

## Acts 15

# One Spirit and differing opinions?

(How should we expect the Spirit to mediate our differences as believers?)

### Introduction:

- A popular but misguided slogan from the 60's was *"Doctrine divides, the Spirit unites."* This statement suggested that the common ground of our faith is our experience not our understanding or confession of propositional truth. A similar statement – *"Truth is not propositional but relational because the truth is Jesus not words or concepts."*
- The church has a long history of doctrinal controversies. Sometimes the controversies have been civil but not always.
- Today we have hundreds of different sects and denominations that claim to have the truth. How are we to relate to these differences?
- In this chapter we will observe how the early church (Apostolic church) discerned the Spirit's leading in making doctrinal and ministry decisions.
- Luke is selective in what he chooses to tell us about how these issues were resolved. We can assume that the details recorded here are the most important facts for our learning experience. Again, this is descriptive (not prescriptive) commentary on how the early Christians operated.

### 1. Respect for differences - Sincere believers can disagree on doctrinal issues.

<sup>1</sup> And some men came down from Judea and {began} teaching the brethren, "**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**" <sup>2</sup> And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, {the brethren} determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. <sup>4</sup> And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But **certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed**, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

- Diversity in the church must be properly understood.

<i>Promoted</i>		<i>Permitted</i>		<i>Prohibited</i>
<b>Differing Ministry gifts</b>	<b>Differing Cultural perspectives</b>	<b>Differing Style preferences</b>	<b>Minor doctrine &amp; behavior differences</b>	<b>Core doctrine &amp; behavior differences</b>
Teaching, evangelism, administration	Jew, Gentile, Black, White, Rich, Poor	Traditional & contemporary worship	Mode of baptism, divorce,	Resurrection of Christ, fornication

- The early church at Corinth (like many congregations today) was permissive in areas where it needed to have firm boundaries (open incest, etc) and divided over issues that should have been appreciated (differing ministry gifts).
- While it is clear that Christianity that does not start with correct confession and beliefs is not orthodox, it is also true that correct beliefs must produce fruit in terms of life style if faith is to be received as genuine and healthy.
- Correct doctrine is important for several reasons.
  1. We are defined (as disciples of Christ) by our doctrine, our spiritual experience, by our behavior, and by our community affiliation.

<p><b>Doctrinal confession</b></p> <p>What Christ has done</p> <p><b>FOR us.</b></p> <p>By itself = intellectualism</p>	<p><b>Personal commitment</b></p> <p>What Christ has done</p> <p><b>IN us</b></p> <p>By itself = narcissism</p>	<p><b>Ethical conduct</b></p> <p>What Christ has done</p> <p><b>THROUGH us.</b></p> <p>By itself = legalism</p>	<p><b>Social community</b></p> <p>What Christ has done</p> <p><b>AMONG us.</b></p> <p>By itself = a country club</p>
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2. Truth is not relative or private. Radical relativity is not a part of Christian tradition. Christian truth is not private but public.
  3. Doctrine determines behavior. In this case the relationship between Jew and Gentile was governed by one's understanding of grace.
  4. True doctrine is not guaranteed by true faith. Sincere believers can be wrong. Personal piety does not guarantee doctrinal orthodoxy (Gal.1 "8 But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed.").
  5. True doctrine is not always obvious to all sincere believers.
- Front-end loading of the Gospel has always been a temptation. Today the issue is not the ceremonial law of Israel but rather the traditions of the church (forsaking certain social issues – drinking, R rated movies, certain political stands, church membership, mode of baptism, etc.). In some circles it is taught that unless there is a forsaking of all known violations of the moral law of Moses, there can be no real saving faith. (For a more extensive treatment of this topic look in [aptoteach.org](http://aptoteach.org) at theology note files #711, #713)
  - Tension between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant has been a part of the church's history from the beginning. (For more information, check out theology note files #104, #105 in [aptoteach.org](http://aptoteach.org))

<p><b>Law</b></p> <p><b>Old Covenant</b></p> <p><b>Faithfulness</b></p> <p><b>Judgment</b></p>	<p><b>Grace</b></p> <p><b>New Covenant</b></p> <p><b>Faith</b></p> <p><b>Mercy</b></p>
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Holiness</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fixed</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Discipline</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Acceptance</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Flexible</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Brokenness</b></p>
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**2. Respect for debate – honest disagreements should be (if possible) resolved by listening and talking.**

6 And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 And **after there had been much debate**, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

- It is significant to note that the leaders “came together to look into this matter”. They did not respond judgmentally, defensively, or quickly.
- The phrase “much debate” is literally “a lot of questioning or discussion”. This suggests that the issue received a long and complete hearing. It is only “after” this discussion or debate that Peter speaks.
- We also note that it is assumed that wisdom will come from a plurality of leaders. There is a “coming together of minds” so to speak.
- We might note what is not a part of the process – direct revelation from God through prayer, a power play by a leader, attacks on the character of opponents, a vote by the congregation.
- Historians have exaggerated the theological tension between Peter and Paul. It is Peter (not Paul) who is defending the Gospel of Grace in this text.
- Peter’s logic seems to be that 1) We have already determined that the Gospel message is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. 2) It is quite obvious that many Gentiles have come to faith apart from “keeping the traditions of the Jewish Law.” 3) Why would we want to go back and ask them to observe practices that are designed to bring them to a place where they already are? The Law was a tutor to bring us to faith in Christ – Gal.3:24. (Gal.4:1-11)
- Suggested rules of debate within the church.

<b><i>Positive posture</i></b>	<b><i>Negative posture</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both sides should have an opportunity to make their case with a good hearing.</li> <li>• Mature believers should do the evaluating upon listening to all.</li> <li>• Debate should rest on rational discussion of.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rush to judgment and just pretend to listen.</li> <li>• Immature believers should have authority to decide for the group.</li> <li>• Issues should be decided by private “words from God.”</li> </ul>

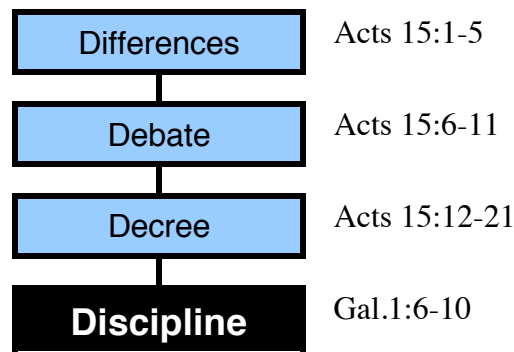
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stick to the issue.</li> <li>• Both sides should be open to change.</li> <li>• Both sides should be willing to submit to recognized authority.</li> <li>• Reaffirm your commitment to the Body of Christ.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use whatever you can to win.</li> <li>• Make the issue a “power struggle” or “personal.”</li> <li>• Those who “lose” should leave.</li> <li>• Hold “your involvement in the community” hostage to your “getting your way.”</li> </ul>
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**3. Respect for Authority - Sound judgment by respected leaders after open debate, should be accepted by all.**

12 And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 And **after they had stopped speaking, James answered**, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 *'After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it,* 17 *In order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name;* 18 *Says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.* 19 Therefore **it is my judgment** that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

- Paul’s call for discipline not debate on fundamentals of the faith must be put in a context of “established” orthodoxy.

Gal. 1 “6 I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; 7 which is {really} not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. 10 For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.”



- For a more extensive treatment of unity and discipline in the church look in [apptoteach.org](http://apptoteach.org) at theology note files #802, #803.
- Verse 20 “but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.” probably refers to cultural sensitivity so as to not offend Jewish believers. The word “fornication” probably refers to illegal marriage (according to Jewish tradition, etc.). The other issues are clearly ceremonial in nature.

#### 4. **Respect for Consensus – “pool the audience”, “the common sense”.**

22 Then **it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church**, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with {their} words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word {of mouth}.28 **For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us** to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

30 So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. 33 And after they had spent time {there}, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. 34 [But **it seemed good to Silas** to remain there.] 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

- While mature and wise believers should be given the major responsibility of discerning matters of difference in the Christian community, it is often wise to seek a general consensus from all who are involved. Sometimes this may mean the postponing of final decisions until a significant consensus exists.
- The expression “it seemed good” suggests a “common sense” approach to wisdom. For a more extensive treatment of decision making and the will of God check out theology note files #306, #307 in [apptoteach.org](http://apptoteach.org).
- Following our “spiritual instincts” may be a good default strategy in discerning God’s wisdom as we make decisions.

#### 5. **Respect for Freedom – Sometimes we must give room to move in different directions.**

36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, {and see} how they are." 37 And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. 38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose such a **sharp disagreement that they separated from one another**, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

- John Mark was related by birth to Barnabas (Col.4:10).
- The expression “sharp disagreement” has the idea of “sharp words” or “strong words”. The Apostles “had words” with each other and separated. It may or may not be significant that this is the last we hear of Barnabas in Acts. We learn later that John Mark wins Paul’s respect(II Tim.4:11).
- It is probably unrealistic to expect that a Christian community is going to be in agreement on every tactical and logistical decision. Sometimes we must part ways. In a healthy community this will be made possible without discrediting a person’s character or distorting their testimony.
- We must never forget that in many ways we now see in a “mirror dimly” (I Cor.13:12). A willingness to graciously live with differences is an important skill in this life.

Freedom can be a virtue or a vice

<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Vice</b>
• Freedom from the Law as a Covenant of works	• Freedom from moral absolutes as a guide
• Freedom from the conscience of others	• Freedom from self sacrificing love for others
• Freedom from conformity to this world	• Freedom from involvement in this world
• Freedom from the flesh and its lusts	• Freedom from a full enjoyment of life
• Freedom from works righteousness	• Freedom from bond service to Christ
• Freedom from the preferences and passions of others	• Freedom from a commitment to unity of spirit and mutual respect
• Freedom to follow personal guidance	• Freedom from respect for authority

***What are the limits of unity?  
When and how is church discipline to take place?***

**1. Situations that require church discipline**

a. DOCTRINAL

1. "One who preaches a false gospel" Gal.1:6-9
2. "One who goes beyond the gospel" II Jn.7-11
3. "Blasphemy" (speaking with gross disrespect of God) I Tim.1:19-20 (2:17; 4:14)

b. BEHAVIORAL

1. "Free-loader" II Thess.3:6,11,14-15
2. "Open immorality" I Cor.5:11
3. "Divisiveness" Rom.16:17

**2. Jesus' teaching — Matt. 18:15-17**

NOTE: This is normally the responsibility of the elders in a fellowship. I Cor.6:1-6; 2:15; 5:3,12; I Tim.1:20

- a. Step #1 Personal reproof in private
- b. Step #2 Include one or two more in bringing private reproof
- c. Step #3 Expose the issue to the entire church
- d. Step #4 Let the person be regarded as an unbeliever

**3. The proper motive**

- a. Love for the offenders — Heb.12:8-13
- b. Love for the church — I Cor.5:1-13

**4. Unauthorized judgment by believers against one another is forbidden.** Luke 6:37

- a. We will be held accountable to our own standard of judgment. Matt.7:1-2
- b. We are not to judge the motives of others. I Cor.4:5; Jas.4:11
- c. We are to be especially patient with young believers. Rom.14:1
- d. We are not to pass judgment on others in areas of doubtful conduct. Rom.14:3,4,10,13; I Cor.8-10

**5. Some general observations.**

- a. Public exposure of sin is to be avoided if possible and then only as a last resource in bringing a person to repentance. Note the way Joseph tried to protect Mary in Matt.1:19
- b. Shame is God's tool before repentance and Satan's tool after repentance. II Cor.2:6-11
- c. Create an environment where it is safe to fully repent with the expectation of restoration.
- d. Be eager to forgive and restore penitent Christians while pressing for full repentance. Lk.15
  1. Be patient and humble realizing that we are all sinners and find holiness to be a challenge. Gal.6:1-3
  2. In I Tim.5:1 Paul tells Timothy to not rebuke an older man harshly but treat him like your father. Later in verse 19-20 "19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. 20 Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful {of sinning.}" Paul tells Timothy to be careful not to quickly accuse an elder but when the evidence is public knowledge that an elder is living in sin,



he should be publicly rebuked. I suspect that this is because his sin is common knowledge and yet he is doing nothing about it. I doubt that Paul is advocating that all elders be publicly rebuked every time a past offense is discovered. Paul was wise in being general about the public confession of his own failures. If he were specific, he perhaps would have been put out of the ministry in the mind of some idealists.

3. When a sinner repents, the church should rejoice and celebrate with and for the penitent sinner just as the Prodigal's Father celebrated the return of his son in Luke 15. The failure to fully recognize and affirm a penitent sinner leaves Satan an opening to use shame to keep the penitent sinner in a state of condemnation with little confidence.

### *Decision making when believers disagree*

#### **“Go”**

- **Personal passions and giftedness call us to minister in specific ways.**
- **Freedom of self-determination in the context of the conscience of others is a right.**
- **Ordination by the church is an endorsement for certain ministries.**

#### **“Yield”**

- **The needs and opportunities of the moment dictate my options.**
- **Self-sacrifice out of respect for the conscience of others is expected.**
- **The counsel (notarization) of the Body of Christ is always important.**

### *Reasons for changing churches*

#### **Valid reasons**

- **I cannot minister here because my gifts are not needed or respected.**
- **I am not being ministered to here because my needs are beyond the vision of this church.**
- **I cannot respect the leadership of this church because of their incompetence.**

#### **Invalid reasons**

- **I cannot minister here because I can't do things my way.**
- **I am not being ministered to here because I am a really fussy eater.**



- **I cannot respect the leadership of this church because I am out of fellowship with them (they have hurt me or not done things my way).**