

The Holy Spirit and Us

Acts 15:1-35

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The winter of 1778 was a tough time for the ragtag American army led by General George Washington. In every respect, the British looked to be winning. But across the Atlantic, in Paris, an alliance was worked out between the young United States of America and France. Months later, the treaty arrived in York, PA, where the Continental Congress approved it. The next day it reached General Washington, who declared that day, May 6, a day of celebration. Washington issued a proclamation that stated God had raised "us up a powerful friend." Without the help of that powerful friend, the American cause might easily have been lost. Then, in the fascinating twists of history, the time came when Winston Churchill called upon the U.S. to be the same kind of powerful friend for the British as they held the line against Nazi Germany in World War II. "Often the victory—and sometimes our survival—depends on receiving help from a powerful friend" (James Harnish, *Believe in Me* 63-64).

All through Acts we see that the church has a powerful friend in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates the church. The Spirit guides, sustains, and empowers the church. In God's gracious way of dealing with us, there's a partnership between the Holy Spirit and the community of faith. That partnership is reflected in a phrase the Jerusalem church leaders use in a letter to Gentile Christians: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28).

What seemed good to the Holy Spirit and the believers? What led to this letter being written and what was being addressed here?

Remember from the beginning of Acts, the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' followers to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They may have thought at first that they were to take the gospel to Jewish people all over the world. But then God led Peter to share the message with Gentiles in the home of the centurion Cornelius. It seemed that God was including at least some Gentiles in salvation.

Then many Gentiles began coming to Christ in Antioch. And Barnabas and Paul went on a mission trip where many more Gentiles, as well as Jews, responded positively to the good news, put their faith in Jesus, and received God's gift of salvation.

When word of this got back to Jerusalem, there were some Jewish believers who didn't think it was a good thing. They were glad for non-Jewish people to become Christians, but they thought they should become Jews also. For these people, following Jesus was always in the context of following the law of Moses and adopting the identity-markers that set Jews apart from everyone else.

So some of these folks went to Antioch and started teaching that Gentiles can't be saved unless they're circumcised according to the customs Moses taught. Paul and Barnabas weren't having any of it. They had seen too many Gentiles receive salvation, forgiveness and new life, by simply putting their faith in Jesus. They believed God doesn't require people to identify as Jews in order to follow Jesus. So there was a sharp dispute and debate between Paul and Barnabas on one side and these teachers from Judea on the other side.

In this section of Acts, we see conflict and debate, a gathering of the church, and decisions being made. In the background of it all are big questions about salvation and what it means to be included in God's people. As non-Jewish people, we're grateful for the decision that was finally made. As N. T. Wright says,

Because God has fulfilled his covenant with Israel in sending Jesus as Messiah, the covenant family is now thrown open to all, without distinction. It isn't a matter, it can't be a matter of belonging to one particular ethnic group, no matter how sacred, how chosen, how blessed with God's presence and entrusted with carrying his promise to the world. It is time for that promise to be delivered, not kept as a private possession. This was what the 'tradition', at its best, was actually about all along. (Acts for Everyone, Part 2)

But how did the church arrive at that decision? Within the context of those big questions about salvation and inclusion in God's people, how does the community function, make decisions, and deal with disagreement and conflict? How do leaders function and make decisions and deal with conflict?

They got together as a community. Paul and Barnabas, with some other believers from Antioch, go to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders and discuss the question of Gentiles in the church. As they traveled, they reported on the conversion of Gentiles. The believers who heard this news rejoiced.

When the Antioch delegation got to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders. There they reported what God had done with them. God was at work. They told what God was doing.

However, there were some who thought that Gentiles who turned to God should do more. There were Pharisees who had become believers in Jesus. Paul himself was one. But this group of believing Pharisees from Jerusalem said that Gentile converts "must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses": Not just identify as a Jew, but be totally committed to Jewish faith and life in order to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus.

The leaders, the apostles and elders, considered this question. After much discussion, Peter speaks. He reminds them about his encounter with Cornelius and friends some years earlier. God had chosen for Gentiles to hear the gospel message from Peter and believe. God knows the heart. God knows the inner life and motivation of every person. God showed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he gave the Spirit to the Jewish believers earlier. "God did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith." God told Peter, "Don't call anything unclean that I have made clean." Then he cleansed the hearts of Gentiles by faith. Peter concludes, "Why lay a burden on the Gentiles that we can't bear? We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Grace is the basis of salvation. Salvation is a gift.

After Peter speaks, Barnabas and Paul tell about what God did among the Gentiles through them. They had seen powerful works of God on their

mission trip. As they tell about those signs and wonders, the whole assembly is quiet and attentive.

When Paul and Barnabas finish their report, there's a third speech. This time the speaker is James. This is James, the brother of Jesus (well, half-brother). James and the other brothers of Jesus refused to believe in Jesus during his ministry (John 7:5). But after the resurrection, Jesus appeared to James and, apparently, he put his faith in the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:7; also see Galatians 1:19).

James has become the leader of the Jerusalem church. As a leader, he sums up what's been said. He takes account of the experiences Peter, Barnabas and Paul have had. God has acted to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. Almost always, the phrase, "a people" refers to the Jews or a group of Jews. Now God includes Gentiles among God's people.

James draws on Scripture for insight. The church isn't deciding that "anything goes." There are some limits. Experience alone isn't enough for making decisions about these big issues. We need other resources. We need the whole community of faith. We need leaders. We need the stories of those who experience God's work. We need the tradition of those who have walked in God's ways before us. And we need Scripture.

Bill Hybels talks about "data sources" that he uses for decision making. The first source is *basic beliefs*. What are our bedrock beliefs, our core convictions that guide us in making decisions? His second data source is *knowing what other leaders would do*. How would other respected leaders and mentors act in this situation? What can we learn from other leaders? Hybels third data source is *pain*, that is, learning from mistakes. Some past decisions were bad and we don't want to repeat those. For Hybels, the most important data source is *the Holy Spirit* (*Courageous Leadership* 161-80). I don't know if all those were in play at the Jerusalem Council, but some of them were. And, the idea that we draw on various sources to help us make decisions reflects what was going on in Jerusalem.

Scripture is a primary data source for the church. James cites the prophet Amos, who spoke of David's tent being rebuilt. God would restore Israel, then the rest of humanity would seek the Lord, including all the Gentiles who bear God's name. If an Old Testament prophet could see non-

Jewish people seeking the Lord and bearing his name, James says, we shouldn't make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God now.

Do we ever make it difficult for people to turn to God, to come to the Lord? What kind of barriers do we put up that block people who want to know God? Do we have attitudes or practices that shut people out? We need to speak in ways that people can understand, even while we teach what the Bible and Christian faith are about. I heard someone put it this way one time: We want to give people a safe place to hear the dangerous gospel, not a threatening place to hear a safe gospel.

James goes on to say that there are some minimum requirements for the Gentiles. He talks about idolatry and immorality. The food restrictions he mentions likely related to idol worship. Sexual immorality could also relate to idol worship, but it's probably a broader idea of sexual behavior outside the covenant of marriage.

There are expectations for followers of Jesus. We're saved by grace but we're also empowered by grace to live a new life. Our "powerful friend," the Holy Spirit, transforms our lives. God cleanses our hearts. God delivers us from worshiping things that aren't God. God empowers us for love and faithfulness in our relationships.

After James' speech, the apostles and elders, along with the whole Jerusalem church, chose two of their own to send with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. One of them we never hear of again (Judas Barsabbas). But the other, Silas, eventually goes on some mission trips with Paul and probably helps write some of Paul's letters (he's "Silvanus" that Paul mentions sometimes).

These men are to go to Antioch with the news that the decision has been made: Gentiles do not have to become Jews to follow Jesus. They also carry a letter stating what's been decided. The letter is from the apostles and elders who call themselves "brothers" of the Gentile believers. They acknowledge that the Gentile believers are full members of God's people, not second-class citizens. They're part of the family.

The letter states that those who tried to enforce Jewish requirements on Gentiles were not authorized by the church. It commends Barnabas and Paul as "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus

Christ." What they said was backed up by that kind of commitment and devotion. The apostles and elders affirm that the Holy Spirit has guided them to this decision. Then they mention the basic requirements that they want the Gentiles to observe so they won't be drawn back in to idol worship.

The early church was faced with a crisis. They had to answer some big essential questions. In partnership with the Holy Spirit, guided by the Spirit and drawing on resources of Scripture, community, and experiences of God's work, they made a decision.

Andy Crouch says, "*The most important thing we are called to do is help our communities meet their deepest vulnerability with appropriate authority—to help our communities live in the full authority and full vulnerability of Flourishing*" (*Strong and Weak* 122). The church was vulnerable—an essential aspect of the faith was at stake. Was God's salvation only for the Jews or was it through the Jews and available for all people? They met that vulnerability with the authority of the Holy Spirit, Scripture, and gifted leaders in the community.

Will we partner with the Holy Spirit to make decisions in our lives?

Will we as a church partner with and rely on the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us so we can be all that God calls us to be?

Will we try to keep the good news to ourselves or will we share it and help others come to know God who saves through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit?

Today, will you receive God's grace, be saved by grace through faith, let God cleanse your heart and bring you into the community of God's people to live a new life that honors God?