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DEALING WITH DISPUTES

ACTS 15



Acts 15 is about controversy in the early church. We can understand Paul and Peter, who insist that God has granted Gentiles repentance that leads to life without the Gentiles needing to be circumcised (Acts 11). And we can understand the circumcision faction, who are named more precisely as believing Pharisees in Acts 15:5. Paul was himself a believer who had belonged to the pharisaic party. But we must be clear that Acts 15 is not simply a matter of tradition versus innovation. It is about a very specific and concrete point which is central to the whole of early Christianity.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL (15:1-21)

1. Read Acts 15:1-5. What is the question being raised by the Jewish leaders? Why was this issue so important to them? From Paul's teachings on circumcision, list three aspects of this sign of God's covenant below. (See: Rom 2:25-29; 4:9-16; Gal 2:3-5; 5:2-12; 6:12-15)
2. Read verses 6-21. How does Peter make his argument for not circumcising new Gentile converts to Christianity? Why does James quote from Amos 9:11-12?
3. How does this council of church representatives seek to resolve the conflict? How can we follow their example?

THE OLD YOKE

When Peter refers to the Law as a "yoke" that no one can carry (15:10), he's echoing the words of Jesus (Matt 11:28-30). God favors the weak and burdened but judges the self-righteous proud. The gospel invites all who are worn out by sin's burdens to come to him for relief.

JOYOUS NEWS FOR NEW BELIEVERS (15:22-35)

James¹ and the others work out two issues in Acts 15:6-21. First, there is *no need to circumcise* Gentile believers. Second, there is *no need to offend* Jewish believers. Gentiles who have believed don't have to become Jews to become Christians. They are not a separate category of Christian when it comes to salvation. But Gentile believers are encouraged not to offer needless slaps in the face to their yet unbelieving Jewish neighbors. They should steer clear from rituals of pagan worship; from meat sacrificed to idols and temple prostitution, a sinful practice new believers were apparently still battling.

4. To make sure the decision of the council is effectively communicated to the churches, the apostles write a letter. What steps does the council take to ensure the authenticity of the letter? Why would the letter have caused the Gentile recipients to rejoice in verse 31?
5. How does the group that travels to Antioch follow up on the letter's instructions? What principles of effective discipleship are we shown?

PAUL AND BARNABAS SPLIT UP (15:36-41)

6. With one important dispute resolved, Luke ironically follows with a more personal difference of opinion that is not settled. Yet, God is sovereign even in our differences. What good comes from the split of Paul from Barnabas?
7. What key ideas do you see in Acts 15 that can help in dealing with disagreements among Christians? How might these be applied to disagreements among believers you're facing now?

NEW FREEDOM

The Law binds but the grace of Jesus frees (Gal 5:1). We can't do enough right to undo the wrong of our sins. But Jesus has done enough for God to be pleased with us. The gospel replaces guilt and fear with grace and forgiveness.

¹JAMES was apparently one of Jesus' brothers, who had not believed in him during Jesus' public ministry (John 7:5). Jesus had appeared to James in a special and separate occasion after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:7) and James had joined with the apostles in prayer (Acts 1:14). By all accounts, James became a prominent leader in the first generation of Christianity (Gal 1:19; 2:9). His judgment, summing up the debate and its results, is extremely important.