

Dissension in the Church

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[0 : 00] We'll turn back to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15.

And we'll take up the reading from verse 5, Acts chapter 15 and verse 5, page 1113. But some believers who belong 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.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. This week is an important week.

In the life of our denomination. It's also an important week in the life of other denominations as well. It's the week in which the General Assembly meet.

And it meets in Edinburgh over the next few days. Now for many people this meeting may seem a complete irrelevance. Something that has little, if anything, to do with real life and more to do with committees and structures and formal arrangements and so on and so forth.

[1 : 33] But to anybody who thinks like that, I would ask you to think again. Especially if you think that a General Assembly is a man-made arrangement.

It isn't. The reason we have an assembly is because we go all the way back to the very first church here in Acts chapter 15.

In fact, every important thing. I know that some of the arrangements that we make as churches are common sense arrangements. For example, we arrange the time of a service at 11 o'clock in the morning or 6.30 in the evening according to common sense.

And how convenient that is with regard to people's timetable. But the really basic important decisions have to be made collectively as a church.

And they have to be grounded upon the Bible. And even the way in which we meet has to be grounded by the Bible. God loves the church.

[2 : 36] Sometimes people can be very cynical about the church. And I would ask you please to be careful before being cynical about the church. I know there are many faults and failures and features about the church which ought not to be there.

And wherever humankind is involved, even Christians, we tend to spoil and ruin so many good things. And so in this world, we'll never do anything perfectly.

And yet, God has said in the Bible, he loves his church. He loves his people. And he wants the best for them. And he also tells us that he has given guidelines.

He has given instruction as to how that church ought to be ordered. And the book of Acts is an absolutely fascinating book that tells us how the first church was ordered.

Now, I'm not saying that everything we do has to be absolutely identical to the way it was in the book of Acts. I don't believe that's possible.

[3 : 42] But what I do believe is that the principles that we find at that very early stage in the church are the same principles which we absolutely have to put into place.

And these are the principles that govern the church to which we belong. And I hope that to a large extent and to every possible extent that is the case.

For example, leadership within the church. The Bible doesn't leave us ignorant as far as leadership. It tells us. If you go back to the previous chapter, Paul visited the cities.

And he appointed, verse 23 in chapter 14. When they had appointed elders for the congregations in every church with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

That's not just an historical statement. That's God's word. That is the way in which we ought to establish leadership within our church. That's the way in which God wants us to lead.

[4 : 42] And for there to be people who are prepared to take ownership and prepared to take charge of the proceedings. Now, when I say that, that doesn't mean to say that the elders are allowed to do what they want.

They most certainly aren't. I've said before, and anyone who knows this Bible will know, that being an elder, and I say this as an elder, being an elder in the church is a massive responsibility.

And the first thing an elder needs to see is the weight and the importance of that responsibility. Before he can do anything else, he has to come to terms with the massive responsibility that God has placed on him as one who has to give account.

One day, we will have to stand before God and give an account about the way in which we have carried out our responsibilities before God. So that means we have to be very, very careful.

And it also means that I would ask you please to pray for the leadership of your church. Please pray for the leadership of your church. Not just the ministers, but the elders as well.

[5 : 50] These are God's appointed, and they first of all have to learn to be servants. Jesus said that I have called, that he made very clear in John chapter 13, that we were to serve.

The very first thing that we were to do, the church is a serving body in which each one of us must learn to serve one another. And it is as we do so that we become a witness to the outside world.

Now, very often people become cynical at this point and say, well, you know, this is what you say, but I don't see much of it in the church at large. That may be so, but that doesn't mean it's not true.

And it doesn't mean we don't strive for it and work towards it and pray for it and to do whatever we can to put to right whatever is wrong.

Now, as far as each individual congregation was concerned, way back in the early church, the elders presumably would meet together for prayer. And they would meet together to make whatever arrangements had to be made for the Lord's Supper, for prayer meetings, for the coming together of God's people every Sunday and so on.

[7 : 02] Making sure that there was a house or a building or whatever available for them. All of these things had to be done for each congregation. But we also know that there was a district and we call that a presbytery.

And presbyteries are simply a meeting of local elders in local places to discuss whatever issues have to be decided upon. But here in Acts chapter 15 is a meeting of the whole church.

And the way this takes place, way at the very beginning, was by means of a question that had arisen amongst them at that time.

And the question was this, and we find it in verse 1. A group of believers who obviously found it really difficult to tear themselves away from their customs and habits, from their Jewish customs and habits.

They couldn't bear to think of anyone worshipping God without having been circumcised. Because they were Jewish people and for them circumcision was part of their very nature and part of the core of their very being.

[8 : 16] And it went all the way back to the Old Testament where God said to Moses that he gave him the right of circumcision. And said that this was to be a mark, the sign of the covenant that God was making with his people.

Now, as the centuries unfolded, Jewish people who took God's word seriously and who took their own position seriously, they absolutely had to be circumcised themselves and circumcise their children.

So when the New Testament came, when Jesus came, and when these people became believers, there was confusion amongst them. And a group of them obviously could not tear themselves away from their past and from their culture and from their custom.

And they said this, they had come to this conclusion, unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now, they were saying this not to fellow Jews who were already circumcised, but they were saying this to Gentiles. And I believe that with others that there was a little bit of racial tension between those who were of Jewish extraction and those believers who were of Gentile extraction.

[9 : 33] And that, again, is hard for us to understand, but you have to go back and to try and understand the enormous racial tension that there was between Jews and Gentiles in that society at that time.

You see, we're all products of our own environment, and we can't help but being products of our own environment. It's easy enough for us to say, well, that was a bit stupid, wasn't it?

I mean, these people should have known. But it's easy for us to say that because that's not an issue. There are other issues in our world, but here's the issue there. Here were people who had grown up Jews, they had gone to the synagogue, they had gone to the rabbis, they had sat under the feet of the rabbis, and for them, they couldn't help but being Jewish people.

That was ingrained into their very system. And so they thought of a Gentile coming to worship God, their God, the God of their fathers, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, without being circumcised was unthinkable.

They couldn't bring themselves to think about that. And this was a question which, once it arose, became not only a divisive question, but a contentious one, one which drew huge measure of emotion amongst the believers.

[10 : 56] And it was a question that threatened, don't ever underestimate this chapter. This chapter may appear as if it was some kind of small issue that had to be sorted out, and it may appear to be just a matter of form in the early church.

It wasn't. This was an absolutely fundamental issue as far as Paul was concerned. And it had to be resolved properly. Otherwise, it threatened the existence of the church, and it actually threatened the future of the gospel.

And I'll tell you why. Because here is what these men were saying. Here, these men were preaching another gospel. You might say, well, how do you make that out?

All they were doing was going back into the Old Testament and requiring a Gentile believer to be circumcised. What's the big deal in that? Well, I'll tell you what the big deal is. Because their message had shifted.

It had added something to the gospel. They were saying that Jesus and faith in Jesus was not enough to be saved.

[12 : 10] Here's the message once again, verse 1. Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

That was no, that struck at the very heart of the gospel itself. And it was no wonder that we go on to read, and after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, there was a furore.

It's not just a little argument, the kind of argument that very often happens, you know, between Christians. But this was not just like that. This was an absolutely massive dispute because it struck at the very heart of the gospel.

And when it came to the gospel, the Apostle Paul, he just could not negotiate with anyone who questioned the gospel itself.

And you know why? This wasn't just some kind of religious disagreement. And you know, people talk about, they talk about the church disagreeing, and sometimes we get accused of disagreeing more than we agree.

[13 : 25] I'm not sure, I don't think that's true at all. But for the Apostle Paul, this was the very message of the gospel. And for him, you take away the gospel, then we might as well all just forget the whole thing.

There was no point in having a gospel. There was no gospel if you added to it. Because for Paul, if you added to the gospel, you changed the gospel.

And as soon as you changed the gospel, you denied the gospel. You took it away. You nullified it. Tonight, this message is the same.

Two thousand years hence. It's about how you and I may be right with God. The most important question that you and I can ever face is how can I be right with God?

Every other priority in my life disappears in comparison with this question of how my sins can be forgiven. Is there a way of me to have everlasting life?

[14 : 30] How can I be sure that I'm going to heaven? That was the question. which Paul was dealing with and which the church was dealing with at this time. And you can see, I hope, how utterly important this question was.

It could not be negotiated. It was a matter of basic fundamental importance because it affected our own lives. You see, the Lord has given us a clear message.

And this is where this is where once again we come back to how we might be right with God and that it is only by trusting and believing in Jesus Christ.

Faith alone. By grace alone. That's the only way that we might in which we may be saved.

So, you can see, I hope, that it was a matter that was well worth debating. That was the question. The only one way of dealing with it was to come together.

[15 : 35] And one of the things that this chapter brings to my attention is the fact that we have to be honest with these questions. There is no point. We will never resolve them by, we will never resolve disputes by discussing them informally.

Because every discussion, the more discussions you have informally, and it appears at the beginning of the chapter this is the very thing that happened. There was no small dissension and debate with them.

But it became apparent that they're really going to come to a resolution, a final, a satisfactory resolution on this problem that we're going to have to come together and that we're going to have to debate the issue as a church.

And that is the basis of our general assembly. Where questions and reports and the progress of the church can be monitored and can be reported on by coming together.

There was a similar coming together in the previous chapter where when they arrived and gathered the church together, verse 27, they declared that all that God had done with them. And this week I hope that we too will hear reports of what God is doing in various parts of the country and in various parts of the world.

[16 : 52] I heard a report not so long ago and I'm quite keen to have someone here from who's been to a part of India where we have church planting work going on of the number of people who have come to faith.

It's really quite remarkable. There is a real powerful work going on in an area of India which we have which we support a work. And no doubt during this week we'll hear of something of that work.

It's a great joy to hear of what God is doing especially perhaps someone who's in a small place somewhere and who's discouraged and who's laboring and never sees a fellow minister or a fellow elder from one end of the year to another.

It's a great encouragement for a person like that to come and be strengthened exactly the same way as they were strengthened here. That's the whole point of the church. It's a collection of God's people and the church's task is to encourage one another and to pray for one another and to hear where the work is difficult.

There are places in our church where it almost seems like such a lone furrow where people are laboring and they have done year after year preaching the gospel year after year and no apparent results.

[18 : 08] There have been all through the history of the church places and people like that who have labored faithfully for God. Are we praying for these people? Do we know who they are? Do we know where our small congregations are?

Do we know where our ministers are laboring away in small congregations often coming to the brink of despair? Do we care as a church? Do we care?

I hope we do and not just our own denomination but other denominations as well other churches where we may know somebody or some part of the country where we may have an interest or have relatives.

Do we pray for the church in these places? And do we believe, do we pray believing that God is able to change the face of our nation and our world and he's able to bring to bring about his plan and his purpose that the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea?

Are we a praying people? That's why I would encourage anyone, I know it's difficult for us, that's why I would give every encouragement to anyone who's able to at any time, to visit the assembly assembly and to be involved in the workings and the operation of the church.

[19 : 26] And very often when somebody visits the assembly, they get a different view and different perspective altogether when they see for themselves something of the work that our church does.

It's about, it's not simply about form or arrangement or meetings or committees, it's about what God is doing and in a day when we need to be on our knees and we need to pray to the Lord that the Lord will hear us and he'll come in great power and he'll turn our nation around.

Now, what happened at this? Well, we talked about the question that brought the whole church together and we also have a very, very interesting perspective on the way in which this great meeting, I don't know how many people were there, but I do know this, that it wasn't a rabble.

It had to be ordered, there had to be a structure. To that great meeting in Acts chapter 15. And I know that because the chapter tells us that one person spoke and then another person spoke and then another person spoke and each one gave witness and said their own thing and they sat down again.

One person would stand up, sit down, the other person, and that's the way that meetings have to be conducted. Otherwise, it would be a rabble. You see, that's what the problem I have with people nowadays who say, oh well, the church should just happen.

[20 : 55] Have you ever heard of the emerging church? The emerging church is the idea that we've got too many structures, we've got too many committees, we've got too many rules and regulations in the church.

What we need to go all the way back to is just a church that happens. A bunch of Christians meet together and let's see what happens. We start singing or whatever and let's see how the spirit leads.

Well, I'm not young and I've been in the church long enough to know that as soon as you start that, it's only a matter of time before two people will fall out with each other. What do you do then?

What do you do when there's a dispute? How do you prevent a separation or a split or a division in that church? Because we all believe that the church should be together and we should be able to resolve any problems.

You'll never resolve problems if you don't have order and structure and sense to them. That's what you see there. Not only so, but they had a moderator.

[22 : 02] His name was James, the disciple. James, the Lord's brother, the apostle. He was the moderator and it's obvious that he's keeping order. And whatever disagreement there is outside of this collection, there is order and structure and there's a sense of respect and solemnity that is appropriate when God's people are trying to deal with a very important issue.

Do you not think it makes sense? Of course it does. God deserves out every effort and tidiness and order and structure. And there is nothing in that that the spirit cannot lead and guide.

See, some people think that the more structure you have, the less of the spirit you have. Well, I don't know where you get that at all. Can the Holy Spirit not work in a tidy meeting, in an orderly meeting, in a solemn meeting, just the same way as he can in another type of meeting?

Of course he can. And that's what you have in Acts chapter 15. Now, here's what the first person to speak was Peter. Peter. And you find what he said in verse 7.

And he stood up and he spoke about how God had been working in the lives of the Gentiles. Now, the significant thing here is that of all the disciples, when it came to those who were racially opposed to the Gentiles coming into the church, Peter was the worst culprit.

[23 : 30] You remember how hard he had struggled in Acts chapter 10 when God revealed to him that he had to go and he had to go and to the house of Cornelius and to bring him to faith in Jesus by presenting the gospel to him.

And God had done that by lowering a sheet with all kinds of animals, clean and unclean. And God had said to him, get up Peter, kill these and eat. Now, this was a vision. And Peter said, no way, I have never in all my life killed or eaten anything that is unclean.

And this was God's way of showing Peter that his ministry was going to be one in which he was going to bring in Gentiles. That was a huge challenge to Peter.

A huge challenge. So when Peter stood up in Acts chapter 15, it must have been, it must have gone against his grain. Everything that he had ever grown up with and all the prejudices that he once had held against the Gentiles, they all had to disappear.

Because once Christ comes into a person's life, you have to change your whole way of thinking. Christ makes a person new. New in their habits.

[24 : 44] New in their lifestyles. New in their routine and everything that they live for. Jesus changes everything. But it's a great change.

I wouldn't give it, I wouldn't exchange it for anything. And that's why I can't understand anybody who says, I can't become a Christian. I can't come to Jesus because I'm too set in my ways.

Well, change your ways. Leave them behind because God has better ways for you. God has a whole new life for you. A life full of adventure and unknown in which God himself takes you and leads you from one day to another.

But it comes at a cost. You have to leave behind your old prejudices. You have to leave behind your old opinions. All the things that you grew up with that are perhaps wrong and sinful and against God's way.

And as God teaches you the new way of looking at things, you have to accept them. It was just as hard for Peter and indeed I'm sure for Paul and all the disciples to come to terms.

[25 : 49] You know the greatest thing, and I know I'm going off on a tangent here, you know the greatest challenge that these disciples had to face as Jews was the truth that God was three.

Up until the point they met with Jesus, they would never have countenanced the possibility that God was actually three persons. Because for them, God was one.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. That's the truth, the central truth of the Old Testament that had been drummed into them from the very age, and it's true. But now they had to come to terms with the fact that God being one was also God being three.

Father, Son, and Spirit. That was the greatest challenge to their thinking. And it was hugely difficult for them. Well, it was the same with this. It was the same with the notion that someone could actually come from the outside, a stranger could come from the outside and could come to Jesus, to faith in Jesus, without first becoming Jewish.

They couldn't think of it. So for Peter to stand up and to defend the Gentiles, and to stand up and argue that the church must accept Gentiles as brothers in Jesus on account of their faith in Jesus alone.

[27 : 13] Let me say it again. Faith in Jesus alone. Not faith plus anything. Not faith and being free church.

not faith and wearing the right clothes at the right time. Not faith and one particular way of doing things.

You go all over the world and you'll find a host of ways of doing things. These are all of lesser importance. But these are all men and women who love and serve and honor Jesus Christ.

We don't have the monopoly of the Christian faith worldwide. We don't. But yet how easy it is to think of the Christian faith only in terms of the way we have been brought up.

It's the most natural thing in the world. Especially when we haven't gone out there and seen the way that other people worship. We're all, there's a bit of the Pharisee in all of us, isn't there?

[28 : 19] There's no need to point the finger at the Pharisees in Jesus' time. There's a bit of the Pharisee in all of us. Faith alone in Jesus alone.

By God's grace alone. Now I'm not saying that the person lives the same lifestyle once he comes to faith as he always did. Of course he doesn't.

God changes that person's life. God all of a sudden lights up the Bible and the Bible becomes something it never was to you. You have a new love for the Bible. You have a new desire for the Bible.

A new hunger for the Bible. The Bible is something you want to read. You have a new love for the church. You want to come to church not because it's a habit or because you always have done but because you love to come with the Lord's people and you love to hear the message of the gospel.

You love to sing his praises. All of a sudden the Psalms that we sing they come to life for us. We want to praise and honour and glorify God because of what he's done for us in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 21] God has given us a new life. But we must never ever add our own conditions. Never add your own conditions.

That's what these people were doing and Peter he argued for the Gentiles coming in and by faith in Jesus alone.

Then Paul and Barnabas stood up and they too argued the same thing. And then James the brother of Jesus stood up and he brought everything to a conclusion and the great sense of this passage is every implication in this passage that it was the decision which they came to was a unanimous decision.

This must have been a hugely solemn moment. Can you imagine it? Before this great gathering took place there were disputes and arguments and fights individually amongst the Christians.

Then they all came together and the context of the assembly and prayerfully and biblically they came to a resolution. Now how did they manage it? How did they manage to come to that resolution?

[30 : 29] So amicable. Well I'll tell you why. Because lying at the very heart of their discussion was the Bible.

James stood up. Verse 13. Simeon he says is related how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name and with this the words of the prophets agree.

Then he went back to the Bible and he grounded his argument on the Bible. And he quoted the Bible. After this I will return.

Amos chapter 9. After this I will return. I will rebuild the tents of David that has fallen. I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it 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 known from of old.

That's how every important question that may be asked. Questions that can divide Christians. The questions that threaten the very gospel itself.

[31 : 35] How can these questions be done? By coming back to the Bible. And so many people will come up with a question and we'll discuss the question round and round and round.

And it's often some time before someone says well what does the Bible say? And all too often very few people will be able to go to the Bible because they don't know the Bible well enough.

And trying to answer questions without knowing what the Bible says about them. that's why if you try and do that you'll flounder. Because the Bible is the word of God.

The only rule to direct us. How we may glorify and enjoy him. So when you're asking the next question whether you think it's an important question or a not so important question if it surrounds the Christian faith you always ask what does the Bible say?

And our church has to be grounded on the Bible. Every church ought to be grounded on the Bible. Our gospel is grounded on the Bible. The Bible is the power of God.

[32 : 47] You take somebody to the Bible and as God works through that person that's what I was saying this morning that I would never hesitate to give someone a Bible and to encourage them to read it. Why?

Because God's power, by his power, the Holy Spirit speaks to people through the Bible. But our decisions are taken, our opinions are formed, our lives are grounded on God's word to us.

At the time of the Reformation, one of the watchwords of the Reformation was this, sola scriptura, the Bible alone.

You know, that's the most wonderful principle on which to operate. It is the Bible that leads us to Jesus. It is the Bible that points us to Jesus.

And it's the Bible that governs our lives as individuals. It's the Bible that governs our church. It's the Bible that governs our decisions.

[33 : 52] It's the Bible that gives us the great promise of everlasting life to those who trust and believe in Jesus Christ. If it's not in the Bible, it's not worth it. That's how important it is.

But if it is, then let's know it and let's know the scriptures for ourselves and let's never be ashamed of coming to a resolution as these men did in the early church on biblical grounds and on a biblical basis.

And so, I hope that as our leaders gather this week, in general assembly, and as the leaders of other denominations perhaps all over the world, whenever they gather, that we will be governed as a denomination and as a church worldwide by the word of God.

And that we will pray for our leadership. Do we pray for our leadership? worship? I'm very conscious of the prayer for the ministers in this congregation and I am so thankful that I know that this congregation prays for Mr.

MacLeod and myself as we go about our daily business and ministry in the pulpit and otherwise. Do you pray for our elders here? Do you pray for our presbytery?

[35 : 22] Do we take an interest in the workings and the discussions of the presbytery? The presbytery by the way when we meet is an open court.

Anyone can go. I always encourage somebody to go to the presbytery. I remember being taken to a presbytery in a sister denomination in the United States years and years ago.

This minister in the OPC, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, with whom we have a very cordial relationship that are Reformed Church like ourselves. He took me to this presbytery and what I noticed more than anything else was not just the discussions but the number of people that were there listening because they were interested in what was going on.

I would love to see that. I would love to see more and more people taking a prayerful interest. The same is true with the General Assembly in Edinburgh.

Not just as unnecessary evil in order to process some business, some technical business. It can be that.

[36 : 30] But it's also the meeting together of the leadership of God's people. It's a very solemn and a very precious and I believe at times a very prayerful and a very special occasion.

and I hope that your support will be firmly fixed and you're prayerful that we'll have the prayerful support of the people of God because at the end of the day the church is not the leadership.

The church is the people, the body of Jesus as a worshipping, witnessing people. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven we pray then for your church.

We have to begin at home. We ask oh Lord that you will bless every part of the church in which we belong.

We ask Lord also for the church in Scotland and in England, for the church in Northern Ireland, in the Irish Republic, in Wales. We pray oh Lord for the church in Europe and all over the world.

[37 : 42] We give thanks for your witnessing people, for the number of people that there are who love the Lord Jesus and who want to worship and who want other people to come to know him as their Lord and Savior.

And we pray that tonight as our focus has been on that very first meeting of the leadership of your church, we pray that as we meet in leadership and that as other churches meet in leadership that they will ground and that all of us will ground our decisions on the word of God, the Bible, which is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify you and enjoy you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.