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A “Good” Church Fight? Acts 15:1-21

*Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are **circumcised** according to the custom of Moses, **you cannot be saved.**”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders...When they came to Jerusalem, they were **welcomed** by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they **reported all that God had done** with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be **circumcised** and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”*

⁶*The apostles and the elders **met together** to consider this matter. ⁷After there had been much **debate**, **Peter** stood up and said to them, “My brothers,^[b] you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made **no distinction** between them and us. ¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the **grace of the Lord Jesus**, just as they will.”*

¹²*The whole assembly kept **silence**, and listened to **Barnabas and Paul** as they told of all the signs and wonders that **God had done** through them among the Gentiles. ¹³After they finished speaking, **James replied**, “My brothers,^[c] listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with the words of the **prophets, as it is written,***

¹⁶*‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,*

¹⁷*so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called....*

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that **we should not trouble those Gentiles** who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them **to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled^[e] and from blood.** ²¹

In his book, **Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit**, Matthew Skinner says that one of the themes of the Book of Acts is that of **discernment and decision-making**. All throughout Acts, decisions change the future of the church's mission and ministry.

Those early believers selected **a new apostle** to replace Judas (Acts 1:26), they decided to share things in **common** (Acts 2), they selected **leaders to serve** the needy (Acts 6), they stood up for their beliefs amidst **persecution and imprisonment**. They followed the Spirit and shared the **Good News with the Gentiles** (10 and 11).

In Acts 21:1-6 the **church in Tyre** disagrees with Paul, who is traveling on to Jerusalem. Both sides feel the Spirit has told them what is best. But instead of getting into an argument, they are full of grace and come to a sort of compromise, Paul stays a week, before going on.

In all of these decisions there are **people of faith with different beliefs**. There is **healthy debate, discussion, and disagreement**. But finally, the church makes a **decision**, seeking to follow the will of God and the direction of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 15, the **Council in Jerusalem** debates the issue of welcoming Gentiles into the church, without them being circumcised, like the Jewish Christians. Some believed that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised to receive salvation through Jesus Christ.

Paul and Barnabas disagreed strongly, and were selected with others, to go to Jerusalem **to settle** this matter with the leaders of the church.

Despite their differing opinions, Paul and Barnabas and the others from Antioch are **welcomed** by all in Jerusalem!

Imagine that today—people of different opinions welcoming one another! Isn't that refreshing?

But what happens at that meeting?

Again there is a group insisting on circumcision for Gentile Christians.

Why?

Are they against God's grace?

No--- but they are very tied to the customs of Jewish Law.

After much debate, **Peter says:**

*.⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the **Holy Spirit**, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made **no distinction** between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be **saved through the grace** of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

So, what is he saying?

He says they are no different than we are, we have all received the Holy Spirit, and we are all saved by the **grace** of Jesus Christ.

This is when **Paul and Barnabas share** about all the miracles they've seen among the Gentile believers and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Then **JAMES, the brother of Jesus**, the leader of the Jerusalem church, says look—this is all to fulfill the prophet Amos, who he then quotes.

Then, possibly to appeal to the Pharisees, **James suggests that they do not require circumcision, but rather encourage them** to uphold some of the Jewish customs, maybe so they would not offend Jewish Christians.

This whole story reminds me of what **JOHN WESLEY** once wisely said:

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity"

In other words, **don't sweat** the non-essentials of faith, seek to be **unified** in what really matters, and show **love** all the time.

What really matters here is *salvation through the GRACE of Jesus Christ*. Some believers will be circumcised, some will not. And that's OK.

Acts 15 is a reminder that a ***DEBATE in church CAN be GOOD!***

It can lead to greater clarity, stronger relationships, and a more faithful witness--- if we are willing to listen, share, and work together to discern God's will.

And DISCERNING is different than just making DECISIONS, or just casting votes.

Voting is easy.

But it leaves winners and losers.

Seeking to discern God's will, especially when we strive for consensus, (or agreement) can lead to a win-win, where everyone has a voice, and everyone's opinion and faith is valued.

The Presbyterian Church has a ***long history of debate*** as we discern.

It has been said that where 27 Presbyterians gather, there will be 33 different opinions! I believe it!

Why?

Why not just require everyone to believe all the same things?

Because we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord of our conscience, and there is freedom for individuals to have differing opinions.

So do we believe ***we can just do whatever we want?***

Absolutely not!

It's more along the lines of ***Wesley's statement***.

We believe it's important to make a distinction between essentials and non-essentials of faith.

Listen to this from our denominational website, talking about a principle from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

At its best, ***"God alone is Lord of the conscience"*** When used correctly, means that ***"my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Only God is Lord of it. Only God's Word has the right to bind it."*** In other words, if a community standard is contrary to my informed understanding of God's revealed will in Scripture, God sets me free to dissent, and then either passively submit to the standard or

peaceably withdraw <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/lord-of-the-conscience/>

Why is this so important in our Reformed tradition?

It is meaningful because we as individuals, and churches, do not have all the answers!

We need to ***listen to God's Word and the Holy Spirit***, in all our debates and disagreements, and then discern the will of God!

There's another important slogan of our denomination---

"We are the Church reformed, always reforming.... according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit".

We can be faithful Christians,

And ***agree to disagree***,

As long as we hold to our faith in ***Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior***.

And as long as we are open—to the power of God's **Word** and God's **Spirit**.

So what do we learn from the Council at Jerusalem in Act 15?

We learn that ***debate*** can be a good thing—there can be a ***'good' church fight***, especially when it helps us to discern the will of God together!

We ***don't have to just vote*** and have winners and losers.

We can seek to hear from God, through one another, through the voice of the Spirit, and respond as one people of faith.

This is definitely ***not a popular way of doing things today***.

We live in a ***world of winners and losers***.

Where most people fight to be ***'right'***.

In one of my devotionals this week, it was talking about Philippians 2,

And how ***Jesus never needed to be 'right'***.

He always sought to be Loving. Humble. Compassionate.

There's a big difference, isn't there?

What if we lived that way? ***Letting go of the need to be 'right'?***

What if instead we tried to be loving?

And love means letting everyone have a voice.

Did you know that this is how ***our Session, the Elders of this church,***
Try to make our decisions?

We do not just vote.

We study God's Word, pray, discuss, let everyone be heard.

And then we seek to ***discern*** the will of God.

We do vote, but we also try to find ***agreement and consensus*** whenever possible.

This is the difference between ***DISCERNMENT instead of just making decisions.***

What if it was our path in our own lives?

Wouldn't that be Good News?

Friends, hear the Good News of the Gospel today!

We can disagree, and still be one family of faith,
seeking to follow God's Word and the Holy Spirit.

We can disagree on non-essentials,
and seek agreement on those things most central to our faith.

This is way of Jesus, and it can be our way too.

For this, all God's people say, Amen.