

The Council at Jerusalem

Acts 15 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "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. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ 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 did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors 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 signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon^[a] has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ "After this I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things^[b]—

¹⁸ things known from long ago.^[c]

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

³⁰ So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 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 believers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁴ [\[d\]](#) ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Settling Strife—You Hurt My Heart
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Acts 15
Rev. Richard J. deLange

Dear Church,

Watch this video and listen as two toddlers argue about whether it is raining or sprinkling!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-jlFn8GKjA>

Isn't that cute and sad at the same time? Isn't it true that arguing, in some sense, hurts our heart!? No matter who we are, it hurts when we have sharp disagreements with people we know and love. It hurts our heart. It can hurt even when we have strife with strangers—people we don't know well.

But it's part of life.

Inevitable Disputes

Acts 15 show us that disputes—even in the church—are inevitable. Strife is inevitable. Today's reading takes place maybe 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus but it didn't take that long, I'm sure, to discover difference and tensions in the church. As long as a church is seeking to faithfully follow the Lord, there will be disputes over doctrine or practice, orthodoxy or orthopraxy.

You get two people together and you'll have differences. No matter how much those two think alike and come from similar backgrounds, eventually there's going to be a rub. Dennis and Mae will discover that Simon and Stephen are going to fight with each other even though they are twins. They've been side by side since conception. They experience the same things. Eat the same food. Sleep side by side. They do life together but they will still fight. Pastor Michael has two year old twins and he can tell you! Likewise, couples that say they've been together for 20 years and have never had a fight, might not be lying. But they would be lying if they said they've never had a disagreement they had to work out. And that's true in every church as well. On every issue in the church, there is bound to be at least two perspectives, reactions, thoughts and suggested solutions which need to be worked out together.

People are all different and that's why we have disagreements, disputes, strife and arguments. People come from different homes, different cultures, different religions and different schools where they learned different things.

Sometimes the things we debate are as simple as those toddlers arguing about the water coming from the sky. The little boy's mom told him it was sprinkling. So that's what he's holding on to. That water is "sprinkling"! You can't call it anything else because his mom speaks the truth. Meanwhile the little girls—I think they are twin sisters—argue that it's "raining" because that's what their mom said. For our adult eyes and ears, we immediately sense the humour in this debate but those little ones are dead serious in their convictions and aren't going to budge. And that's what happens to all of us when certain issues arise. We stick to what we've been taught. We believe our teachers interpreted scripture correctly and taught us accordingly. We have deep convictions about certain matters.

You can only imagine how the argument went in Galatia, where Paul and Barnabas had been preaching and leading Gentiles or Greeks to Christ. One of the things we don't always realize is that Jews were spread all over the place. They had synagogues in many different towns outside of what was Israel. So as Paul went to share the gospel "to the ends of the earth" in the Gentile world, one of his first stops in every town was a Jewish synagogue. As the Holy Spirit convicted hearts, Jews would turn to Jesus.

Then Paul might preach on the street corners or by altars to the gods of the Greek pantheon. And that's where Gentiles as well would convert.

Jewish and Greek believers come together to form the First Christian Church of that town. They'd share a deep new-found love for Jesus but they'd also discover some things that they didn't appreciate or understand about each other.

You see, Gentile Christians remained part of their social and ethnic group as did the Jewish converts. It's the same for us. The Nieva family still holds many Filipino traditions dear just like those of us from other backgrounds might love customs of countries where our family comes from. It could be eating strange things like Filipino Adobo, Scottish haggis or Dutch olliebollen. Similarly, both Jews and Greeks came to the church with their own baggage, traditions and cultural practices.

Some Jews, in particular, looked with disdain on the pagan practices of the Greeks but also simply assumed and strongly believed that a Greek who became a Christian must also take on certain Jewish customs which they equated with being essential to the Christian faith. The debate about these differences comes to expression in Paul's letter to the Galatian Churches where he and Barnabas have been preaching. Acts records that missionary journey where churches in Galatia were founded and chapter 15, like the book of Galatians, addresses a vocal Jewish conviction about Greeks needing to be circumcised. A small group of zealous Jewish Christian believers—called the party of the Pharisees in v.5—went from town to town in Galatia

after Paul had converted Greeks. These teachers said that Paul didn't tell the Christians the whole story—Greek Christian men and boys still needed to be circumcised. So, the Galatian Christians were confused and had debates about this.

That's one dispute. The central one of Acts 15 and the book of Galatians.

Beyond that theological dispute, we find personality clashes. The end of Acts 15 tells us the story of Paul and Barnabas having a very heated debate about taking John Mark (or just plain Mark) along on the next stage of their missionary journey. The word translated "sharp disagreement" in verse 39 of the NIV is the Greek *par-ox-ys-mos*, from which we get 'paroxysm'. I'm sure that clears things up for you!! It might for Simon and Stephen's Aunt Kim and Uncle Rafael who are studying medicine. Keep listening. I found this interesting. When that "word is used in (it's original)... medical context it can mean 'convulsion' or refer to someone running a high fever." But in the context of an argument, it "carries overtones of severely heightened emotions, red and distorted faces, loud voices, things said that were better left unsaid." (NT Wright). Picture a red-faced heated debate with verbal fireworks.

That's the sort of debate over Mark that Luke shares with us. It stems from how Mark abandoned Paul and Barnabas on a previous mission trip to Pamphylia (v.38). Mark ran back to Jerusalem and left them. Therefore, Paul doesn't trust Mark. Once bitten, twice shy! Paul didn't believe Mark should join them on another missionary trip. It turns out, however, that Mark is a cousin of Barnabas. We don't know for sure, but it could be that Barnabas had a heart to heart chat with his cousin and realized that Mark has grown up. Mark realizes now that he can't jump ship when the going gets rough.

As is often the case, both sides of a debate have some valid points to consider. Barnabas was right to think that Mark deserved a second chance. But Paul was also right that someone who blows it shouldn't automatically be trusted with the same responsibility again. When those two points of view clashed, there was *par-ox-ys-mos*. Verbal and emotional fireworks.

I have no doubt that Barnabas' heart hurt and Paul's did too. They both must have felt so bad after their decision to split up. They'd been great partners together. They'd seen many people turn to Jesus as they worked side by side. Now they decided to separate. It was heartbreaking.

So, it's great that Luke puts this story in the book of Acts. He doesn't try to hide it or whitewash it. The church has been well served for 2000 years by knowing about this ugly blemish in the early church. It's a reminder that Christians don't instantly become super compassionate and totally understanding or even fair when we believe in Jesus. Even the Apostle Paul had struggles. Sanctification is a life-long process. We are never done becoming more like Jesus on this side of heaven. Sin—stubbornness, hurt, distrust, doubt, pride and more—breaks our unity in Christ and ought to make our heart hurt.

When the church is being the church, disputes are inevitable. Today as well, we disagree over how to live with covid-19. We also have theological debates. The last 30 years of the 20th century saw the debate in our denomination over women in church leadership. We also debated what was often called “worship-wars” where members disagreed on the use of the organ, guitars, drums, praise teams and hymns, psalms or praise songs. The current 30 years is a debate over LGBTQ issues, among other things. Culturally or socially, our current situation is in some ways like the first century as our historically Dutch church learns to welcome people of all nations into our fellowship and we learn to embrace one another in this wonderful work of the Holy Spirit.

Such is life in our world where we have different views, different upbringings, different cultural or ethnic backgrounds and sometimes different theological training or understanding. We should not be surprised by disputes. Our goal should be to maintain our unity in Christ. But too often we lose sight of that and a particular issue divides us.

The Spirit at Work

Disputes and disagreements hurt. They hurt our heart even more than the little boy in the video hurt when the girl poked him in the chest. We can lose sleep over the things we’ve done, the things people have said or the things they’ve done to us. Sometimes it feels so sad, like nothing good comes from it.

But, friends, that would sell the work of the Holy Spirit short. The humbling part of Acts 15 is that as God’s people we don’t always treat each other as we should. That leads to pain. But **the Holy Spirit is always at work**, moving the church forward, moving each one of us forward slowly but surely. That’s his work of sanctification. And that should give us comfort.

I look back on my life and can see all kinds of stupid things that I’ve done. I’m not proud of them. I wish I hadn’t done them. I’m ashamed and I’ve felt sorrow for my actions. My heart has hurt. But God is faithful. You see, I’ve had so many pastoral situations over the years where my own sin and stupidity now serve to help me help others. That’s God’s grace big-time.

In a similar way, the separation of Paul and Barnabas was used by the Holy Spirit. After those two had their sharp disagreement, they separated. By the grace of God, the Holy Spirit still used each of them to spread the gospel—now in two directions instead of one. That doesn’t mean the Holy Spirit wanted there to be divisions. Differences can be from the Holy Spirit who has given us all different gifts, for example, but divisions usually come from our own inability or unwillingness to change or listen or learn from others. They come when we fail to treat one with the same sort of love and grace which the Lord has shown to us.

So what do we learn in Acts 15 about the Spirit’s work when we hit a wall with each other and differences threaten to divide the unity of the Church? What do we learn

about how Christ's body functions when there are stresses on the system? Or even how Christian friends and families should deal with one another when strife is threatening our unity?

First of all, when we are faced with difference, we should ask ourselves, "What is the Holy Spirit trying to teach me? How is he stretching me? How is he helping me to love others more deeply?" The Jerusalem council tried hard to teach the Jewish Christians to deal with their own cultural biases and to love the Greeks as sisters and brother because of Jesus who binds them all together into one body. At the same time, the Greeks were instructed to stop certain immoral and idolatrous practices that would cause great offense to the Jewish Christians. To me, the amazing thing about this council decision is that, in some sense, the decision over this theological issue of circumcision was settled on pastoral terms. How can Jews show love to Gentiles and how can Gentile Christians show love to the Jewish Christians?

In short, the Holy Spirit was teaching each side to find a way to love one another as co-heirs with Christ. Paul makes a big deal about this when writing to the churches of Galatia as well, saying that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. We are one in Christ. Our salvation in Christ must be our united focus. From there we work hard to figure out how to hold on to one another as we hold Christ high as our Saviour and Lord. That includes—of course—letting his Spirit-inspired Word guide us and using the word and depending on the Spirit to help us settle our strife in Christ-honouring ways.

It is interesting that Paul struggled with this himself when it came to dealing with Mark. He seems to angrily refuse to listen to Barnabas' thoughts on how Mark has possibly grown up. Instead, this dispute ends up causing division. Perhaps Paul's pride got in the way. "If I were Mark, I would never have just deserted the missionary team." Paul was failing to give Mark the opportunity to grow in spiritual strength. He failed to trust **that** the Holy Spirit was **not** done working in Mark's life too. Meanwhile, Barnabas could very well have mishandled the discussion too.

The word "sharp disagreement"—*par-ox-ys-mos*—speaks of both Paul and Barnabas using fiery words. Both shared some fault.

Church, it's always good to remember that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives in every situation—whether theological or personal—and is helping us grow to become more like Christ. As Mark matured, it appears Paul also did. We find a few years later that Paul changed his mind about Mark. In fact, in the book of Colossians, Paul signs off saying,

Col 4:10 My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings, as does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. (You have received instructions about him; if he comes to you, welcome him.)

Clearly, Paul now sees Mark as a partner. The past has been forgiven. He has seen that the Holy Spirit was faithful in working in Mark, growing him through his failures. So now Paul humbles himself and happily works alongside of Mark. I'm sure he and Mark

had some real heart to heart conversations and had to forgive each other for wrong actions, thoughts and words. Their sore hearts needed to heal. But they forgave one another because the Lord has forgiven each of them much too.

Secondly, when disagreements occur in our own lives or in the life of the church or at work or elsewhere, we do well to ask, “What is the Holy Spirit teaching us about our need for grace?” We always need to look deeply at our own biases or principles. Are they truly biblical principles or are they just something we’ve grown so accustomed to that we thought they were ordained from God? That was clearly happening among those Jews who felt that God required circumcision for Greek Christians. The Jews, according to Paul’s words in Galatians, were forgetting about our need for grace and were instead going back to depending on the law. This theological dispute was settled rather quickly and decisively by the council meeting in Jerusalem. The result was greater unity as both sides came to see that we all need the grace of our Lord Jesus. This was the heart of the words of Peter in Acts 15:11. Jesus is the centre of our lives and the one who saves Jews and Greek alike by grace.

It’s interesting in this passage that sometimes personality clashes are harder to fix and take a bigger toll on church unity than actual theological issues. That was the case in Acts 15 at least. The Apostles figured out the circumcision issue rather quickly, though we aren’t told exactly how long it took. Hours, days or weeks. Acts 15 is probably the Cole’s Notes version of the meeting. Nonetheless, the issue was settled. However, Paul and Barnabas couldn’t settle a personality dispute concerning Mark, at least not as quickly and smoothly.

This again speaks to our desperate need for Jesus and the gospel of grace. This speaks to Jesus’ work in the church, not giving up on his bride even when we might give up on each other. That’s grace. Our Lord makes even human wrath—our fiery faces and words—serve his purposes. “That doesn’t excuse sinful human reactions,” as one commentator wrote, but “it shows once again **what** the gospel message itself massively demonstrates: that God can take the greatest human folly and sin and bring great good from it.”

“That is a humbling and necessary lesson for the church to learn in each generation. Luke could quite easily have found a less embarrassing way of explaining the new missionary pairings (rather than sharing the news of an ugly split between Barnabas and Paul). I have a hunch that he told this shocking little story partly at least because he wanted this lesson to be heard and taken to heart.” (NT Wright, Acts 15:36-41). It speaks so loudly to our need to depend on the Holy Spirit for grace for ourselves and for others as we seek to be a faithful and united body of believers, Christian family or Christian friends.

Now dear friends in Christ, Acts 15 remind us that church leaders must themselves depend on God’s grace in the face of strife. Even more so when it comes to theological, practical and even personal disputes, we must look to the Lord for grace. This is similarly the job of parents like Mae and Dennis as they bring up their little boys.

When any kind of strife arises, remind one another that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives and hearts. Look to what he's doing to stretch and grow us more into the likeness of Jesus. Getting our own way should never be the goal. Instead, being patient with one another as we seek to follow Jesus into greater faithfulness and love should be our driving motivation. Leaning on him and finding his grace to help us in all things when our heart hurts because of differences between us.