

Sunday April 23, 2023

Lesson 5: The Tale of Two Churches

Reference: Acts 15:1-35

See Also: Lesson Supplemental: (1) Sadducees, (2) Pharisees vs Sadducees, (3) What is an Apostle

When we last saw Paul, he and Barnabas had just returned from their missionary trip through the greater Galatia region (Gentile nation). The year was around AD 48. They continued to minister to the believers at the church in Antioch. Sometime later, they received word that Jewish believers who were zealous for the Law (Pharisaic Jews) visited the new believers in south Galatia and begin to subvert Paul's teaching. This prompted Paul to pen the epistle we know today as *Galatians*, around AD49.

Church in Jerusalem vs Church in Syrian Antioch

At this time in church history, we have two churches that function as the center of knowledge and guidance for the future of church planting in that New Testament period. Both churches are large churches that actively engages in the ministry of Christ faithfully. Both are influential in their own ways.

The church in (Syrian) Antioch began as a revival of Gentile believers (cf Acts 11), though it was likely started by Hellenistic Jews. By the time of Acts 15 (AD50), the church was largely diverse, as evidenced by the diverse background of its key leadership (Acts 13:1). Yet, the church remained a largely Gentile church, and effectively became the center of Christianity for the Gentiles. The significance of this dynamic being that, being largely Gentiles, they were not as familiar with Jewish traditions and therefore did not observe much of the Law of Moses nor of any "purity" protocols advocated by the Jews. Moreover, Paul did not advocate following Jewish tradition and practices, as doing so would not align with the doctrine of grace as he understood it. The members were saved, not by the Jewish understanding, but simply by faith in Jesus without any adherence to Jewishness (Acts 15:7-11)

By contrast, the church in Jerusalem was comprised largely of Jewish converts – Mainly Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes. Their practice of Christianity at the time of Acts 15 still largely follows the Jewish tradition, customs, and culture, as they believed most of those practices were still necessary. They are believers and embraces the doctrine of grace; but their religious practice still followed the Jewish traditions. Some of the stronger advocates to maintain these practices are the Jews who were formerly of the Pharisee sect (Acts 15:5). In effect, this church was the origin and center of Christianity primarily among the Jews.

Church in Jerusalem	Church in Antioch
Predominantly Jewish Christians	Predominantly Gentile Christians + Hellenistic Jews
Hebrew Jewish Culture	Greek Culture
Emphasizes religious traditions and doctrines in alignment with Jewish practices	Emphasizes faith in Jesus Christ alone independent of culture norms
More traditional, Jewish culture, attracted people with religious background	Less traditional, more open to new paradigms, attracted people who are new to religion

Events of Acts Chapter 15 – The Great Dissension in (Syrian) Antioch

Shortly after penning the letter of Galatians, a similar conflict confronted the church in (Syrian) Antioch, where a group of Judaizers challenged the doctrine observed and practiced in Antioch. At the core of the debate was not only whether circumcision was required in order to be saved (15:1), but also whether Christian living should follow the "purity" practices derived from the Law of Moses (15:5). Luke recorded that the Jews who created this controversy within the church came from Judea (church in Jerusalem), and

were formerly of the Pharisee sect (15:5). Luke also recorded that they do not speak for the church in Jerusalem; that they were not authorized to speak for the church in Jerusalem (15:24). Finally, Luke recorded that this debate created great dissension (15:2) within the church; serious enough that the church sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for the purpose of clarifying and resolving this debate. This issue could not wait for the next opportune time to visit Jerusalem. The year was approximately AD 50.

### Events of Acts Chapter 15 – The First Ecumenical Council

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were greeted by the church, the apostles, and the elders (15:4). Luke's word choice here indicates that Paul was not speaking only to the leaders of the church, but to the whole church. What was originally thought to be specifically about circumcision (15:1) was clarified to be more inclusive of the whole "purity" practices of the Jewish tradition (15:5). This was not an issue that the two sides could embrace an "agree to disagree" stance. Paul would not allow it (cf. Galatians 2:11-21).

Moreover, given that these same Pharisee converts were members of the church in Jerusalem, the inference can be made that the church in Jerusalem were likely adhering to these practices without considering the implications or principles behind their practice of Christianity. Effectively, they likely did not see adhering to these practices as a big deal – since they were all Jews.

After much debate (15:7a), Peter spoke up and presented a case firmly on the side of Paul, opposing the views of the Pharisaic believers (15:7b-11). His argument is based on his personal experience with the vision on the roof that led him to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). His emphasis was that he personally witnessed God pouring his Spirit on Cornelius and his household BEFORE that household went through circumcision, baptism, or any other disciplines (i.e., knowing Scripture). For Peter, God did this for the Gentiles solely on the basis of faith apart from a requirement of circumcision or law obedience (15:9). Note also that this was not the first time Peter had engaged in this debate with Paul (Gal 2:11-14). Peter may have already embraced Paul's theology on this matter before this debate in Acts 15. Peter closes his argument by accusing these Pharisaic believers of testing God. In that culture, "testing God" is synonymous with unbelief. Peter was basically accusing them of not being true believers.

Peter's speech was followed by Barnabas and Paul, speaking to the whole church about the "signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (15:12). This was then followed by James (the brother of Jesus), who was the functional leader of the church in Jerusalem. James validated Peter's argument by citing Old Testament scripture from the prophet Amos (15:14-18), then motioned for the church to issue an official proclamation (15:23-29) affirming grace as the only means of salvation (15:19-21). Other apostles and elders agreed with the motion, and the motion was approved by the whole church (15:22).

Knowing also that this issue had created deep dissension within the church in (Syrian) Antioch, members of the church in Jerusalem also approved sending leader representatives from the church to assist Paul and Barnabas back in Antioch (15:22). Candidates chosen to return with Paul and Barnabas were Judas (Hebrew Jew) and Silas (Hellenistic Jew); both were also prophets (15:32). After spending some time in (Syrian) Antioch, Judas returned to Jerusalem, while Silas remained in Antioch (15:34).

### Principle for all ages

This Lesson focuses on the cultural impact on Christianity. The church in Jerusalem has a distinctly Jewish culture, even though they've converted to Christianity. The church in Antioch was distinctly that of a Gentile or non-Jewish culture. At the core of the debate is not so much about Jewish influences on Christianity, but cultural influences on Christianity. This could refer to religious culture (as was the case in Acts 15), ethnic culture, generational culture, worldly culture, or even political culture.

Cultural influences are unavoidable. The church in Antioch, though sheltered from the influences of the Jewish (religious) culture, the makeup of their leadership team suggests that they were heavily influenced by their ethnic culture. This, thus, narrows the question to: How much can culture influence the practices of the church? The response to this question leads to the following principles:

- **God never intended for His church to be culture-bound** – The church in Jerusalem practices Christianity with a slant towards a Jewish culture. The church in Antioch did not follow any of the Jewish traditions. Each church has its own unique blend of cultural influences (church in Jerusalem had multiple Jewish sects, church in Antioch had multiple ethnic groups), yet both churches were approved by God, and also, both churches had problem people.
- **God never intended for His church to promote rule-based religions** – The boundaries of cultural influences stop at the footsteps of legalism. The Pharisaic Jews in Jerusalem wanted to promote the same rules-based (Pharisees) Jewish practices on Christian living. This went beyond the Jewish culture, crossing over into doctrinal issues – the same doctrinal issues that Jesus rebuked (Luke 11:46 cf Acts 15:10). The apostolic declaration (15:23-29) frees churches from such burdens.
- **God does not want culture to influence the gospel** – The conflict and dissension of Acts 15 was caused by a disagreement over the interpretation of the gospel message as it relates to salvation. The facts of the gospel message were not in dispute (that Jesus died and resurrected for the sins of both Jews and Gentiles). It was the interpretation of the gospel message – influenced by culture on the doctrine of salvation – that created dissension. Rather than to get caught up in a debate over the Law of Moses as interpreted by the Pharisees, Paul and Barnabas simply kept promoting the Gospel message with a focus on what God had done (Acts 15:3, 4, 12).

Every church will have its own unique blend of culture. In response, some churches may impose stricter spiritual disciplines that aligns with their cultural practices, while others may opt to be more seeker friendly. The apostolic proclamation of Acts 15 effectively communicated to the church in Antioch that they are free to practice their blend of Christian living independent of the practices of the church in Jerusalem – so long as they stay true to the gospel message. The principle, thus, is that every church's central focus ought to be on the gospel message. Beneath that, everything is permissible.

Given these principles, the following applications apply:

- Don't use the Bible to settle cultural differences in churches. The Bible is the Word of God that points to the Gospel Message. It is not a user manual that teaches us how to settle our differences that are commonly rooted in cultural upbringing (ex: conflict resolution, dissensions).
- Don't preach culture in the Gospel Message or in churches. Inter-cultural or mix-cultural dynamic is noble, but it is not the goal of the Gospel. Ethnic churches are perfectly fine if that ethnic group is what God wants to target. Don't try to force cultural-ness, or inter-cultural-ness in ministry. Just preach the Gospel and let the Word of God do its work.
- Raise "go-betweeners," especially for multi-cultural churches. By all accounts, Paul can be considered as a "go-betweener," or someone who can relate to each side of the deeply rooted cultural understanding. Being a Pharisee, Paul understood what it means to be a Jew; and being raised as a Roman citizen, he also understands what it means to be a Gentile. Go-betweeners can help resolve misunderstandings that come about through cultural differences. Generationally, go-betweeners are often referred to as "1.5 gen," somewhere between first and second gen.

### Reflecting Upon the Word

Re-read Acts 15:1-35. This is the passage on the first ecumenical council of Christian leaders.

1. What can we observe about the way each church approach a problem that had divided the church?
2. What can we observe about the culture of each church as it relates to the issues?
3. What can we observe about the decision making process that the council leaders undertook?
4. As it relates to church life and church dynamic, What can we observe about why God allowed these two churches to be so different (i.e.. why would people from Cyprus choose to go to Antioch vs Jerusalem)?
5. How can we correlate these observations into applications for our church?

### Reflecting Upon our World

The case study of Acts 15:1-35 revealed many issues of church life / church culture that many churches can relate to today, issues ranging from theology (15:1) to church life (15:5) to church division (15:2), to church authority (15:24), to decision making approach via a congregational practice.

1. The church in (Syrian) Antioch experienced the tension that led to disunity, and sought to resolve the issue *immediately*. The church in Jerusalem received the news, and sought a resolution *immediately*. Both churches demonstrated an intentional approach to resolve disunity issues, which reflected an attitude among members about disunity in their church culture.
  - a. How does your church's culture compare to the church culture of these two churches? How does it align or mis-align?
  - b. Can the same approach adopted by these churches in Acts 15 be adopted in your own church today as it relates to disunity issues? Why or why not? What's the fear?
  - c. What do you think is the biggest takeaway (benefits, drawbacks) of approaching your own church's issues using the principles outlined in Acts 15?
2. Both churches in this case study have diversity in the makeup of their church, and in response, adopted church life that aligns with their own diversity without imposing it on each other.
  - a. How much does your church tried to copy the ways of other churches? What are some pros and cons for doing so?
  - b. How does your church show respect to leaders of other churches in the same manner demonstrated by this case study?
  - c. What do you think is the biggest takeaway about ministry with diversity within your church?

### Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

Reflect on your personal journey, focusing on your participation in service to our Lord in your local church.

1. Do you believe tensions, church fights, or intense arguments in churches can be avoided? Why or why not?
2. When you see tensions, church fights, or intense arguments in your church, how do you respond?
3. Have you personally experienced church fights in your own spiritual journey? What did you learn from those experiences?
4. Next time (and each time) you experience a church fight scenario in your church, journal your experience and the lessons you believe God wanted you (or your church) to learn.

===== THE RESOLUTION =====

History tells us that this whole fiasco, started by some ultra-traditional members of the church in Jerusalem, was settled quite swiftly

First – as we’ve read (Acts 15:6-11), Peter addressed the Hebrew Jews,

Then – James spoke up, and declared to the members in Jerusalem church that “they not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:19)

Finally, we have this:

[Acts 15:27-29]

➔ What I would like for you to focus on, is how the church in Jerusalem handled this conflict

- They didn’t issue an edict – we said it, therefore, you must listen
- They did make a ruling, but they didn’t just leave it at that ruling – like a judge.
  - “Paul is correct – you all do not need to be circumcised”

A lot of times, when there are cultural or generational conflicts in the church, how the conflict is handled is just as important as addressing the conflict itself.

Let’s breakdown how this was addressed in the first century church:

1. They identified and debated the issue (Acts 15:6-12)
2. They come up with the resolution to the issue (Acts 15:13)
3. They addressed the audience who started the issue (Acts 15:19-22)
  - a. Influencing those whom they can directly relate to, have authority – those at the “giving” end
  - b. Comforting those whom they do not relate to – those at the “receiving” end of the conflict

In this particular episode, the traditional group – members of the sect of the Pharisees – were the aggressors who demanded the newer generation believers to abide by their traditional practice.

- To the Traditional Group: This is easy (easier) to resolve – the leaders of this group can simply address the group directly
  - This would be like – your uncle telling your parents: American borne kids do not think like overseas borne kids...
    - The second generation – ABC’s – would have a much harder time convincing their OBC parents that they think differently...
    - I can remember, at one point, having conversations with both my brother and my sister about their kids –
      - They were trying to influence them to do the right things – the OBC way, and they couldn’t understand why their kids think the way they do...
      - The message just comes across easier to accept when it comes from the people they can relate to
  - Here, the apostle Peter and James can absolutely relate to where their members are coming from...
    - They can make a statement, and their members can more easily accept. Which is what had happened.

But ... this is only HALF of the equation – how do you address the other half?

- Imagine, if you will... OBC parents, after having started this dispute with your ABC kids, now going back to your kids and telling them... “okay, I get ya... “ ... I understand you...
  - To the ABC audience – do you really think they understand you?
    - Maybe... maybe not... how can they communicate that they “get it?”

- Write a letter? NO...

→ Look what the church did...  
[Acts 15:22; 27]

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Let's go back and look at the team that the church in Jerusalem sent to the church in Antioch, to deliver the message of encouragement:

- Judas – a Judean, Hebrew Jew
- Silas – a Hellenistic Jew
- Barnabas – also a Hellenistic Jew from Cypriot (Acts 4:36)
- Paul - ...

By all accounts, this is a “go-between-er” team... a 1.5 team!

- One Hebrew Jew
- Two Hellenistic Jew
- A proto-typical 1.5-er

There are no Gentiles in this group because this issue involves a Jewish tradition, not a Gentile tradition

===== APPLICATION =====

- The two churches –
- Antioch
- Jerusalem
- The problem – tradition / Circumcision / Cultural practice

When we look back at this episode in Acts 15, and parallel the event in history with the book of Galatians, there is no question that the main focus is theological, as it relates to living under GRACE vs living under the LAW.

- All of us today – unless you are a Jew – we can look at this divide between these two mega churches in Acts 15, and possibly wonder what the whole commotion was all about
- We need to recognize that this was very much a cultural issue, and with this in mind, I'd like to offer the following application insights:

**FIRST -- The Bible is NOT a cultural manual**

- The Bible was NEVER intended to settle cultural differences
- Don't use Bible verses out of context to justify your cultural preference or cultural position
  - Hebrew Jews – the traditional Jews – hold true to their tradition so very tightly
    - They cite Mosaic Law to justify their position
  - In much the same way, if we allow our culture to dominate our relationship with someone from a different culture, **the gospel can be lost**

- Cultures that advocate for a strong male dominate society will no doubt preach Ephesians – how the wife must submit to the husband – using our modern day understanding of the word “submit” as opposed to the biblical understanding...
- Cultures that promote LGBTQ rights will no doubt twist the Word of God to fit their narrative
- Don't use the Bible to settle something that is very much cultural

### SECOND – The Gospel of Salvation does not promote cultural practices

- God never intended for His church to be cultural-bound – the principles of the gospel applies to every culture
- I break with some of my seminary friends and professors who wants to promote an “inter-cultural” church as the model of next generation church planting
  - I disagree
  - From these passages we read today, we can see...
    - there's a reason why the Greeks gravitate towards the church in Antioch...all the way from Cypress, rather than the church in Jerusalem
    - there's a reason why the Hebrew and Pharisee converts gravitate towards Jerusalem
    - The council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 makes it clear, don't add to the requirements for being a Christian
    - Fort Bend Community Church – senior pastor testified that he set out to plant a community church, an international church. The name of the church is Fort Bend community church, not Fort Bend Chinese Church; the name was intentional – he wanted this to be an international church.
      - He didn't plant this church in China Town; and it wasn't planted in a Chinese community...
      - This church today has over 1000 members, and when you walk in, all you see is pretty much Asians.
      - If God wanted this to be an Asian church, don't try to force it to be an International church; likewise, if God wanted this to be an International church, don't force it to be a specific ethnic cultural church
  - If you want to plant a church, plant a church focused on the gospel, not focused on culture.
    - If God wants the church to be Inter-cultural, it will be as such, and you focus on the gospel
    - DON'T PUT CULTURE BEFORE THE GOSPEL!

### THIRD – If your church is inter-cultural, or inter-generational, the solution is to raise 1.5-ers. Raise go-between-ers. Start now, be pro-active; don't react.

- If your church today has a lot of young couples with kids, there is a very good chance that your church will be at least a two generation church. If you try to force it to be one generation culturally, you will lose the other... it's a certainty.
- If your young couples are a mix blend of various cultures, there is a very good chance that your church will be inter-cultural. Don't try to force one culture... you will lose the other.
- Focus on what is important – the gospel

I am more convinced today... based on what God has shared with me, what I've seen in Chinese churches, and some Hispanic churches, that... for multi-cultural churches in America, and multi-generational **ethnic** churches in America, we must raise 1.5 leaders; go-between-ers.

I believe that if you are to plant a Chinese church in USA, you cannot bring in a pastor from the mainland to run it without surrounding him with 1.5 leaders.

Personally, I believe it is actually better if you can raise pastors here, so that they can get acquainted with the American culture, and thus, effectively raise 1.5 pastors

... but these are just my views

The key, is that, in a multi-cultural setting, it is very important to be pro-active, and start to raise 1.5-ers, go-between-ers. You need these people to bridge the gap and maintain unity in the Body...



Arnold –

For many years, the Jewish people welcomed Gentiles into their covenant community provided that they turned from their idols to the one true God and adhered to the Jewish law -- most notably by being circumcised. A number of law-observant Jews are wondering why Paul and the church at Antioch are not insisting that the Gentile converts keep the law. This issue becomes divisive and threatens to split the movement.

DLEE – some people will always view religion as adhering to a set of rules, rather than to follow the principle behind those rules.

15:1 – a faction within Jerusalem church consisting of believers who have been Pharisees (15:5), not authorized by the leaders of the Jerusalem church (15:24)

15:2 – they are not excluding Gentiles from becoming authentic members of the people of God; they are simply insisting that they be circumcised. Paul was equally convinced that circumcision is not necessary as a sign of the covenant for the newly constituted people of God. For Paul, this was not an issue of which of the two parties should amiably “agree to disagree” this is central to the gospel and needs to be settled by the principal leaders of the church – in Jerusalem.

15:3 – 300 mile journey = minimum of 20 days and probably a month because they took the opportunity to share their testimony along the way.

DLEE - Travel through Phoenicia and Samaria = made the long journey, this is how important this is to Paul. He was not going to wait until the next opportune moment in Jerusalem to discuss this

15:5 – believers who belonged to the party of Pharisees – main complainers

DLEE – supplemental – Sadducees and comparison

- We see in this verse that the issue actually is more than circumcision. The Pharisaic believers want the Gentiles to observe the entire law of Moses as a condition of membership in the people of God. This includes especially the laws regulating ritual purity, Sabbath observance, and the celebration of the key Jewish festivals.
- In Paul’s letter written to the Galatians just prior to this council meeting, Paul explains the implications of the Pharisaic believers’ view: “Again, I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (Gal 5:3)

15:6-11 – Peter explained... he does not take a middle of the road position; he presented a case firmly on the side of Paul and opposed to the Pharisaic believers. His argument is that God poured out his Spirit on Cornelius and his household BEFORE THEY RECEIVED CIRCUMCISION (and actually before they received water baptism). For Peter, this signified God’s sovereign decision to incorporate Gentiles solely on the basis of faith apart from a requirement of circumcision or law obedience

Testing God is tantamount to unbelief; so this is Peter’s accusation to these Pharisee believers

15:10 – cf Luke 11:46 – Jesus said to the Pharisees “you load people down tih burdens they can hardly carry and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them” DLEE – to much emphasis on the religious rules, rather than principle

15:13 – James

- This is James, the brother of Jesus, not James the apostle (son of Zebedee). Is James, brother of Jesus an apostle? See “what is an apostle”
- James seemed to have become a very influential leader in the Jerusalem church.

McGee – 575

Gospel is used in two senses in the New Testament:

- The facts of the gospel
- The interpretation of the gospel

The Judaizers in the book of Acts do not dispute the facts of the gospel, they dispute the interpretation: What did Christ do for you on the cross? Is the work of Christ adequate to save you?

15:5 – they wanted to add something to the gospel – whenever you add something to the gospel, you no longer have the gospel, but you do now have a religion

The Jewish community at the time comprised of four predominant sects, but only three of which were known to have converts to Christianity (Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes). The main group among these sects in the church in Jerusalem that where a group of Judaizers challenged the doctrine observed and practiced in Antioch. At the core of the

Peter Support (Gal 2:11-14)