praised
In the city of our God,
In His holy mountain.
Beautiful in elevation,
The joy of the whole earth,
Is Mount Zion *on* the sides of the north,
The city of the great King.
God *is* in her palaces;
He is known as her refuge.

Sing Psalm 48.1-3.

(Cwm Rhonda: [*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah!*](#))

Great is God, now greatly praise Him in the city of the Lord!
Holy she, His lovely mountain, great and glorious by His Word!
God her King is great within her, He, her Stronghold ever sure!
He, her Stronghold ever sure!

Review Acts 14 and 15; meditate on Acts 15.6-12.

Preparation

1. Who spoke in these verses?
2. What was the gist of their message?

Meditation

In the minds of Peter and Paul, there was never a thought that the Church of Jesus Christ would ever be anything other than one body and one people. Jesus, they knew, had insisted that the visible unity of His people was crucial to their effective witness (Jn. 17.21). Peter would later write that all believers are part of a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” and the one “people of God” (1 Pet. 2.9, 10). The churches in Antioch had already demonstrated their oneness with the believers in Judea by sending aid for their relief (Acts 11.27-30). Paul would later write that it is important believers work together for unity. He chided the Corinthians for their divisiveness (1 Cor. 1), and he urged the Ephesians to work hard at maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with all believers (Eph. 4.3).

So it’s not surprising that we find them here in Jerusalem, working to keep the Church together as one people, one nation, and one body. And the fact that they succeeded – both for the churches in Jerusalem and Judea as well as for those far-flung among the Gentiles – indicates that those who served with them understood the importance of unity as well.

They recognized a problem and realized it could divide the believers. So they gathered in council, set forth the situation, searched the Scriptures, and arrived at a conclusion that rejected the false teaching (v. 10), reminded the churches to keep focused on Jesus (v. 11), and counseled them how to maintain their separate and holy status in a world of sin (vv. 23-28).

Maintaining unity among all those who believe in Jesus is not easy work, and it’s made even more difficult in our day when *dis*unity among the churches of our Lord is the norm, and few seem to care about finding ways of expressing the oneness we have in Jesus Christ. Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace must be a *visible*

unity. Pray that God will put it on the hearts of church leaders in communities around the world to seek that visible unity which persuades the unbelieving world that Jesus Christ has been sent from God for salvation.

Treasures Old and New: Matthew 13.52; Psalm 119.162

The devil dances to the tune of disunity. Nothing thrills him more, whether it be in a marriage, the home, the Church, the community, or the world at large. It is his specialty. Within his chained-up sphere, he has managed the mayhem on a thousand fronts.

But God desires unity for His children. So, when the opposite arrives, we can rest assured we are serving the wrong master. Or someone is and needs to be rooted out. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas set about to do just that.

Jesus prayed before His death and resurrection that we might be as one. “As You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (Jn. 17.21). Do we deny His existence by our disunity? Or nullify His claims to be God? He answers “Yes” to that.

And what about our standing as Christians? If we are not in accord with one another on our essential beliefs, then we nullify our claims to belong Christ. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn. 4.7, 8). “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn.13.35).

Disagreements will always arise because we are individuals. Billy Graham quoted his wife Ruth as saying, “If two people agree on everything, one of them is unnecessary.” We are all necessary, so it is how we as believers handle the dissensions that is the crux of the Bible’s teaching.

God knows our hearts. Peter captured the sum of this truth when he spoke of everyone’s salvation: “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us [the Jews], and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15.8, 9).

What is important to God is the state our heart, for only when our hearts are right can we be one together in the Lord:

“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, and take away the foreskins of your hearts...” (Jer. 4.4).

“Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer” (Deut. 10.16).

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deut. 30.6).

“For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16.7).

With all of our differences, the miracle of grace occurs, when unity happens because of Christ. We set aside our personal issues and strive to find the Scriptural solution to whatever problems arise. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Ps. 133.1), as we endeavor to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4.3).

It is hard work; but well worth doing!

For reflection

1. Very little visible unity exists among the churches of our Lord today. Does this matter? Explain.
2. Jesus Christ and His salvation is the only sure foundation and common core of Christian unity. Why?
3. Can Christians disagree amicably about certain matters? What can we do to work for greater unity?

The Gentile Question: Acts 14, 15

While the testimony of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul was important for the council in making their decision, something more than the experience of the Gentiles had to be taken into consideration. The council needed to know what the Word of God said. James pointed out that what was happening among the Gentiles was in full agreement with the OT (Amos 9:11, 12). Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Bible Not on Acts 15.15-18

Pray Psalm 48.9-14.

Praise God for His grace and lovingkindness to His people. Pray that He will unite His people, all over the world, in seeking Him for revival, renewal, and awakening to Jesus Christ.

Sing Psalm 48.9-14.

(Cwm Rhonda: [*Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah!*](#))

For Your grace and lovingkindness we proclaim Your matchless worth!

As Your Name is, great and boundless, let Your praise fill all the earth.

Let Your people sing rejoicing for the judgment of Your truth;
for the judgment of Your truth.

Walk about the blessed city, see her beauty, see her power.

Count her ramparts, filled with glory, look on ev'ry mighty tower.

Tell her glory to the nations: God will guide her evermore;

God will guide her evermore!

The Gentile Question: Acts 14, 15

For reflection or discussion

1. What kinds of threats exist today, pressuring believers to compromise the pure Gospel of the Kingdom? How should church leaders address these threats?
2. What is church discipline? How does it work? Why is it so important?
3. Based on what we've seen thus far in Acts, what does a local church need to make a solid contribution to the ongoing work of Christ?
4. Why is maintaining sound doctrine so important? How do your church leaders work to ensure that only sound doctrine is taught in your church?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 14 and Acts 15?

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