

Acts

Part 40 – A Good Letter from Good Leaders

Acts 15:22-35

After their wonderful victory over error in Jerusalem, the apostles and elders sent a letter to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia and beyond. The letter is an example of great pastoral wisdom both in its reassurance of the gospel of God's grace in Christ alone and also in its admonition that these recent converts leave behind their former paganism in all its forms.

The elders were keen to assure the Gentile believers of their status as God's people by the letter's twofold use of "brothers". It would not be surprising for Jews to address fellow Jews as brother considering their shared ancestry. By addressing the Gentile Christians as brothers, however, they are highlighting the fact that in Christ, Jew and Gentile are united together and have become the spiritual seed of Abraham through faith in Jesus (Gal. 3:29; Rom 4:11).

The letter announces the good news that Gentiles will not be burdened by ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law such as circumcision. What is clear, however, is that idolatry and the sexual immorality so often associated with it is strictly forbidden for all Christians. Being Christian means not only coming to Christ but also leaving behind sin.

Exegetical Outline:

I. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-33)

- A. The Dispute in Antioch about the circumcision and the role of the Mosaic Law (15:1-3)
- B. Reception of the Antioch delegation in Jerusalem (15:4-5)
- C. Council of the Apostles and Elders (15:6-7a)
- D. Peter's Speech (15:7b-12a)
- E. Barnabas's and Paul's report (15:12b-f)
- F. James's speech (15:13-21)

G. Decision of the Council and Letter to the Gentile Christians (15:22-29)

- 1. Appointment of messengers to Antioch (15:22)
- 2. Letter of the apostles and elders (15:23-29)

H. Aftermath: The Decision Explained in Antioch (15:30-33)

- 1. Messengers travel to Antioch and deliver the apostolic letter (15:30)
- 2. The reading of and reaction to the apostolic letter (15:31a-b)
- 3. The ministry of Judas and Silas in Antioch and departure to Jerusalem (15:32-33)
- 4. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch (15:35)

* Verse 34 is not found in the oldest manuscripts.

Main Idea: The church is blessed by godly shepherds who contend for and proclaim the gospel of grace while not neglecting the importance of holiness.

Notes On Church Government:

1. Types of Church Government:

a) Episcopal – All authority is clerical and is arranged in a strict hierarchy: Roman Catholic, Anglican/Episcopalian, Methodist, some charismatic/Pentecostal churches, etc.

b) Independent/Congregational – Authority is divided between laity and clergy without a hierarchical government (though this is not always the case in practice). Local churches are autonomous: Baptist; Independent; Congregational; Bible Churches; etc.

c) Presbyterian – Shares with congregational system a division of authority between laity and clergy and the rejection of hierarchicalism. Shares with the episcopal system the denial of local autonomy and the insistence upon the manifestation in the church's government of the visible unity of the church.

2. How Presbyterians Understand Acts 15:

a) In Acts 15 a local church appeals to the wider church which devises a ruling that is then imposed on others: that is, Antioch and Jerusalem and the Galatian churches were neither independent nor autonomous. They have the right of appeal, but also the duty of submission to the larger body of Christ. So, the same submission which the local church is to require of its members, the larger church requires of its member congregations.

b) Practicing this visible unity in our day is possible only to the extent that other Christians agree that this is what ought to be done. As a member of the PCA, Covenant Presbyterian practices this unity through membership in a Presbytery which itself is a member of the General Assembly of the PCA.

c) The government to which we belong is an assembly of ministers and elders (as opposed to a bishop). Acts 15 describes a peer relationship between the apostles and lay elders. Note the emphasis on this point: "apostles and elders" in vv. 4,6,22,23. The annual gathering of the PCA General Assembly is our way of applying these general principles.

d) It is important to understand in Acts 15 the emphasis placed on the unity and universality of the church. Oftentimes Presbyterianism is thought of chiefly as a system of rule by elders or as an anti-hierarchical system. But it is not primarily distinguished in this way. The foremost characteristic of Presbyterianism government is its insistence upon the unity of the church under a single government.

1. Good shepherds order the church wisely.

Vv. 22-27

- The whole of chapter 15 demonstrates the wisdom of orderly church government to protect both the peace and purity of the church.

2. Good shepherds contend for the gospel.

Vs. 24 – “Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions...”

- The letter identifies false teaching and those who were spreading it. The Jerusalem Council was a means to identify and root out teaching that was diluting the gospel of grace.

3. Good shepherds call God’s people to holiness.

Vs. 29 – “...that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”

4. Good shepherds love God’s people.

a) *Subjective expression* – “Lay no unnecessary burden...” (Vs. 28)

- Part of the concern of the elders and apostles was to not lay upon the Gentile Christians an unnecessary burden. They understood the negative human consequences of an adulterated gospel. Good shepherds are tender toward God’s people. Certainly there are times for correction and even rebuke. But these are in service to love.

b) *Objective expression* – “...encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” (Vv. 32-35)

- One of the chief expressions of love from overseers of a congregation is that teaching and instruction from God’s Word which leads to their strengthening.