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**SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS**

# UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

A Watershed Moment – Acts 15:1–32

Tim Badal | October 14, 2018



Acts 15 tells us of the journey of Paul and Barnabas, which started in Cyprus and then moved up to the region that today is known as Turkey. Even though they were kicked out of a few cities, God still used them to do mighty things. Even though Paul was stoned and nearly killed, their mission was still a huge success. People came to know Jesus and churches were planted—some of which are still in existence today.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to the church in Antioch, we're told in Acts 14:27 that *"...they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles."* This gives us some clues regarding our task today. These men spoke only of what God was doing. There wasn't any mention of how their work week had gone or anything about that big football game. When we gather together as God's people, our attention should be given to the big things—about what God is doing and about the open doors we have for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

My challenge to us is that these open doors might become the themes in our conversations. Those other things might be important, but God's work should be our focus. The things Paul and Barnabas told their church brought great encouragement and strength to the disciples there. In the same way, there are people among us who need to be encouraged, who need to hear how God has moved specifically in our lives or how He has used us in ministry, so they too might be spurred on to love and good deeds themselves.

So far in Acts, everything seems to be going well. The church was growing. As our title indicates, nothing seemed to be able to stop the expanding work of Christ in their midst. But all that is about to change in Acts 15. In this chapter, we see that the believers had an enemy who would stop them in their tracks.

Was it persecution? No, they had already experienced that for many years and that had not stopped them. In fact, they overcame these trials and grew in spite of the persecution. Was it financial hardship? No. They indeed struggled from time to time with these issues, but they always managed to transcend those problems as well.

The enemy that appears in Acts 15, that the church probably didn't see coming, was that of disunity. This is an enemy the church faces even today. There are a lot of reasons churches struggle with unity. I would say there are a lot of dumb reasons that churches argue and fight and why they have splits.

The enemy that was deteriorating the unity of the church in Antioch was a big one. It came in the form of a challenge to their doctrinal unity. They had to determine what they believed about God and salvation. What did it mean for someone to be reconciled to God? This was not a small matter; it was a big deal, a legitimate problem that needed to be resolved. If they hadn't figured this out, we wouldn't be here today. The spread of Christianity would have been stopped. That's why I'm calling this event described in Acts 15 a "Watershed Moment"—a turning point. We have moments like that as well today. Because of something that happens at a certain point in time, the trajectory of our lives is changed.

As a 42-year-old man, I've had a handful of watershed moments. One of those was when I met and then married Amanda. Other big changes came when each of our three boys was born. I also remember when I was called into this ministry. I specifically recall some of the things God did to move me from what I thought my life was going to look like to what it is now as a preacher of God's Word.

Churches also have watershed moments—decisions or meetings where the trajectory of a particular local church could go one way or the other. We've had those moments when God uniquely brought us to the point when a decision had to be made based on what God wanted us to do.

In Acts 15 there was a watershed moment, a point when the church needed to make a decision. If they didn't make it, their future would become very uncertain at best. But as we'll see, they did address the issue. In the previous chapter, we have seen how Paul and Barnabas had returned to the church in Antioch after their first missionary journey. Their mission had been successful, and then they were hanging out with the disciples in Antioch. Acts 14:28 says, *"And they remained no little time with the disciples."* This was a reunion of sorts, when they enjoyed spending time together. But then as Acts 15 opens, we read this:

*<sup>1</sup> But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."<sup>2</sup> 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 the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup> So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

Notice that it was when everything was going well and the church was enjoying their time together that the enemy arrived. Problems occur in churches—and in our lives—when we least expect them. Wouldn't you agree that troubles come just when everything seems to be in order and going our way? We're doing well, then out of nowhere on some random Tuesday, the world collapses around us.

That's what was going on in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas were excited to tell them about all God had done and was doing in the churches around them. The people were rejoicing. It was a good day to be in the Antioch church. But then some men from Judea showed up. These were believers, credible men who came to teach in the church. But as they were concluding their words to the congregation, they said, "If Gentiles are to come to Jesus, they need to become Jews first."

In other words, they were requiring the Gentiles to first adhere to all the Jewish regulations found in Moses' law. This especially included the chief rite, that of circumcision. I have to wonder if the Gentile men sitting there that day were thinking, "You know, I was planning to go to the membership class, but I think I've changed my mind. That's too much to ask." Still, that's what the visitors were telling them.

Specifically, they were saying that in order to receive salvation from Jesus, there were things the individual had to do. We then read that Paul and Barnabas quickly interrupted them and began to refute what they were saying. Luke is very honest with us in recording this. In verse two he says, *"After Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them..."* In other words, there was a whole lot of yelling and arguing going on among them.

Some people might object, saying it's not right to fight in church. But there are times, especially when false doctrine is being preached, when there needs to be a stiff rebuke against that doctrine. In this case, the doctrine being brought forth would have brought great harm to the church. As leaders of that church, Paul and Barnabas brought the discussion to a definite halt, demanding that the men recant their teaching, but they would not, which left the church in Antioch with an important issue to resolve. They needed clarification on exactly what salvation meant and what it required. Paul and Barnabas were saying one thing; the people from Judea were saying something else. Both were true believers, so it was important that they find the answer to this question.

Paul and Barnabas must have realized that this doctrinal teaching was probably also being taught in other Gentile congregations as well. So they decided to get final resolution from the apostles in Jerusalem. This was a watershed moment—the first council in Jerusalem when the church gathered together from places where they had been scattered to meet with the leaders and elders to decide this matter.

The way this question was going to be answered would determine the future trajectory of the church.

I'm going to address their conversation from three different viewpoints: theologically, philosophically and practically.

## Theologically, what does it mean to be saved?

When we look at the Council in Jerusalem through theological eyes, we can see what doctrinal issues were at stake. We know the men from Judea had told the people in Antioch that as Gentiles, in order to receive salvation, they had to go through the rite of circumcision. We should notice that they weren't asking whether Gentiles could become part of the church. That had been resolved back in Acts 10 when Peter had a vision in which he was told to go to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile army leader. After having a very descriptive dream, Peter went to Cornelius, then led him and his household to the Lord. These Gentiles were then filled with the Holy Spirit, without having followed any dietary laws or other Jewish customs. God had obviously given them His stamp of approval through the Holy Spirit.

Peter clearly understood that Gentiles could also be part of Christ's church. This gave Paul and Barnabas full permission to preach the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Thus, the issue in Acts 15 wasn't whether Gentiles like us could come to Christ. Rather, the new theological problem was to know what Gentiles might have to do to be Christ followers. Up to that point, most Christ followers started as God-fearing Jews, so this is why some leaders were beginning to think the Jewish laws had to be applied to Gentile believers as well. Upon hearing this idea, Paul and Barnabas responded, "No way, Jose. That's not happening. We're going to refute it."

We should realize that this same theological question still comes up today: what does it mean to be saved? It's a question we must know the answer to as well, because we're in the business of seeing God saving people. As His ambassadors who are sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, we need to remember that people's eternity is at stake. Thus, we must be sure we're communicating the right way to be saved.

Have you ever been given directions to some place that turned out to be wrong? You trusted the person who gave them to you, only to find out they had no clue where they were sending you. That might make you pretty angry. You might even feel duped.

It's not only for our own good, but also for the sake of those we're sharing Christ with, that we need to answer the question: what does it mean to be saved? I'm going to give two quick statements about the gospel that will help us remember what it truly is and is not.

### **The gospel is not about what you do; it's about what God has done for you.**

These Judean men were telling the people, "In order to be saved, you have to be circumcised. To be in right standing with God, there is something you must do." But we need to remember that as Jesus was on the cross at Calvary as the Sacrifice for our sins, He spoke these words: "It is finished." The job was done. If He had left something for us to do, He would have said, "Now it's your turn." He didn't say that.

Jesus knew the same thing the Father had told us over and over again in the Scriptures, which is that you and I are lost and without hope. Because of our sin, we have a sentence of death against us. We're at war with God and there's nothing we in our unrighteous state can do to get right with Him. In fact, we read in Isaiah 64:6 that our righteous deeds are like filthy rags before God. Even if we try to do righteous things, God says righteous deeds done with sinful hands are still sinful. There's nothing we can do to redeem ourselves.

Maybe some of you walked in here this morning trying to figure out what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. There are a lot of churches that will tell you that to become a Christian means you first have to do certain things. They might tell you that if you want to make it to heaven, your good has to outweigh the bad. So you're busy doing all kinds of things, trying to get on God's good side. But what we're learning in Acts 15 today is that's not true. The difference between Christianity and all other religions isn't about what we have to do to get to God. Christianity is about what God has done for us. The only thing we need to do is to trust that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord. When we believe this to be true, God says He gives us the right to become His children. We don't have to work. We don't have to take all kinds of preliminary steps before we can be saved.

Those men who went to Antioch from Judea were dead wrong. They were bringing hindrances, blocking people from becoming followers of Jesus.

## The gospel does not say change and then come to Jesus; it says come to Jesus and then be changed.

The gospel promises that when we come to Him, then we will be changed. There are some who might tell us, "Because of your sinful habits and behaviors, you need to be cleaned up before Jesus will allow you to come to Him. He doesn't want to see you in the mess you're in."

Suppose you are about to meet someone famous, so you want to put your best foot forward. You buy a new suit, you clean yourself up, you dress up nicely—why? You want to make a good first impression. So many conclude that this is how we must come to Christ as well. They would say, "You who are broken—whose lives are filled with dysfunction because of sin—before you come to Jesus, clean that stuff up. Get rid of those bad behaviors. Stop cursing. Stop doing other bad things. Then once you're cleaner, then you can come to Him." But as we see in the Bible, Jesus always met sinners right where they were. He never required them to be different before He would speak to them.

Think of the woman at the well. She was living in adultery when Jesus spoke to her (John 4:1–42).

Think about the woman caught in the act of adultery. Jesus met her there (John 8:1–11).

Think about Zacchaeus, who was stealing from people. Jesus didn't tell him, "Figure things out and clean yourself up, then I might come to your house." Rather He said, "Zacchaeus, I'm going to spend time with you today, even though you're a filthy scoundrel" (Luke 19:1–10).

We should also look at the miracles Jesus did. Those people were broken and crippled and dealing with all kinds of struggles. He didn't require that they go through some sort of rehab before He would see them. He met them in the middle of their helplessness and pain, and He changed them—after which they were never the same.

Brothers and sisters, I don't care how hardened a criminal someone is—how dirty a sinner they are—don't ever require someone to take preliminary steps before they can come to know Jesus. We might read this text and think, "Well, circumcision is not something we would ever require." But how many times have we told someone that in order to be saved, they need to clean up some aspect of their life? The Bible calls that idea a "doctrine of demons." The gospel is good news because it saves sinners right where they are.

So that's the theological debate: what does it mean to be saved? Quite frankly, salvation comes only when we bow our knee to Jesus and see Him as the only One Who can save. It's not what we think we need to do, but it's acknowledging what He has done. By His grace and love and mercy, we are now able to experience newness of life. The men from Judea were essentially saying that Jesus' sacrifice was not good enough and because of that they were leading many people astray.

What happened next? Beginning in Acts 15:6, we read what took place back in Jerusalem:

*<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*

*<sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

*<sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,*

*<sup>16</sup> "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from of old."*

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."*

In this gathering three speeches were made. First, Peter spoke about his encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Then Paul and Barnabas recounted what had taken place on their first missionary journey through Cyprus and modern-day Turkey. They told of how the Gentiles had come to know Jesus and how they had been filled with the Holy Spirit, and no circumcision or rites of the Mosaic law had been required. Then James, Jesus' half-brother, offered his judgment, that they should not put any stumbling blocks before people who are coming to Jesus, including the Gentiles, whom the Jewish people traditionally had considered to be dogs.

## Philosophically, what traps do we have to steer clear of?

How does this speak to us today? Not only was this a theological issue, it was also a philosophical issue. We need to ask ourselves, “What traps in thinking do we need to steer clear of?” We might have our theology right, but our methodology could still be off.

In Galatians 2:12–14, we read that Peter had the right theology regarding how Gentiles were on equal footing with the Jews in the mind and heart of God. But Peter’s methodology fell apart when he began to give Jews higher priority than the Gentiles. He would eat with the Gentiles when there were no Jews around, but then when certain Jews came to him, he stopped eating with the Gentiles. Paul had to confront Peter on this act of hypocrisy.

How do we keep from the same kind of hypocrisy, even when our theology is accurate? Let’s identify a few traps we find in today’s text.

### **Trap #1: Pacifying insiders instead of pursuing lost outsiders.**

When a church starts to pacify insiders instead of pursuing lost outsiders, this can be a trap. The church in Jerusalem had gathered all their leaders in this council. It would have been really easy for them to decide not to rock the boat. They could have decided to listen to their current congregation and just tell the Gentiles—who would not have known differently—that they would be required to observe the Jewish law.

That’s not what they did, but how often are pastors and leaders today tempted to compromise in this way? In my case, weeks can sometimes go by before I get a call or meet with someone in my office who is asking how we might be able to reach more people for Christ. Instead, most of the time what I hear about is another way to make someone in our church happier through our ministries or programs.

As leaders, we must never make it a priority simply to pacify the people in our churches, putting their preferences above our mission. As we learned last week, our call to share the good news of Jesus Christ is our number one priority. But how often does the pacifying of our own needs trump our goal of reaching out to others?

If the job of the Jewish believers in Acts 15 was to tell the Gentiles how to be like them, then instead of being a hospital, the church would have become a country club. Country clubs have certain requirements for people who would join them. Similarly, a country-club church would have ideas of how people could become right in the eyes of God. But this would be dead wrong. We need to be careful that we don’t seek to pacify the church insiders, because God has called us to a mission with outsiders.

How do you know if you’re doing this? First, it happens when church becomes all about you and not others. If you find yourself complaining more than caring for others, that’s a clue. “Well, I didn’t like the song they sang. I didn’t like what Tim taught. I’ve got issues and struggles.” Well, we all have issues and struggles, but our focus should not be on what makes us happy. Rather, we need to see what God is doing through us to impact the lives of others.

### **Trap #2: Being something is different from simply doing something.**

The second trap is not understanding that being something is different from simply doing something. What does that mean? The people in Acts 15 were not interested in whether new believers were changed by a real experience with God. Rather, they were thinking only about the actions and behaviors that would prove these Gentiles were tracking with Christian standards. They emphasized the outside rather than the inside.

Many in the evangelical world today also equate being a Christian, not with a real relationship with Jesus, but with a person’s conformity to whatever list of activities they require. Do you go to church? Are you part of a small group? Do you serve in the church? If you do these things, then you must be a Christian.

What we need to remember is that these are things anyone can do on their own. Anyone can show up to church, join a group, serve. It doesn’t require a heart changed by Christ to do these things. I’ve been a pastor long enough to know that people come to church for all kinds of reasons. They join small groups for all kinds of reasons. And surely people serve for all kinds of reasons. But these activities don’t always equate with an authentic love for Jesus.

When the Jews put circumcision as a prerequisite for being a Christian, they reduced Christianity to outward actions. The result was that someone could say, “I’m a Christian because I eat certain things, or because I have been circumcised, or because of all

these various services I've accomplished." Instead, a true Christian can say, "I'm a Christian in spite of myself. I'm a Christian because of the love and grace and mercy of God."

### **Trap #3: Focusing on external conformity instead of inward change.**

This leads us to the third trap, which is connected to the first two. In this case, we are focusing on external conformity instead of inward change. The Jews from Judea were worried about body parts and dietary laws. But the leaders in Jerusalem agreed that these things were not important, especially if they served to block people from the gospel of Jesus Christ. We too need to be careful not to tell people that they need to do certain things before they come to Jesus.

One way this can happen is for us to create "laws of conformity." We look at our own lives, then tell ourselves, "Well, I'm a good Christian and these are the things I do or I don't do. I don't have tattoos. I don't drink beer. I don't have cable TV. I don't hang around with unbelievers. Since that's what I do as a Christian, then surely all good Christians should be like me and stay away from these things."

No, that's not how it works. Good Christians follow God's Word. While you might decide not to do certain things and another person might decide some of them are okay, that doesn't make you a good Christian or them a bad Christian. It just makes you different people. We need to not presume on a person's status with God based on their conformity to a list of external things that we've created. We have no right to question their salvation or their faithfulness to God based on our own personal check list. If we do this, we miss out on the stamp of approval Paul and Barnabas give in our text. In Acts 15:8, they told the group, "*God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.*" An internal change was evident.

Internal change should always precede external change. If there isn't a change of heart, then external actions have no meaning. In fact, the external changes we seek only come authentically out of internal change.

### **Trap #4: Elevating your liberty over another's liability.**

The final trap we need to be careful of is our tendency to elevate our liberty over someone else's liability. What does it mean to be saved? In Acts 15:19, James said they "*...should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.*" In other words, they should not make circumcision an issue, because it didn't matter. He did ask those at the council to teach new believers certain things, but they would not be required to observe the over 600 laws of Moses from the Old Testament.

Can you imagine having a list of 600 do's and don'ts? The Jewish people would go to the Gentile churches with their clipboards, asking, "Did you do this? Did you do that?" As a Gentile, they might respond, "No...I didn't do that one, or that one either." They would then be told they weren't good Christians—or maybe they weren't Christians at all. "But I read the Scriptures and I don't see that it's addressed to me in that way."

What the council determined was that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, at which point all the men in the room said, "Amen!" The male attendance at the membership classes even increased. Yet the leaders did give them a few guidelines they needed to follow. Although the new believers had liberty and although these guidelines would not impact their relationship with God, there were still some things they were to abstain from.

Notice what they were asked to do. This does get a little complicated and I'll explain why in a moment. He said in Acts 15:19–20, "*Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.*" What? The one about sexuality is easy to understand. Things polluted by idols seems to make sense. But what about the other two?

These requirements were recorded in Leviticus 17 and 18. In fact, they are almost repeated verbatim here. So we can assume those Old Testament references are what James had in mind. Those were ceremonial laws that merge with the moral aspects of the law. It's in these places that unbelievers can yell and scream at us about Scripture. They accuse us of being inconsistent regarding the rules, picking and choosing which Scriptures we agree with and obey. We plant different plants beside each other. We all are wearing fabric that has two different kinds of material mixed together. We eat shell fish and pork. But then we call out people who commit various kinds of sexual immorality as being sinful. They therefore accuse us of being inconsistent.

But there were two types of laws in the Old Testament. First, there were the ceremonial laws, which included dietary restrictions, the observance of the Sabbath and things that were important to the people of Israel, especially during their wilderness travels. These were given to bring structure and order to the millions of Jews who were trying to follow God. But these laws never made anyone right before God. They kept the people healthy and safe, allowing them to have a strong judicial system.

Now we would say that the ceremonial laws have been set aside and that they were only for a period of time. Jesus Himself said these laws no longer hold sway in our lives. Peter was told by God Himself to abandon the dietary restrictions, to eat everything including those things that were formerly declared unclean.

There is a second part of the law, which are the moral laws. These include the Ten Commandments. These are laws that have not changed. They were not true only for a specific period of time, nor are they true only for the Jews. A Gentile could not say, "God told the Jewish people not to murder, but that does not apply to me. I can murder whomever I want."

But now that we understand the moral laws to still apply to us today, how do we understand these four restrictions in Acts 15? They seem to include a mix of ceremonial and moral. The matters of blood and strangling related to what the Jews considered to be kosher processing for meat. Animals would be bled out after they were killed, so people would not be eating their blood. That eliminated eating things that might have been killed accidentally and which had lain with the blood still inside. There were also animals that were sacrificed to idols in the pagan temples, after which some of the meat would be sold in the markets. This was an economic measure that was often taken advantage of.

So why would James include these things? We don't really know what to make of them, although we do understand sexual immorality, which was not ceremonial. Some commentators have suggested that there were close kinship relationships that Gentiles permitted, and James might have been saying they couldn't marry their first cousins. Others think it had to do with table fellowship. In other words, Gentiles should not do anything that would cause their Jewish counterparts to be offended. But that wouldn't apply to the sexual immorality part. The reason we abstain from that kind of immorality is not that we're concerned about offending someone else. The Bible is clear that God Himself is offended by this.

Others think these might be related to the issue of paganism. While Christians did have liberties, some of their liberties were also found in pagan cultures. The Gentiles thus had to give up certain liberties to declare their distinction from those lifestyles. I've wracked my brain even this morning as I continued to study this, and I still don't know what to make of the statements. But here's what I do know: Whatever the reasons for these restrictions were, both the Jews and the Gentiles were okay with them. We don't see any more dialog regarding these things in Scripture. In fact, later Paul said that it was okay to eat food sacrificed to idols. He said food is food and we shouldn't make it more than it is. There are lots of questions with lots of room for debate on these matters.

Yet for us the bottom line today is that these men came to an agreement. Essentially they were saying, "Although we have liberty in Christ, we are still going to make our relationships with others a higher priority." This sets a good precedent for us. While you and I are free to do a lot of things, our freedom could still offend others. We need to be willing to give up doing some things, or maybe watching some things, or eating or drinking certain things, if we know these activities will be a problem for those around us. Other people's consciences may respond differently than ours. It is our responsibility to show love and charity in these cases. Our freedoms should never trump another person's sensitivities. We can't just tell them, "Well, God says it's okay." In fact, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12 that while all things are lawful for him, not all things are helpful for others. In fact, some of these things might not only not benefit others, they might not really benefit us either. We must be careful.

The biggest issues the church struggles with today are not heavy-duty doctrinal matters. Most of the doctrinal battles were won by our church fathers, who clearly articulated what is in bounds and out of bounds theologically. We now struggle most with all of the secondary issues, where two groups can view the same thing from different sides. But our text today reminds us not to elevate our liberty above the liability of others.

## **Practically, how do church leaders stay unified?**

I realize this is a cumbersome text, as we try to put our 21<sup>st</sup>-century perspective into a moment in time without a full explanation of everything that was going on back then. But we still can gain a practical truth for today from this story. Circumcision is no longer an issue for us. We might find a place where some of the other applications would be relevant. But one lesson stands out above the others and that is that the church must deal with crises that threaten to divide our members. What happens when we don't agree? Just as the church in Jerusalem realized, we too will fail in our mission for God if we are not unified. How did they stay unified?

## When church conflict comes, leaders must expect it.

First, church leaders should expect that a group of sinners led by sinners will sooner or later experience conflict. Sinners are selfish. People disagree and it can lead to fighting. We're welcoming some guests here this morning, but if these people have come with the goal of finding a perfect church, I'm not going to offer any false advertising. I'll just tell you: we're not it. We're not even close and that's coming from the pastor. In fact, one of the reasons we're not close to perfect is because of the pastor. We are imperfect people and we're far from having it all put together. That means we're going to rub against one another and this friction will result in issues and struggles, just as they experienced in the early church. There will be times when people will teach things we disagree with. There will be times we do things others don't approve of. We are going to get on each other's nerves.

When that happens, we need to know what to do. We should expect conflict. We can't be Pollyannas with rose-colored glasses, thinking it will never happen here. It will happen, it has happened, but our job—like the job of the early church—is to figure out how to transcend it.

## When church conflict comes, leaders must deal with it.

Our second truth about engaging conflict is simply that we need to deal with it. There are a lot of churches that don't deal with stuff. We see this in other relationship contexts. There are some people who fight and others who prefer flight. Neither is right. Instead, we need to find a middle ground, which is what the church in Jerusalem was able to do. They sought to resolve the problem.

Remember, their problem was big, causing divisions and arguments. Both camps thought they were right. So a great discussion took place and eventually the leaders all gathered to talk. It wasn't the congregation that settled this question; it was the leaders. It was a church issue and leaders were called to deal with church issues.

What steps should these leaders take?

1. They must calm down. After all the struggle and conflict, it's important to bring order to the situation. Acts 15:6 implies that they assembled in an orderly gathering. There was no mob. There was no outburst or yelling. In fact, in verse 12 we read that *"all the assembly fell silent."* No one spoke until the other was finished. What a novel approach! Everything was handled calmly. Yes, debate was needed, but it needed to happen in an orderly fashion.

2. They need to communicate. Three speeches were given: one from Peter, one from Paul and Barnabas, then one from James. These men communicated their experiences and explained their understanding of how God interpreted their experiences. It wasn't that one person's experience trumped another's. Rather, their experiences were used to support what they had concluded about God's truth. None of them said, "My way is the only way." They spoke humbly, explaining to each other what they believed God had taught them.

3. They compromise. Circumcision was taken off the table and the Gentile men said, "Yee hah!" But then they said, "Okay, but don't offend your Jewish brothers." Very rarely when debates are held between two opposite views does either side fully prevail. Compromise is always needed.

I might be so bold as to tell you that this is the problem in Washington these days. There's no compromise. There's no seeing eye to eye on some things. But the people in Jerusalem were able to compromise, and among church leaders today, there needs to be a willingness to compromise. Along with compromise, however, there needs to be consensus. The leaders in Jerusalem had to tell their congregations something. In Acts 15:22-29, they wrote a letter that specified exactly what the leaders had agreed to. They made sure everyone was on the same page, so the people would know exactly where their leaders stood.

After that, the congregation was brought into the process. We see in verse 30 that the men went back to Antioch to report on what had been decided. *"And having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter."* They communicated exactly what had been agreed upon. There was to be no more circumcision, but they wanted the Gentiles to be aware of a few specific places where they were not to offend the Jewish people.

Then notice this in verse 31: *"And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."* The role of the congregation was to celebrate what the church leaders had done, to celebrate their leadership and wisdom regarding what God had called them to do.



I will tell you this. If we can follow this prescription, then our church will stay unified, even as it has for the last fifteen years. It is when these practices start to erode that we find ourselves falling into disunity, with quarrels and struggles among us. The church in Antioch came to a problem, they addressed it head on, theologically, philosophically, and practically.

I don't know what the next problem is going to be for Village Bible Church. I don't know when it's going to come or what it's going to look like. But I know it will come, so we need to prepare, we need to pray, then we need to be ready to do the hard work, so the church of God can stay on mission.

Had they not gotten this right, my friends, we wouldn't be here. It would have splintered the church and the movement would probably have died. But because they addressed this in this watershed moment, we stand here today unified as a church on mission for God.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

*Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers ([www.sermontranscribers.net](http://www.sermontranscribers.net)).*