

Sermon Series: Viral – good news spreads fast

#5 Dealing with Difference – Acts 15

Intro – borders erected today

Wherever we look today, walls and barriers are being erected to **keep people out!**

Last week these plastic barriers were trucked in to keep people in NSW from freely crossing into QLD,



Queensland is 'building a wall' along its NSW border to stop people from sneaking across. Source: 7News

Police officials have since asked the Gold Coast council to build a 700-metre barricade to stop people from trying to enter unlawfully, according to 7News.

We've seen an even bigger wall built in America to tell the people of Mexico how unwelcome they are in the United States,



And even our everyday lives now have a distancing component that makes it tricky to let people know that they are welcome in your presence!



Fear of what's foreign

We are all too well accustomed with the **fear of what is foreign** to us. Acts chapter 15 presents an **ancient fear of what is foreign**.

In the early church problems arose Christians from a Jewish background and those who were Gentiles¹ - that is, people from other nations and backgrounds.

Let's pick up the action in **Acts 15:1-2**...

15 ¹While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved."² Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question.

These events bring to light the big topic of **dealing with differences** between people when a church is growing and changing.

Paul² (The former persecutor of the Church) and **Barnabas** (The Encourager)³ are back in Antioch of Syria, the place I referred to as "Gospel Ground Zero". It's the city north of Jerusalem, on the coast, connected to international trade, where the Good News of Jesus went viral, changing lives and starting new churches (see Acts 11).

Jews **lived on the margins** and carefully segregated themselves from city life.

Gentiles **fully engaged** in the marketplace of Roman city life with all its polytheistic, multicultural and syncretistic offerings; all of which was viewed as licentiousness by Jews.

When Jewish Christians heard that Gentiles were being **fully welcomed as members** of the "people of God" troubled many.⁴ It **challenged their very idea of God's purposes**. It no doubt revived memories of how Gentile rulers oppressing Jews for centuries. It threatened their **identity, lifestyle and culture**.⁵

¹ Gentile means "of other nations". Most of the first Christians were Jews from Judea and Galilee

² Paulus is the name used in Greek/Roman identity, "Saul" in his former Aramaic/Hebrew identity. Note the change in the order of the two names as Luke prepares for succession in his story telling

³ Both introduced earlier in Acts – Barnabas in ch. 4 and Paul in chs. 7-9

⁴ E.g. Deut. 26:18-19, see Gal. 6:16 for Paul's take on the new "laos" (Gk.) of God

⁵ Gentiles were able to participate in a partial way in the Jewish religion and were sometimes called "God-fearers". They were attracted to Jewish culture and its point of difference to Roman lifestyle and religions. But

Bringing these two different cultures together in the one Church was a **challenge indeed**. Even the apostle Peter needed God's direct intervention to change his mind about the inclusion of the Gentiles (see Acts 10).⁶

So some wanted to put up a wall. They insisted **that gentile believers must live like Jews** or consider themselves still **cut off from God**. They excluding what seemed foreign to them and sought to stem the **spread of the Gospel**.⁷

Paul and Barnabas stood up against such **obstructers**. Paul describes them in Galatians 2 as...

"so-called believers... —false ones, really—who were secretly brought in. They sneaked in to spy on us and take away the freedom we have in Christ Jesus. They wanted to enslave us and force us to follow their Jewish regulations."⁸

These visitors to Antioch had **mistaken** the observation of rules and cultural practices as **the essence of their identity** as the people of God. They had supplanted the very **basis** of knowing God – **grace** – and undermined the very **means** of living in a right relationship with God - **faith**.⁹

How do you deal with such differences? What could break human barriers? What could bring down such a great wall of exclusion? Well, you look to the **gospel of Jesus**.¹⁰

Essential beliefs

A council meeting of church leaders was called at Jerusalem to rule on **what was essential to theology** and **what was necessary** for pastoral peace.

Peter stood up in that meeting to **defend** the Gospel of God saying (vss. **7-11**)

Jews of that time never considered God-fearers to be much more than generous observers. Gentiles were considered as "unclean" or "sinners" (note Paul's reference with sarcasm in Gal. 2:15) by many Jews and their lives were seen as licentious and their practices abhorrent.

⁶ Gal. 2:14

⁷ See Ephesians 2 re the wall of hostility. For example, they insisted that males become circumcised as an essential for being part of the "people of God". Yet, circumcision was originally a sign of faith, and was given before the Mosaic Law. In Genesis 17 Abraham, as a mark of the promise God made, was circumcised. Abraham's unfaithfulness to his wife preceded this as seen in Genesis 16, showing that no merit existed in Abraham himself. The sign pointed to the fidelity of God. Abraham is credited with a right standing before God through his faith, as Paul teaches in Romans 4, not because of the mark on his body per se.

⁸ Gal. 2:12 suggests they carried false credentials as "friends of James", the church leader in Jerusalem.

⁹ See Galatians 2:15-21

¹⁰ See Paul's radical statement in Galatians 3:28

⁷ ...you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that they are accepted, by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as was given to us. ⁹

God did not discriminate between us and them but purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” ¹¹

Ok, so Peter’s illustration is **not a wall**, but a heavy agricultural **yoke** on their necks. But Paul, in Ephesians 2 described the same problem as like a wall of hostility. And **what brings down that wall** and makes for a peace? None other than the cross of Christ, made known in the **Gospel**.¹²

Peter highlighted two theological essentials that remain true for us:

1. **God does not discriminate** – anyone, from any background, who puts their trust in Christ receives all the blessings promised to the “people of God”¹³, and secondly...
2. Our standing before God rests on **grace alone**, through **faith alone**, not by religion or human merit or any other means.

Next in verse 12, **Paul** and Barnabas stood up to **tell of the proof** in the pudding – they had **witnessed Gentiles receiving the same miraculous benefits** of faith seen among Jews at Pentecost in Jerusalem.¹⁴

¹² Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹¹ Here then, is another major turning point in the life of the Church. It’s the last we see of the Apostle Peter in the Book of Acts. Barnabas too will make his depart. From here Luke will give Paul centre-stage as the "Apostle to the Gentiles.

¹² Ephesians 2:14-18

¹³ Revealed to him by God, as seen in Acts 10:34-35

¹⁴ See Acts 2, 11, 13, 14

Then from verse 13, **James**¹⁵, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and the brother of Jesus, “opened his bible at the Book of Amos” to show how the **inclusion of Gentiles was no afterthought** but had **always** been God’s goal.

¹³ When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me.

¹⁴ Peter[c] has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. ¹⁵ And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

¹⁶ ‘Afterward I will return
and restore the fallen house[d] of David.

I will rebuild its ruins
and restore it,

¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord,
including the Gentiles—
all those I have called to be mine.

The Lord has spoken—

¹⁸ he who made these things known so long ago.’

The Apostle Paul would later summarize this essential truth of the Gospel of Jesus - in Ephesians 3 we read...

"that through the gospel the Gentiles are **heirs together** with Israel, **members together** of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."¹⁶

Paul also spelled out a clear defense in Galatians 2:16, saying...

¹⁶...we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not

¹⁵ Notice how James is not introduced to the reader (here or in 12:17) probably because of his well-known status in those times. His authority indicates him as the leader of the Jerusalem church. Notice how, after Peter’s escape from prison earlier in Acts, Peter wanted James to be informed. James is also mentioned first of the three “pillars” of the Jerusalem church by Paul in Gal 2:9. Extra-biblical witnesses show that James was highly regarded by non-Christians of the time, largely because of his ascetic ways and his prayers for the city were well-known by all. When he was stoned to death in AD 62, many were shocked. His leadership was not granted because of his kinship with Jesus, but because of his character and gifts.

¹⁶ Ephesians 3:6

because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.” (Gal. 2:16)¹⁷

Paul even goes on to say that adding any necessity of obedience to laws to a person’s faith in Christ **renders the cross of Christ meaningless and irrelevant.**¹⁸

To deal with the differences in the Church, we see a **three-fold approach...**

1. **Apostolic Authority:** Peter appealed to the direct guidance and intervention God gave him. It was affirmed by the other leaders.
2. **Evidence in Experience:** Barnabas and Paul appealed to the confirmation given by what they tested in real-world experiences, and
3. **Backup from the Bible:** James drew upon the wisdom of the Scriptures, showing the words of the OT prophets to be in harmony with teaching of Jesus.¹⁹

James concluded his speech on the differences in question in v19 of Acts 15:

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

The late John Stott, an eminent New Testament teacher and church pastor once said wisely of these essentials of our beliefs as Christians...



“The gospel is not good advice to people, but good news about Christ; not an invitation to us to do anything, but a declaration of what God has done; not a demand, but **an offer.**”

Essential pastoral measures

Having cleared up any question about who God accepts and how people are included in the people of God, there was still the **practical problem** of actually **uniting these two wildly different groups** of people in the one Church.

¹⁷ Paul’s great theme of grace alone is expounded in Romans 3-5 and summed up in Eph. 2:8-10.

¹⁸ Gal. 2:17-21

¹⁹ he refers to Peter (Greek name) by his Aramaic name (Cephas “Rock”, see Jn 1:42) and Simeon appealing to his affinity with the offended ones. Luke shows that James is speaking as a typical Hebrew.

James, therefore, moved on in his speech in Acts 15 to give advice on what Paul would later call “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1).

In Acts 15:19-20 we read

“...we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.”²⁰

These four contingencies recommended to the Gentile believers **sound strange** to **modern ears**. We don’t have time here to unpack the fulness of their original context and meaning. Suffice it to say, James bundles together four ceremonial and religious factors in the lifestyle and religion of first century Jews based on Old Testament teaching and centuries of practice (see vs. 21).²¹

Surprisingly, perhaps, it’s those who were first to become followers of Jesus who had the more **fragile faith and lifestyle** in this situation.²² Thus, James put the onus for sensitivity and self-awareness that would lead to a pastoral solution to the difference to these two parties on the Gentile converts - **those with the greater freedoms** in this situation.²³

Paul later developed a theology of the use of Christian freedom, urging believers not to use their new-found liberation from laws in a manner that would lead others of more fragile faith to stumble (e.g. Galatians 5:13; Romans 14). James applies a similar theology to the pastoral solution of getting these two differing groups of Christians to harmoniously live as one Church.

Paul would later describe the Gospel as the solution for such differences as we have studied here in Acts 15, writing in Ephesians chapter 2. Writing to Jewish Christians who were troubled by the inclusion of Gentile believers, he wrote:

²⁰ Leviticus 18:27-30 may form the background to the aversion of Jews toward the practices of Gentiles

²¹ Many commentators fixate on “sexual immorality” (Gk. *porneia* sometimes translated “fornication” but was used as an umbrella term for all kinds of sexual practice at odds with Jewish culture and religious observance). They see it as an outlier among the four contingencies. But in cities like Antioch where pagan temple worship and sex were combined regularly in Gentile lifestyle, the four contingencies all have idolatry in common (i.e. they each clash with the careful segregation Jews practiced to avoid contact with pagan religious devotion and so keep their devotion to the one God pure and holy)

²² Note how Paul had to manage the antagonists and confront Peter and Barnabas who so easily strayed back into legalism (Acts 15:2, Gal. 2:13)

²³ It should be remembered that Jewish Christians had a responsibility in the pastoral solution too - they were being asked to lay aside their false attachment to law as a basis of salvation

¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. ¹⁵ He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. ¹⁶ Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

¹⁷ He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. ¹⁸ Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us. Ephesians 2:11-18

Paul's summation of the liberating, wall-breaking, impact of the Gospel of Jesus when dealing with differences is no more radically expressed than in Galatians 3:28-29...

²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children[p] of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.

Dealing with Difference Today

When dealing with differences in the Church today, I don't hope or imagine we will ever be calling a council together to talk about people insisting on circumcision! But we do still battle greatly in the Church rules and regulations that deal with matters of exclusion and even hostilities, sadly.

- For example, The Church Times reported last week new provisions in the Church of England to consecrate bishops who believe that only males

should be ordained ministers in the church. There's a huge division between those who say women can lead at all levels of the church, and those who don't. Those with greater freedom have perhaps made gracious provision for believers who differ greatly with them – but **have they undermined what is essential in God's Gospel?**

- In a more positive example, in America today many accolades flow for the late Congressman John Lewis. He lived long enough to see his legacy of civil rights for black people realized in politics. His long campaign for America to recognise **equal dignity of all men and women** before God and in politics was undertaken with belief in the Gospel of God on this essential truth.

What about dealing with differences in **local issues as a congregation?** I fear there are barriers that we erect inadvertently to newcomers to the faith and to the church. For example,

- Now that we **stream our services online**, we offer “a welcome” of a different kind to people from a much broader background than ever before. Are there practices and messages we give that act like a wall to newcomers to the faith?
- As we engage with a wider range of **activist organisations** like ASRC, AARC, PVAW, Common Grace, and others, we will work alongside people who have different political, religious, and social views and lifestyles to us. **Will we accept the onus to adjust our wants and needs** to make room for everyone who is interested in following Jesus?

Let's **hope it doesn't come down to holding council meetings** to deal with differences along the way. Yet, like Acts 15 demonstrates, perhaps we too can follow the **three-fold approach** we see there to be sure we hang on to what is essential, and be generous with what is disputable for the sake of the pastoral peace God desires in His Church.

- We too can seek the mind of **church leaders** – together with the people of the church, prayerful leaders can be used by God to clarify what is needed;

- We can seek **evidence from experience** - looking to the real world we can consider what the Spirit is saying to us in practical examples of grace and justice and peace; and
- We seek the **backup of the Bible** – looking to the lessons already taught in Scripture and applying them to how we deal with difference today.²⁴

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²⁴ E.g. Paul's principle in Romans 14 of the "stronger" Christian having the onus on them to adjust their behaviour and reserve judgment for the benefit of those whose faith could be considered more fragile in disputable matters.