

GOSPEL UNITY

Acts 15:1-35

Notes

There are many things that have potential to cause disunity in the church and in our relationships.

The Devil can and will use personal preference, pride, tradition, power, motivation, greed, and any other tool he can to cause disunity in the body of Christ.

We must always have a gospel-centered purpose in dealing with people.

That is why I am thankful Luke recorded this story for us in Acts 15.

In Acts 15 we have a situation in which two groups of Christians have opposing views on a subject. Thankfully, what could have caused a major split not only in the church, but in early Christianity, was avoided by focusing on the Gospel, by practicing humility, and by listening to one another.

As we go through this story and the points, I want you to ask yourself “Is there anything in my personal life or anything I am bringing into the church that has, is, or may cause disunity?” If so, I want you to ask a follow-up question, “Is this thing a gospel issue?”

Because if it is not a gospel issue and it is simply a preference then we need to learn to practice grace, humility, and understanding with one another in order to allow the Gospel to take center stage in your personal life and in the life of the family of Christ.

Verses 1-35

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

*'After these things I will return,
And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen,
And I will rebuild its ruins,
And I will restore it,
So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,'
Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.*

Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them,

"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

"Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth."For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

PRINCIPLES FROM THE PASSAGE

I. PROBLEMS WILL ARISE IN YOUR LIFE (AND YOUR CHURCH) (1-3)

There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch. Jewish Christians from Judea came and said that these new Christians had to be Jews first.

Now, before we get all out of shape, we need to remember Paul had not written Romans or Galatians, nor had the book of Hebrews been written. These were faithful Jewish men who loved God and were trying, incorrectly, to keep the law.

Jews had always required Gentile converts, from the OT, to be circumcised and observe the law if they wanted to be Jews. The sudden change was probably difficult for them.

It posed a practical problem: how could Jewish Christians enjoy table fellowship with Gentile Christians if the Gentile Christians failed to adhere to the same ritual laws and therefore were unclean?

The church was going well and then suddenly these guys show up causing issues.

But Paul and Barnabas did not give any of these requirements on any of the Gentile converts and if Paul, who considered himself a pious Jew did not place these restrictions on them, why were these guys. (Some people just like to start trouble)

So, trouble started, and they realized that they could not solve the problem in Antioch, so the church sent a delegation to Jerusalem, the mother church, the church where all the apostles attended.

They travelled 300 miles to Jerusalem-took about a month and they visited congregations along the way

What I want you to see is that conflict is always present/if it wasn't this it would be something else, which we see in the church at Rome, Ephesus, and Corinth

There will be problems in your life and in the life of the church. But instead of running from conflict, embrace it.

Use conflict as a chance to grow, to practice godly love, patience, longsuffering, humility, and grace.

Don't run from or try to erase all conflict. Some conflict is necessary in our lives in order for us to practice and grow in the character of Jesus.

How will we learn patience if we never drive in Baton Rouge traffic? How can Bro. Ralph learn grace if he never has to argue with me? How can I grow in love if Bro. Ed doesn't get on my last nerves?

Problems and issues will arise in our lives and our church, why? Because we are imperfect people living alongside imperfect people.

II. THINK THE BEST OF OTHERS DURING CONFLICT (4-6)

They arrived in Jerusalem and were welcomed by the church and reported all that God had done through them.

Some people stood up and said that the new converts needed to be circumcised and required to follow the OT laws, both moral and ritual.

Instead of attacking them and their character they met together to resolve the issue.

This is not directly in the passage, but I drew it out from what is not in the passage. Nowhere here, does Paul or Barnabas attack the Jewish Christians.

They were their brothers in Christ, even though they were misinformed.

This is a good reminder for us today.

There are people that I have sharp and heated social, educational, political, and theological debates with; so far apart there is no way to compromise.

You know this too in your life

What we usually do is think that because a person has a different religious, biblical, or in today's climate a different political view that they are automatically opposed to me, they are a horrible person.

Just because someone views the world differently than you does not mean they are your enemy

When we do this, we fall into the fallacy of "Us vs. Them" mentality.

What can help us, even if we cannot agree on an issue and even if a compromise cannot be met is to think the best of the person.

They are still created in the image of God and if they are a believer, they are our brother or sister

We are still to show kindness, love, gentleness, grace, and mercy to them

So instead of automatically thinking someone is evil because they have a different theological or political view, let's think the best of them and treat them as Christ treats us.

III. ALWAYS FOCUS ON THE GOSPEL (7-21)

At this meeting there were three speeches given and all three focused on the gospel

Peter's Speech

- Preaching to the Gentiles wasn't man's idea, but God's
- God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit
- God makes no distinction between Gentile and Jew

Paul and Barnabas' Testimony

- Telling the whole assembly of how God is saving the Gentiles by faith alone

James' Speech

Jesus' half-brother and author of the book of James. He is a leader in Jerusalem church

- James provides scriptural support for God's plan for saving people from every nation
- Amos 9:11-12

This was a huge issue. Getting back to the gospel was of utmost importance. If they could not get this right, then everything would be messed up.

Paul even went on to say in Gal. 1 that if someone preaches a different gospel they should be cursed and kicked out of the church.

The gospel is of first importance.

Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We do not add anything to the gospel. We do not add to the gospel.

Salvation is made through Christ alone and anyone who tells you different is either sadly mistaken or they are working for the Devil

IV. IF POSSIBLE, FIND COMMON GROUND

If possible, find common ground for the work of the gospel.

See, while the gospel was and is of first importance, they still had an issue.

Observant Jewish Christians still could not fellowship with Gentile Christians due to them being unclean according to OT.

So, James offers us a concession based on grace and humility.

He suggests an appeal to the Gentiles to avoid some practices that may offend Jewish believers.

Out of a love for their brothers, who still may not have a full understanding of the New Covenant Gentiles should avoid certain practices.

- Basically, all ritual matters
- Avoid contact with pollution that comes from idols
- Immorality (ritual and moral)
- Strangled things
- Blood

This is descriptive for them/not prescriptive for us, but does provide a model for how we can have fellowship and serve along others in Christ from different backgrounds and/or cultures

How many times have we stopped coming to church, or know someone who has, or had broken relationships because we or someone else would not show grace?

If it is not a Gospel issue, we must be willing to practice humility for the sake of one another.

Bear burdens; show grace; lovingkindness

V. UNIFY FOR THE GOSPEL/CONTINUE IN THE MINISTRY

Once conflict is resolved, unify in the gospel and continue in ministry together

They all think it sounds good. Paul and Barnabas like it so they draft a letter and send them along with two others to Antioch

The church at Antioch hears the letter and rejoices because they are easy things to do to have fellowship with others.

Gospel unity begins in the heart.

We need a willingness to lay aside our desires and preferences so others can hear the gospel and participate in gospel fellowship.

This passage also teaches us another very important thing concerning gospel unity: we must unify around the gospel.

We must always guard and protect the gospel at all costs.

If that means we stand on a lone island when every other church has fallen away; when all our friends and family have adapted to the world- we stand on the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

This passage overall demonstrates the dire importance of making the gospel the most important issue in our lives.

What about you?

Have you been taking the gospel serious in your life? Has it been having first importance in your life? Do you need to personally take a more serious stand on the gospel?