

Sermon Given by

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At the Evening Service on 7th November 2010

Acts 15:22-16:5 - "Getting the team together"

One of the most telling points I think that has been made as we have been travelling through these chapters of Acts was almost a throwaway line by one preacher, when he encouraged us to view this account of the first missionary journey as part of our **family history**.

People take their family history very seriously today, don't they? Some of us here – those of a certain vintage – will remember the TV series Roots which had a huge following; for today's internet generation it is more likely to be the popular website Ancestry.co.uk. We love to know about our forebears – even if the discoveries are occasionally in the form of a rather dark story.

And I hope as we have been reading these chapters of Acts it has been a similar experience for us – that we have had the sense that we are looking at the family photo album. This is our story, with our roots if we are Christians today.

And if you're not yet a Christian, looking into the Christian faith, this could be a significant thing which you sense you lack and it should be something you find in the Christian church: a sense of connectedness with the past and with other people.

It's something which many today feel they do not have, as society unravels, to be replaced instead with dis-connectedness and rootlessness and individualism.

If reading these chapters is like looking at some fascinating family snaps from the past then the specific episode we are thinking about this week and last week really is a vital part of our family history. **Without the events of Acts 15 happening you and I would not be here this evening.** It's as simple as that. There would be no worldwide Christian church. At best there would be a small Christian sect within Judaism. Certainly no All Saints Little Shelford to speak of.

The presenting issue was, you may remember, the place of Gentiles in the church – and particularly on what terms the church in Jerusalem would accept them as equal members of God's people.

By this chapter it is about ten years since, beginning with Cornelius, Gentiles have been brought to faith in Christ and welcomed into the church by baptism. You remember how he was not only accepted by Peter, but when Peter reported the full facts of what had happened back to the church in Jerusalem, they praised God.

Then when the church in Antioch began successfully reaching out to Greeks, the church in Jerusalem again wanted to check out what was happening, which it did by sending Paul and Barnabas. Obviously God was at work in the new movement and again the Jerusalem church acknowledged that.

But with the next stage – Paul's first missionary journey, the stakes are getting raised higher. How will the Jewish church respond to the increasingly independent Gentile movement which is springing

up?

I like that story about a father visiting his 23 year old son in the new flat which his son had just moved into, and as they went out of each room, his father switched the light on. Finally the whole place was ablaze with light. Inevitably the question came: 'Dad, why have you switched all the lights on?' And his father just turned to him and said: 'I've waited 23 years for the pleasure of visiting you in your home and leaving the lights on...'

Forgive me if that silly story trivialises what is happening here but we are all familiar with the tensions which occur in families when the next generation grows older and begins to assert their independence.

What will happen in the relationship between the parent church in Jerusalem and the young but increasingly independent Jew/Gentile churches springing up all over the Eastern Mediterranean?

How they answered that question is the topic of the Church Council in Jerusalem in Acts 15; and it is no exaggeration to say that our existence hung in the balance at this point.

It's not strictly exposition tonight taking us through every verse of the passage; I want instead to tease out two principles from today's section: **unity on salvation issues; flexibility on secondary issues.**

1. Unity on salvation issues

That emerged as the council met in Jerusalem. The debate was forced on them by the false teaching which is described in verse one of chapter 15: ***Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.*** You see in that last bit how it was a salvation issue. The Judaisers were teaching that it was great to have Gentiles come to faith in Christ; but that was not enough. They needed Jesus PLUS something else – Jesus PLUS circumcision.

And the debate had established that that was not true. If you add circumcision on as an extra requirement, you imply that what Jesus did wasn't enough – that Gentiles couldn't be accepted. Whereas God plainly had accepted the Gentiles without circumcision.

God had accepted them on the basis of faith in Jesus alone, and if God had accepted them, then the Jewish church had better do so as well. Peter's conclusion in verse 11 was emphatic: ***we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.***

Hence my first heading – **Unity on salvation issues.**

I wonder if we value sufficiently what Jesus Christ achieved for us when he died on the cross for us... It was a significant part of how the great preacher CH Spurgeon came to faith. He was reading a gospel booklet and he was arrested by the words 'the finished work of Christ'. What did it mean?

'Immediately,' he said later, 'the words 'It is finished' (words which Jesus spoke as he died on the cross) suggested themselves to my mind. What was finished?

'And I at once replied, 'a full and perfect satisfaction for sin: the debt was paid by the Substitute; Christ died for our sins...' Then came the thought, 'If the whole work was finished and the whole

debt paid, what is there left for me to do?’ And with this dawned the joyful conviction that there was nothing in the world to be done but to fall down on one’s knees and, accepting this Saviour and his salvation, to praise him for evermore...’

It is the most wonderful news that on the basis of Jesus’ death on the cross any person who puts their trust in him - whatever their background, wherever they are from - can be fully and freely accepted, there and then, with no ifs, buts or maybes and with no religious extras added into the deal.

In fact if we add to what Jesus has done, we are in fact implying it is somehow deficient: to add to it is to take away from it. It’s like me going to a painter after he has applied the final brushstroke to a masterpiece and asking to add a few extra touches of my own – what an insult – only this is worse – because if I add my works to Jesus works, I am in fact relying on myself for acceptance before God. And I cannot be accepted on those terms.... That’s why unity on essentials – like salvation – is so important.

The Jerusalem Council recognised that and their letter implicitly emphasised that, as you can see if I read verses 22-8 to you:

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

Do you see how the whole tone of that communication breathes this spirit of unity on essential salvation matters?

The apostles and elders act visibly in unity with the whole Jerusalem church – they’re not standing on their own authority. They don’t just send a letter – letters can’t smile – they send Barsabbas and Silas to confirm the written message; they don’t cold shoulder the representatives from the Antioch church - the Jerusalem delegates travel back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. And they are described very warmly as ‘dear friends’.

Notice also how the apostles and elders call themselves brothers in verse 23 (and our translation actually obscures the fact that they address their letter in verse 23 to the Gentile brothers, not just Gentile believers).

In the letter itself the apostles and elders deliberately distance themselves from the false teaching by saying that it was unauthorized and they acknowledge that it has caused major distress – the

false teaching has disturbed and troubled the Gentiles' minds.

It's all saying we stand with you and we accept you as equals in God's people.

Ending in that wonderful conclusion in verse 28: ***It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:***

That verse has sometimes been hijacked unhelpfully by people who want to use the idea of the Holy Spirit guiding the church council to justify the thought that consensus in church councils and synods is the voice of the Holy Spirit. So in the recent debate about women bishops in the Church of England, a number of people have said that because gradually the majority view has shifted to the point where 2/3 of the Synod believe that it is right for women to be appointed bishops, that is the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Once you reason like that of course the door is open to saying exactly the same if the consensus shifts on other issues. If 2/3 of the church in ten years time think that homosexual practice is OK is that the voice of the Holy Spirit as well?

It makes much more sense to understand this as shorthand for what Peter had already said: that the Holy Spirit communicated his view on this matter in an obvious way - namely, that when Cornelius and the Gentiles became Christians, they had the same experience of the Holy Spirit as the Jewish Christians at Pentecost. God the Holy Spirit showed that they could be accepted and justified 100% as much as the Christians who had been born and bred in Jerusalem. They didn't need to be circumcised or anything else before they received the Spirit. It therefore seemed good to the apostles and elders and to the Holy Spirit to accept them without extras, because they had been fully saved in their initial conversion experience.

And we must guard that freeness and fullness of salvation jealously. ***Unity on salvation issues.***

Hang on a minute I can hear someone saying – you've stopped mid-sentence at the end of verse 28. The Jerusalem church did impose some requirements, didn't they?

Well yes they did – but not as requirements for salvation. So let's move on to our second heading...

2. Flexibility On Secondary Issues.

And that shows in three instances here...

i) The first is in the requirements suggested in the letter. Let me read verses 28-9 again... ²⁸ ***It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:***

²⁹ ***You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.***

Farewell.

It's significant the way they say: '***you will do well to avoid these things***'. Because they aren't elevating these commands to the level that the false teachers had elevated circumcision.

In the discussion in Jerusalem, James had given the reason for this advice as that Moses had been proclaimed in the synagogues of these towns for a long, long time. Inevitably there were converted Jews present in the churches alongside the Gentiles and out of sensitivity to them in some of the more obvious places where Gentile standards ran head to head with Jewish ceremonial law, the Gentiles were being encouraged to honour the Jewish laws – not as a means of salvation, but simply for the sake of unity.

Technically they could eat meat sacrificed to idols, but the right to that freedom was a secondary issue which they should hold lightly. **Flexibility on secondary issues.**

Certainly from the response to the letter in verses 30- 35 the Gentile Christians weren't taking this as a threat to their freedom. ***The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ^[34] ^[u] ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.***

They were ***encouraged*** by the message that they were accepted as Gentiles and they sent their gospel peace back with the Jerusalem Christians. They model unity on salvation issues and flexibility on secondary issues.

ii) The flexibility is displayed again in the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in verses 36 – 41. ***³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷***

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Don't you think it's interesting that we have recorded there the second falling out between Christians in the chapter? This time it isn't between people who you might easily envisage falling out – Jews and Gentiles; it's between Barnabas and Paul – two bosom buddies. Just a reminder that godly, Spirit-filled Christians will sometimes have disagreements – sharp disagreements: the word used is the word from which we get the medical term paroxysm.

The other little lesson is that such fall-outs between Christian aren't necessarily bad news. I think we often are terrified that if Christians end up in opposite camps on some issue it is a disaster. But often out of it some good may come.

In the first clash of the chapter the end result was a much greater clarity about the gospel; in the second dispute, between Paul and Barnabas, God overrules it so that instead of their being one gospel team there are two, heading off to two destinations. That not a bad outcome, is it?

But what made it possible? ***A flexible response to a situation where nothing massive was at stake.***

The question of whether to take John Mark along or not wasn't a salvation issue. So Barnabas and Paul agree to disagree and get on with spreading the gospel. You see it again: a climb-down happens. Unity on salvation issues, flexibility on secondary issues.

iii) It's the same again in Paul's decision to have Timothy circumcised in verses 1-4 of chapter 16. Let me re-read them. ¹ *Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.* ² *The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.* ³ *Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.* ⁴

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.

Some people have criticised Paul for, as they see it, giving in to pressure in having Timothy circumcised. 'How could he do that', they wonder, 'having stood his ground on the issue of circumcision?' But there is a deep consistency in his thought and action. Once the principle had been established that circumcision wasn't necessary for salvation, he was willing to make concessions in policy, again for the sake of Jews in the area. What wasn't necessary for acceptance with God, was still advisable for Timothy to be acceptable to some people.

Now this specific issue of how Gentile churches can be formed in a setting where there are many Jews is much less common today; but the need to distinguish between primary issues and secondary issues remains. On salvation by grace we must unite with other genuine Christians and we must resist any force which undermines that core gospel message; but on secondary issues we must be much more relaxed and flexible.

I like what the 16th c German preacher Martin Luther is supposed to have said: 'If you can preach the gospel, go round in a procession carrying a silver or gold cross or wearing a cowl, or surplice of gold or linen, and if one of them is not enough put on three'.

By contrast, we tend to be flexible on the gospel and then inflexible on our particular secondary matters.

'Believe as I believe, no more no less.

That I am right and no-one else confess;

Feel as I feel, think only as I think;

Eat what I eat and drink but what I drink;

Look as I look, do always as I do;

and then (and only then) I'll fellowship with you.'

That's the message we often give off. Of course it is a denial of the gospel. If that had been the approach on the part of either Jews or Gentiles in Acts 15, the gospel would have died out – and we wouldn't be here today.

Conclusion

So notice in conclusion how because they distinguished between primary and secondary issues there is a lovely result in chapter 16 verse 5. ***5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.***

It's actually the third time Luke mentions that the outcome of this idea of unity on salvation and flexibility on secondary issues is ***strengthening*** to the young churches who hear it.

I think when we harden and become inflexible on the secondary issues we usually think that is going to strengthen other Christians. We think: 'it would be so good for us all if we all read this book or went on this conference or signed up to this fair-trade agreement'. Whereas in fact what really strengthens a church and draws others in is a clear focus on the message of salvation and a willingness amongst all of us not to fight for our personal likes and dislikes and impose them on others. Backing down on secondary issues is what will strengthen the church.

As Richard Baxter put it: 'On the necessary points unity; on the questionable points, liberty; in everything love'.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)