

SUMMER 9 - Dispute and Resolution

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[0 : 00] we're told that the apostles had to remain in Jerusalem where they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then in verses 6 to 8, they were given the task that the Holy Spirit would equip them for.

That is, they were given the Holy Spirit so that they might be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. And in chapter 2, the Spirit was given to them and the whole church.

They go to Jerusalem in the succeeding chapters. They go to Judea. They go to Samaria. Then under persecution, they travel north to Antioch. And then in Antioch, the Spirit impels them to go even further.

And with that in mind, turn with me to Acts chapter 13. So Acts 13. And I want you to look at verse 2. I want you to look at what the Holy Spirit says.

He says, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. You see, the succeeding verses indicate that the work that the Holy Spirit has called them to is Gentile evangelism.

[1 : 10] After all, you see, God has already indicated in chapter 9 that Paul is to be the apostle for this work, the apostle to the Gentiles. And so it is that in these verses, the mission to the Gentiles is launched.

And in chapters 13 and 14, it gets off to a successful start. That's not without its hiccups. It's not without opposition. However, we hear that people are converted.

Largely, we hear that the reaction of Jews in the synagogue is hostile. And although some Jews are converted, the tendency is for Jews to reject the gospel.

But Gentiles embrace it. They accept the gospel. They are converted. And it's the conversion of the Gentiles that raises enormous implications and questions.

Let me explain if I can. The passages about Gentiles up till this point have made it clear that God is committed to including Gentiles.

[2 : 10] There's no turning away from that. It is clear God is committed to including Gentiles. No doubt about it in the story itself. God confirms that it's his will by quoting scripture.

Sorry, Paul confirms that it's God's will by quoting scripture. You can see this in his speech in Acts chapter 13, verse 47. However, it's also clear that God's commitment to opening doors to Gentiles raises significant issues.

I mean, think about it for a moment. It raises questions, doesn't it, about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The Old Testament is clear, you see.

The Old Testament said God chose the Jews. He made them his special people. He gave them covenants. He gave them laws and commanded them to keep them.

And this would identify them as his special people. Many of these laws separated the Jews from the nations. Now, it's not as though non-Jews couldn't be included within Israel.

[3 : 14] History had shown that some could. Scripture had shown that others could. However, it was never going to be very easy. If they were male, they had to undergo circumcision.

You can see this in Genesis 17 and in Exodus 12. No matter whether they were male or female, they had to undertake to live a life devoted to the law.

To obey the law. You see, there was therefore a place for God-fearers in synagogue life. However, God-fearers did not belong to the people of God.

They were not insiders. They were still, to some extent, outsiders. To some extent, foreigners to the covenants of grace. They were on the fringes.

The only way to belong to God was through circumcision and keeping the laws of Moses. But in Acts, things are changing.

[4 : 14] You see, Christianity claimed to be biblical. That is, to be according to those very same scriptures. It claimed that a Jewish man, Jesus, was the Messiah of scripture.

It claimed that the promised time of the Messiah had come upon the world. And that the gifts of the new age were to be experienced by all.

However, chapters 13 and 14 show that Gentiles were being accepted into this Christian faith. And they were being accepted without any of the requirements except that they received Jesus.

And this meant, try and understand this, there were now two brands of Christians. Two brands. One group were Jews.

And they understood that being a Christian was consistent with being a Jew and involved keeping Jewish laws. They were a group of Christians who supported and advocated this.

[5 : 18] However, over on this side, there is another group of Christians. And they had become Christians without being Jews. Without being circumcised.

And without having any obligation to keep the law. Both groups believed in Jesus as their Messiah. As the Messiah.

However, one group did only that. And were accepted by God. They simply accepted the Messiah. And all of a sudden were included among God's people.

And the Ethiopian eunuch was the first example of this. He heard the gospel. He was baptized. And did you hear Philip asking any other questions?

No. No other questions were asked. He was an insider all of a sudden. And God gave him. And then there was Cornelius. God gave his verdict in that situation.

[6 : 18] God poured out the spirit upon these Christian people. Cornelius and his household. And the implication of all of this was circumcision did not matter. Now it's apparent if you've got this going on.

There are some problems brewing, aren't there? And they come to a head in this chapter before us tonight. So let's now have a look at it. Acts chapter 15. Now the first thing I want you to notice is there is a lovely structure to this passage.

It goes from verses 1 to 35. And we begin in Antioch with a problem. Verses 1 to 2. We then have a journey from Antioch to Jerusalem.

Verse 3. The focus then shifts to Jerusalem and a debate. That goes from verse 4 to verse 29.

There is then a journey back again from Jerusalem to Antioch.

And we conclude in Antioch with rejoicing. So we started with trouble. We end with rejoicing.

Because the trouble that caused the journey has been resolved.

[7 : 25] What's more, you'll notice that the story begins with various unauthorized Jewish teachers from Judea teaching something in Antioch. So you start at the beginning with some Jews teaching something in Antioch.

And in the end, you have some authorized Jewish teachers from Jerusalem teaching something very different in Antioch. It's a wonderful little scenario, isn't it?

Now it's clear that something very significant happens in that middle section. In that time in Jerusalem. It is clear that this is very significant for the whole question that we've been talking about.

That of Jews and Gentiles living together in Christian faith. So this passage is very important in Acts. It represents what is a turning point in Christian faith.

Christianity could have gone in a very different direction. Christianity could have looked very different. But it did not. Because this event happened.

[8 : 31] And in the middle section of our passage, we'll find out why and how. So now let's look at the details of verses 1 and 2. Immediately we're told of the problem. Look at verse 1.

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.

That is, I take it that he's saying you cannot be Christian. The issue is plain. It is this issue that will consume the rest of the chapter.

Now on the surface, the issue is plain. Simply that of circumcision. But the rest of the passage makes clear that circumcision is just a sign for lots of other things. Look at verse 5, for example.

Verse 5. But some believers who belong 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.

[9 : 27] In other words, verse 5 shows, I think, what is implicit in verse 1. Circumcision is the first step. It shows, by being circumcised, you are saying, I want to be an insider.

I want to live a life devoted to God, the God of the Jews. I want to live a life devoted, therefore, to keeping the law of this God, which is the law of Moses.

So, you've got to understand what's going on here. The issue is... Thanks, Andre. The issue is, what makes a Christian a Christian?

Is a Christian solely a believer in Jesus? Is eternal life solely based on faith in Christ? Or is a Christian someone who has believed in Jesus and taken on a life of covenant obedience?

If the latter is true, they need to demonstrate that by being circumcised if they're male. And circumcision will indicate a willingness to live a life devoted to obedience to the law.

[10 : 32] That's what this debate's about. The latter view is what Paul and Barnabas dissent from. They want nothing to do with it. That is the debate.

That is what the debate is about in verse 2. And it was strong and it was pronounced. Have a look at verse 2. The original text literally says that the issue caused... It's a bit of an understatement, I think, in some sense, but it's a way of emphasising it in the original.

No small dissension and debate. In other words, a very significant debate. You can see what's going on here, can't you? And it doesn't just matter in Antioch.

It concerns the whole Gentile mission. It concerns the whole future of Christian mission. And it needs to be sorted out. And so in verse 2, we're told how they agree to sort it out.

Paul and Barnabas, plus some others, will go to Jerusalem. They will table the question and dispute it with the Jerusalem leaders. And they will go as emissaries of the church in Antioch. So here you've got the northerners, representing often Gentiles.

[11 : 37] The southerners, established Jewish faith, Jewish Christian faith. But look at verse 3. In one way, verse 3 preempts the debate that will come.

It tells us the story of how the apostles travel. And as they travel, they tell people the news. And what is the natural reaction of Christians when they hear the news?

They rejoice. They're glad. And that's the natural reaction because they know God has been at work. Other believers are rejoicing at what they hear.

And that is what will be restricted if the argument of certain individuals wins out. Because all of a sudden, that great rejoicing at many people coming in will be squashed.

Let's have a look at verses 4 and 5. However, before I do that, I should mention that there is some debate about how the events of this chapter fit into Galatians chapter 2. Now, I think the most likely scenario is that Paul's discussion in Galatians 1 is about incidents that occur before the ones we're talking about here.

[12 : 47] This is the resolution to many of those issues. So this, I think, occurs after Galatians 1. In some sense, the events here confirm Paul's theology in Galatia.

However, let's press on. Verses 4 and 5 are clear. Paul and Barnabas and their friends arrive. Here they are. They're well received by the church, the apostles and the elders. They tell them what's gone on.

However, there's some resistance from one group of people. These are Pharisees who apparently had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, just like Paul. So a bunch of people just like Paul, Pharisees, have come to believe in Jesus.

However, unlike Paul, they had remained so zealous for the law that they considered that obedience to it was part and parcel of being a Christian.

In other words, they thought being a Christian was about not only receiving Christ, but submitting totally in obedience to the law of Moses. And I want to stress this again to make sure we understand.

[13 : 45] I don't think that this debate is the debate that is happening in Galatians. I think it's a debate that is separate to that. I don't think they're talking about life, the Christian life, after you are saved by Jesus.

I think these group of people are saying that salvation itself not only involves faith in Jesus, but also obedience to the law of Moses.

Does that make sense? So it's not, well, I believe in Jesus and then I take on the law after. No, it's that believing in Jesus involves taking on the law as well.

And you show this by getting circumcised. In other words, Gentile Christians are to become Jews if they are to be truly Christian. This is the issue.

The fundamental issue is not that of circumcision. It's the issue of what does it mean to be saved? And so we come to the resolution. And we have Peter's speech. And just have a look at it there.

[14:45] I think it's got three parts to it. Let me explain. Part number one, and I'm just going to try and summarize the verses. Part number one says Christians are on the same grounds, whether they are Jew or Gentile.

That is, they have received the Spirit and exercised faith in Jesus. Therefore, God has no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.

Okay, that's part number one. Part number two is this. So, why put God to the test? By the way, I ought to say that, you know that term, putting God to the test, doesn't have...

It's not got a very good history in the Old Testament. To put God to the test is not a noble thing to be doing. It is a sign of great, great rebellion.

Can you see what's being said here? It's saying, why are you rebelling against God in an ungodly way? You threaten doing that. You threaten putting God to the test.

[15:48] In other words, God is heading in one direction, and you are saying, I'm not going anywhere near that. We're going in another direction. You're putting God to the test. By doing what?

Placing upon them a yoke that we have not been able to bear. Friends, what is the history of the whole of the Old Testament? It is that no one could do it.

No one could obey the law. No one could live a consistently rigorous, righteous life.

No one. And you get all the way through. Not even David could do it. David crashes out. Abraham crashes out.

Often in the text, you'll be told within a chapter or two of great promises being given that they could not be met by the people who received them. Think about it. Abraham.

[16:44] Abraham. He receives the great promises of God in Genesis 12. By the end of Genesis 12, what is he doing? Running off down to Egypt, lying about his wife, putting the promises under threat.

Think about the next incident. Israel is rescued in the Exodus. They are given the Ten Commandments, the things that will mark them out as God's people.

Within 12 chapters, they are setting up a little golden calf or a big golden calf at the foot of the mountain in rebellion. Think about the people entering the promised land.

They get as far as Jericho. It's a great success. But then they find the next cities a disaster. Why? Because someone's been stealing things that should have been devoted to the ban.

And so there's failure. David. 2 Samuel chapter 7. Given the great promises of God. He will have a son ruling forever. Chapter 7.

[17:47] Chapter 11. He's committing adultery. Stealing another man's wife. And so it goes throughout the history of God's people.

Failure after failure after failure after grace. You know, grace then failure. Grace then failure. Grace then failure. It just goes on and on. And can you see what Peter's saying here?

He says, You haven't been able to do it. Don't put it on others. We have not done it ourselves. How can we be putting this yoke on others?

That's part number two. Part number three. No, says Peter. You are saved by grace. Or you will be saved by grace. Jew and Gentile.

No distinction between them. Same for everyone's. Friends, the implications of Peter's speech are very clear. Christianity is not a sort of completed Judaism. Does that make sense? It's not a sort of polished up, rounded out, completed Judaism.

[18:50] No. No. God saves Jews through Jesus. God saves Gentiles through Jesus. There is no distinction. All are related to God in the very same way.

And then we reach the next little section where Barnabas and Paul get to tell their story again. And to tell about the conversion of Gentiles. Basically they say, look what God's been doing. And then you get James' speech.

Now James is clearly the senior leader here. And basically what he says is this. Here's my summary again. Look at God's reaction. God receives Gentiles.

This matches with Old Testament prophecy. He quotes from Amos. Therefore, he says, I have made a decision. Abstain from idolatry. Abstain from fornication.

Abstain from anything strangled. And from blood. Then he gives a little bit about Moses. Which I think says, you know, wherever you go, Jew or Gentile, you'll find people who obey the law in synagogues.

[19 : 58] And then he says, so what's going on here? I think James is doing this. He's saying, I want those four things I say. Abstain from idolatry. Abstain from fornication.

Abstain from anything strangled. Abstain from blood. Involve you in doing two things. First. Avoid the things that will harm your faith.

This is what's being said to Gentiles. Avoid the things that will harm your faith. The first two of them. Idolatry and fornication are always, nearly always kept company with each other in the Old Testament.

Fornication and idolatry are often linked with each other. Often occur together. Keep yourself from these things. Then he adds a couple of other things.

He says, avoid these things. Things strangled and blood. What are they all about? What do you think Paul is saying? He's saying, avoid doing the things that are going to put strains on your relationship with your Jewish brothers and sisters.

[21 : 04] And also the things that are going to make you an offense to the non-Christian Jews. Avoid those two things. Avoid the things that will do great harm to your Christian faith.

And avoid the things that will harm your relationship with Jews, whether they be Christians or not. There are two concerns. One, their own spiritual health. Two, their relationship with Jewish brothers and sisters.

As well as faithful Jews that they could find themselves mixing with. By the way, do you think we're still bound to these things? I know you don't think you are. Because you eat things with blood.

Oh, sorry, most of you do. Why are we no longer bound to them? Because our situation has changed. We are not meeting regularly with Jews. For whom these things might cause great offense.

We still want to keep the first two because they're harmful for our faith. But the second two we don't keep any longer. Because we don't have this close association of Jew and Gentile together. Okay.

[22 : 11] Finally, there's an action. Which is, choose men to send to Antioch. Send them with this letter. And the content of the letter is fairly straightforward. It goes, greetings to you.

Then, James says, we're distancing ourselves from the troublemakers. They weren't from us. Do you see that in the text? Then he says, here's our decision.

And he goes through the four things again. And he says, here's our letter. And he goes through it again. And then they journey back to Antioch. And then they gather together in verses 31 to 35.

And look at the words that he used. They gather together. They hear. They rejoice. Barnabas. And then Jerusalem men who were authorized, encouraged and strengthened.

Then they're sent off in peace. And then Paul and Barnabas teach and proclaim the word of God. That's a great little finish. Now, we're going to come back to see what this means, what the central point of it is in a moment.

[23 : 11] But I want to look at one more passage. And I'm going to read it to you again. Because in one sense, it doesn't belong here. But in another, it has very interesting links with what's just happened. So have a look in chapter 15.

In these verses, 36 on. After some days, Paul said to Barnabas, Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaim the word of the Lord to see how they're doing.

Now, Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. Now, do you remember John Mark? Do you remember he left Paul when he just started the first missionary journey?

Left Saul and Barnabas. Sorry, Paul and Barnabas. Now, look at what happens here. Paul decided not to take him with them. Sorry, not to take with them the one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work.

The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company. This is two great godly men. Two leaders of this church.

[24 : 18] Two that have just gone down to Jerusalem to resolve a dispute. Now having a dispute amongst themselves. Not over a gospel issue, but over a very pragmatic daily thing.

It's important. But they have this dispute. And it's a very sharp disagreement. And this disagreement became so sharp they parted company. Barnabas took Mark with him.

Sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out. The believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

What do you make of this? Is it bad? Is it good? Well, there's one thing good about it, isn't there? Because now you've got two lots of people travelling around doing all of this work. So that's one good part of it. But is it a good thing or a bad thing? It's not ideal, isn't it?

[25 : 17] Because what have you just had a story of? You've just had a great story of unity and love being exercised by Christians. This wonderful story. Set in a doctrinal context.

But a wonderful and rich story. And this one goes on to say, Things are not always that smooth. That's what this story is here to say, I think.

Things are not always that smooth. You will have people concerned to reach the world for the gospel and it won't be smooth between them. And often those things won't be doctrinal things at all. Most of our denominations are formed on what look like to be doctrinal things, but are more often things of Christian practice. Here, I think, are two different men with two different personalities. You can understand it, can't you?

Paul, the very task-oriented missionary man. And Barnabas, what's his name mean? The son of encouragement. He wants to keep building up this brother that, you know, we don't know why he left.

[26 : 19] But he wants to look after him, care for him, nurture him. Very task-oriented man, a very people-oriented man. They clash. Yes. Not the only time it'll happen in Christian history.

But you can see what it does, you see. It's an offset to this previous example. Friends, I want to say that sometimes there are good theological reasons not to work with other people.

I'm not sure that it's bad to split with people on just pragmatic grounds sometimes. But there's often a cost involved. There'll often be good things accompanying it, but there's often a cost involved.

Anyway, friends, I want to draw together some of the implications of this passage for us. There's so much we could do, but let's just draw some of them together. First, I want you to notice some bits and pieces in this text. You see, each of them have significant implications.

Look at verse 28. This is the letter from the council to the church at Antioch. It's a description of what God has been doing and of what the meeting decided.

[27 : 25] And look at what it says. Now, friends, I find this sentence quite striking.

You see, when we use the language of the Holy Spirit and we say, the Holy Spirit did this or the Holy Spirit told me this, we generally mean something almost magical happened, don't we?

Something very spectacular. In other words, something, in inverted commas, spiritual happened. Something unusual, perhaps even a little bit spooky. But what happened in Jerusalem was what?

They simply had a debate, didn't they? And lots of debate. I mean, we only got the tail end of it.

There was lots of debate going on before the bits that we heard. What happened in Jerusalem was they had a debate.

They sat down, they listened to each other, they heard from the scriptures, they reasoned, and they concluded. And when they did, they said, it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Now, they could mean that they'd seen what the Holy Spirit had done and therefore they reasoned it was good to the Holy Spirit.

[28 : 34] And then we reasoned it was good to us as well. But it's clear, isn't it? That the Holy Spirit works through the ordinary things of life.

Through humans interacting, through debates, through meditating upon scripture, through guidance in interpreting scripture. And so it's possible that we could even say, without anything really spectacular happening, that seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

The second thing I want you to notice about this verse is the total involvement of the Holy Spirit in all that has happened. Think about it. It is the Holy Spirit who initiated the move to the Gentiles, isn't it?

It was him who directed Philip to go and speak to the Gentile Ethiopian eunuch. It is the Holy Spirit who directed Peter to go to the household of the Gentile Cornelius.

Acts 11 verse 12. It is the Holy Spirit who initiated the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul for the mission to the Gentiles. And it is the Holy Spirit who now guides the church in its decisions about what is required of Gentiles.

[29 : 43] Seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Friends, God's Holy Spirit glorifies God's Son. And the inclusion of Gentiles glorifies the Son.

And so we might expect, mightn't we, that the Holy Spirit would be there acting and directing. For this is the task of the Holy Spirit, to glorify the Son and to make him known.

That's how you can tell when the Holy Spirit's active. He speaks through people often. And he makes Jesus known through people's words.

He's active when Jesus is made known and when people come to know Jesus. But let's move on. I want to speak about keeping Old Testament law. Friends, Jesus is keen on Old Testament law. You read the Sermon on the Mount. The very first page of the Sermon on the Mount has Jesus saying, you know, it's still there. It should be observed.

[30 : 47] Paul is keen on it in the sense that he thinks that it's good and it's from God. You can read about this in Romans and Galatians. The law of Moses is good.

It comes from God. And because it comes from God, it is something we should read, study and follow. But the law should be read through a much more primary lens.

And that lens is the person and work of Christ. It is the person and work of Christ that brings us to God. It is the means by which we are saved.

We are not saved by keeping the law. But if we love the Lord Jesus, we will listen to and learn from the law. Now, there's much more about the law that could be said than this.

And in fact, much more has been said. So many books have been written. It's just overwhelming.

We don't have time, but that's what I think. The law is good. It is to be read through the lens of Christ and it's to be loved and to be followed.

[31 : 52] Now, the centre of this passage is crystal clear. Can you see it there? What is the centre? The passage is not about how to make decisions as Christians. I don't think that's what it's up here for.

It is not about how to run synod. It is not whatever denominational decision-making body you have in your denomination. It's not about that. It's not about how you should conduct relationships among different groupings within your church.

This passage can offer some very helpful guidance on all of those issues. However, this passage has one central point and the central point is about salvation.

It shines out of this passage. In verse 9, Peter talks about cleansing the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles by faith, but look particularly at verse 11.

Let me read it to you. Peter says, On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.

[32 : 54] The message back to the church of Antioch makes the very same thing clear. Believing in Jesus is what saves. Paul was right. Barnabas was right.

The certain individuals were wrong. The Pharisaic Christians in Jerusalem were wrong. Salvation is through grace by faith in Christ. Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, the glory of God alone.

This is of primary importance. It is verified by God in Scripture. It is verified by God the Holy Spirit's actions in history. It is verified by God the Son's sacrifice.

It is verified by this first church council. Salvation is by grace alone. Salvation is through Christ alone.

Friends, in the hierarchy of spiritual truths, this one is right up there. This one is right up there. It is a truth that makes a difference between salvation and damnation.

[33 : 57] It is therefore a truth worth dying for. It is a truth worth fighting for. It is a truth worth going to the wall for. Our brother in Iran is right.

He cannot deny this, even if it means his death, and we cannot deny it. Now, for many of us, we will never be called upon to give, to defend this truth as our brother has to.

Nevertheless, we are called upon to defend it in numerous ways all the time. When Christianity is reduced to the observance of certain things, and that's all it is.

When Christianity is reduced to a set of checklists that you just tick off and say, I've done it. When Christians are measured, even in our churches, in terms of whether they belong to a certain group or not.

When we measure our standing before God in terms of law, even Old Testament law, when we allow that it is possible to be related to God through other religions, when we say that Jesus is only one way to God, or in countless other ways, we've forgotten to stand for truth.

[35 : 19] Friends, do not give in on this. Do not give in to the pressure that we have in our society. Even in our churches, there is only one way to be related to God.

And that is through God's grace demonstrated in Christ Jesus and through faith in Him. Fight for this truth.

Go to the wall for it. It is what God is committed to. That's what this passage says. Faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.

Stand for this truth. It is being undermined every day in our churches, in our world, everywhere. Stand for it. That's what these guys did. That's what this council verified. It is by grace, through faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[36 : 30] Don't let it go. It must be held on to. It must be fought for. And if necessary, it must be died for. So let's pray. Father, we thank you for this debate.

Thank you for the spirit in which it was conducted. Thank you for the decisions that it made. Thank you for the men and women who, through history, have stood for it.

That is, stood for the decisions made here. Thank you for our brothers and sisters who have paid the ultimate cost, that is, their own life, in order to defend this truth.

We think particularly of the heroes of the Reformation. We think for those of our brothers and sisters around the world this day, who stand for it.

We pray particularly for our brother in Iran. We pray that, you would keep him faithful, that he will not jettison this truth, that there is only one true way to be related to you.

[37 : 53] That is by your grace, through faith in your son. Father, please help us in our own context to stand for this truth, and to not jettison it for anything.

Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.