



#2 In the Acts Series Part 2 A Beautiful Mess

1 Forest Park Church

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Opening Text:

Acts 15:1

2 *Now some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*

As so often in Acts, we have here a greatly condensed account of events which occurred over a period of several months.

- It all began with the introduction of a very plausible and attractive heresy which came disguised as Christianity.
- Luke says that certain Jewish brethren, who ostensibly were Christians, came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.
- They came among the Gentile believers there, who had just come out of raw paganism, who had been idolaters, had been devotees of the licentious and sexually immoral practices of the pagan temples.
- These Gentiles had been hopeless in their outlook toward the future beyond this life and were sunken in despair and darkness, but then God had saved them. They were now rejoicing in Christ.
- But these Jewish brethren came to them and said, as Luke quotes them here, verbatim: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

This specific issue has long ago passed away as a concern to us; but the principle behind it is very, very present with us yet today.

- The enemy has simply changed the players on the program.
- He has substituted some new issues on the same old divisive platform.

3 I. Theology Mattered to the Early Christians

“We live and work in an anti-doctrinal age or, at least, a time when people think they are anti-doctrinal”

You will hear phrases such as

- “people are more important than truth”,
- “it doesn’t matter what you believe but how you live”
- “how people feel matters more than what people think”

All of these common phrases try to get to the heart of something crucial:

- Bad theology is dangerous and kills people. (The Bible says much about false teachers)
- Yet the solution to “bad theology” is not “no theology at all” That’s also bad theology.

Judges 21:25

4 *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

Solid theology as seen in the pages of Scripture is both horizontal and vertical

- It balances grace and truth,
- love and justice,
- law and grace,
- head and heart.

The purpose of Doctrine is to help the church and Christians to know what to say, think, and do in the face of new challenges.

Acts 15:2

5 *When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement. 3 So they were sent on their way by the church,*

and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they were relating at length the conversion of the Gentiles and bringing great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all the things God had done with them.

They took this serious:

- This is a 467 mile Journey.
- A Strong 16 day walk.
- Even if they went by sea this represented a considerable time investment.
- Round trip they were dedicating nearly a month just in travel.

Our English word doctrine is derived from a Latin word, doctrina, which means, “that which is taught.”

Moses received instruction from the Lord on the mountain ([Ex. 24:12](#))

- The Israelites had sworn to do all that the Lord had spoken.
- That instruction included truths about who God is, what He had done for His people, and what He expected of them.
- That pattern is repeated throughout the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, Titus, a young preacher on the island of Crete, was exhorted to “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught” so as to be able to “give instruction in sound doctrine” ([Titus 1:9](#)).

- There are several such passages in the New Testament.
- Clearly, the teaching and preservation of divinely revealed doctrine is basic to the office of the minister and to the function of Christ’s church.

True unity can only be achieved when God intentions are understood and followed.

6 II. A Matter of Identity

Acts 15:5

But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses."

The problem is, of course, that the very identity of God's people in the Old Testament was framed by the rite of circumcision and the Mosaic Law,

- Both of which were instituted by God himself.
- Right from the time of Abraham, circumcision was the mark of the covenant and the expectation was that all male children and any men who became part of the Hebrew nation would be circumcised.
- Those who became part of the community also took on a well-defined way of life as given through the Law of Moses.
- Circumcision and the Law weren't things one intellectually agreed with and then moved on; they were part of a physically real, lived theology that God created.

The real question here is still an important one for today, what defines a Christ Follower.

8 III. A necessary Struggle.

You may be a Garbage man, a Fortune 500 CEO, a housewife and stay-at-home mom, a musician, or a professional athlete, but you're also a full-time thinker.

- Some of us think improperly and inconsistently,
- some of us reveal our thinking more publicly than others,
- but if you're a person, you think.
- You've never had a thoughtless day in your life.

Thinking about life, and our desire to understand, is a deeply and uniquely at the heart of how God wired us to operate.

- Most of the time we don't realize that God created us this way because he desires for us to wrestle with the choices we make.
- That's why there was a tree in the garden.

If Jesus had wanted to he could have answered this question and so many others in passing in just one sentence.

But he didn't rather he let the Church struggle to resolve this issue.

9 Phil 2:12

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,

The God who designed you to be a thinker is the same God who inspired the writers of the Old and New Testaments to pen his truths.

- God hardwired us to view life through an interpretative grid,
- He gave us his Word to shape that grid.

The Bible is a book, filled with doctrine, that defines what is good, right and true.

- Our loving Creator gave it to his children so they would know how to properly make sense out of life.
- The Bible is the "Meaning Giver" explaining foundational truths to the "meaning makers" he created.

With God's word, we wouldn't know how to think about life.

We wouldn't know for sure if what we knew was true,

and we wouldn't know if what we thought we knew was good and morally right.

But Sometimes it requires us to wrestle with a subject.

- We wrestle to place the scripture into our selfish hearts.

Sometimes that struggle is alone but sometimes its with others who are dealing with the same issue.

When you properly understand the doctrines contained in Scripture,

- They transform your identity,
- Reshape your relationships
- Redirect your finances.

Your calendar, your words, your hobbies and your leisure will look different. You won't think about your past and your future in the same way you once did, and you'll look at the present through an entirely different lens.

10 IV. An Issue to Solve.

The apostles and elders act to solve the dispute.

As the story unfolds in verse 6: "The apostles and elders met to consider this question."

What happened in this meeting, as Luke records, were many speeches, and the meeting probably went over several days.

- We have no way of knowing the length of the meeting.
- We only know a few compressed excerpts from at least three speeches.

The first speech came from the apostle Peter.

If you go to Galatians chapter 2, you'll reconize this speech was not easy for Peter to deliver.

- He'd been up in Antioch, and Paul writes about the moment when Peter was waffling on this same issue.
- Peter had been eating with Gentiles for a while until some of his Jewish friends came, then he restricted himself only to Jews.
- Paul publicly called Peter out.
- Peter had the humility to say: Paul, you're right.

When Peter finished, we're told in verse 12, the whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul.

The people became silent. They listened.

One of the problems we struggle with in the world today is that we don't do a good job of listening to each other.

We have our positions hard and fast, whether it's in economics or politics or theology or a hundred other topics.

We go into many discussions thinking, *I know what's right, and it doesn't make any difference what you think.*

We becoming brittle and rigid, which is infiltrating our modern society, both in the church and beyond the church, wherever you look.

11

James 1:19

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

When Paul and Barnabas finished, James spoke up.

- James was the brother of the Lord.
- Without Biblical explanation, James had risen to be the leader, the spokesperson of the church in Jerusalem.

James said "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."

- James was saying: We've got a whole world out there to win, and we've got to do our best to make sure that the Gospel message is pure and simple.
- So James proposes a letter.
- The letter begins in verse 24:
- The Jerusalem church sent the letter with some godly men so the congregations out there would hear the gentleness, firmness, conviction, and holiness behind how this decision was made.

Two key lessons arise from how the church handled the conflict.

What can we learn from this story?

12 Conclusion:

What made this doctrinal crisis work out as beautiful as it did was the Church's AIM.

First, the church in Jerusalem made sure The gospel, was never compromised.

Throughout this debate, the gospel of Christ, the gift of Jesus shed for our sins, the call to repentance, was never compromised. The church understood what people—Jew or Gentile—have to do to be powerfully saved.

This could have been a moment when the gospel of salvation could have been terribly confused, and the church could have divided over doctrinal misunderstandings.

- But the church preserved what Paul would say to the Corinthians in chapter 1, when he said: If anyone pulls the cross out of the gospel in any way, shape, or form, they're wrong.
- So the gospel of salvation was preserved in this great debate.

Second, they preserved the unity of the body of Christ.

No one walked.

- We don't hear ourselves well in today's society.
- We are being so in love with a customized society in which every person wants everything his or her way.
- Whether we're talking about business and the stores we go to,
- or the clothing we buy,
- or the job we do,
- everybody demands that you do it his or her way.

- If not, they walk.

You see that in the church today: Do it my way, or I walk.

The beauty of this passage is that people disagreed with each other sharply, but they preserved the integrity and the unity of the body.

- And don't think everybody went away from that meeting happy.
- Some people must have been profoundly disturbed, but they hung in there.
- And the church and its power and its mission went forward because the Spirit of God spoke.
- **That's a powerful story.**

Finally, in verse 30 we read that they went to Antioch: "where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. **Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.**" That's the way church is to be done.

So we close the book on one of the greatest stories of the church.

- We can be proud to be part of this wonderful tradition,
- This is what we can genuinely call a Beautiful mess.
- When good people see things in different ways, the gospel is integral and the unity is preserved.