

Acts 15:1-32

Resolving Doctrinal Issues

Since the beginning of the church, there have been arguments over how Christianity should be practiced. Why is that? With all the talk in the Bible about the unity of the faith, why are Christians so disunited?

Of course, some disunity arises from evil people who see religion as a means of financial gain, or as a means of being powerful through controlling the lives of others. There have even been mentally ill people whose illness has been interpreted as spirituality for whatever reasons make sense to a mentally ill person. There are lots of examples of those kinds of people causing disunity, but those cases are easy to understand. They did it because they were evil or they were ill.

But what about those serious disagreements between well-meaning people that result in religious division? How do well-meaning, good Christians end up splitting the church over doctrine?

Acts 15 records how the church overcame just such a situation. A controversy arose, and it seems safe to assume that both sides meant well. Acts 15 records how the problem came up, how they set about to resolve the differences, how they reached their conclusion, and how they spread that conclusion.

What can we hope to learn from an account of how the first century church resolved an issue? Is it fair to try to apply their methods to our time when they had apostles and prophets to settle things, and we don't? As we look through this scene, let's notice the role of those miraculously endowed people. The problem was not straightened out by a pronouncement from an apostle or prophet. Their method of resolving this doctrinal issue is one which we can duplicate. We have the ability to solve our issues just as they did.

So, let's see the New Testament's example of how to resolve doctrinal issues.

First, the problem surfaced.

Acts 15:1-5 And some men came down from Judea and {began} teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, {the brethren} determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

This issue had been brewing for some time. Back when the first Gentile was converted (Cornelius in Acts 10), grumblings were apparent. At the time when the Holy Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius, Peter made a somewhat odd statement, "Who can refuse water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?"

When we read that in Acts 10, we wonder who could have refused. But it seems, at that time, this was a legitimate concern. Then, when Peter returned to Jerusalem, he had to defend

his baptism of Gentiles all over again, drawing the same conclusion in Acts 11:17. This problem lay dormant and festering for at least a half dozen years until it resurfaced here in Acts 15.

Why would this question arise? Who would exclude people from the church unless they observed the Law of Moses? The question seems silly to us, but to them, it was a very difficult question. Why?

The number one reason why doctrinal differences arise is long standing habit or custom. For these Jewish Christians, their relationship to God had centered on the Law of Moses for all their lives, and for 1500 years before. Religion without the Law of Moses was just foreign to Jewish Christians, and all those who became Christians in the first 10 or 15 years of the church were Jewish. They all had the same background and the same long standing habit or custom. Never mind the logical reasons why they were wrong; it just didn't feel right.

The same thing happens in our culture if we try something different, or try to knock down a barrier between some group of people and the gospel - like missionaries who insist that people in tropical climates adopt Western clothing because the thought of a congregations full of half-naked people just doesn't feel right - or past controversies over clothing styles or hair styles - or controversies over observing certain religious holidays. The straw that finally split the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in the seventh century was a dispute over the correct day on which to celebrate Easter. Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists object strenuously to celebrating any religious holidays. These are all controversies over customs - but those who divide over them cannot see it.

The second reason why doctrinal issues and differences arise is the Pharisaic mentality, named for the folks here, the Pharisees, who desperately wanted rules for everything. There are still lots of Pharisees in the church. It's as if they are afraid that someone is going to slip into heaven undeservedly.

The New Testament is long on principle and short on rules. We are supposed to make decisions based on our desire to please God and our love for others. There must be billions of good ways to do that. God has given a loose framework to operate within, the New Testament, but there's very little structure there, mostly concepts. It is up to us to apply them to our time and place.

That is unnerving to a lot of folks. They just must have rules. And they must force their rules on others.

It all traces back to a lack of good reading skills - the fancy name is hermeneutics. These Pharisees were drawing big conclusions from too little Scripture. There are lots of examples of that going on every day since.

But - how did they set about to resolve this problem?

Acts 15:6-12

And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." And all the multitude

kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

How did they set about to resolve this problem?

First, they came together. They did not carry on a running debate through letters, which are always picked apart by the opposition, causing them to say something they were not intended to say. They did not just condemn one another from afar. Instead, they came together to discuss the problem.

Second, they listened to everyone. Notice in verse 5 and in verse 7, the Pharisees spoke, too. There was much debate. Unfortunately, the usual attitude when opposing sides come together is that both sides are there to tell the other side how it is, and neither side is there to listen, learn, and, potentially, change. More than apostles and prophets spoke. Those who were wrong spoke, too.

Third, each side presented evidence. Although the specific verses they quoted are not given, I'm sure each speaker referred to many Scriptures to support his case, as James will do in the next paragraph. They also relied on miraculous events, with the underlying assumption that, if the person had been wrong, God, who controls such powers, would not have allowed that person the miracle, or would not have caused the sign or wonder to happen at that time. Therefore, Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had the best arguments. God endorsed their work with Gentiles by causing signs and wonders.

How does this work as an example for us? We can do the first part: come together and listen to everyone. We are quite capable of doing that. But we don't. Why do we allow religious disunity to continue? There are those who assume that the other side will never change, perhaps based on previous attempts. There are those who assume that the differences don't matter. Both of those assumptions are wrong. I'm sure we can come up with lots of good reasons why we cannot make unity happen. But, in the final analysis, those reasons are just excuses.

But what would we talk about if we met? Miracles? That would put us at a real disadvantage with the Pentecostals. It's a sticky question, but not one so difficult that we should allow division in the church to continue.

Surely there is something that we can do on a local level to begin to address this problem.

The problem was discussed, and, in the next paragraph, the problem was resolved.

Acts 15:13-21

And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 'After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,' Says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old. Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Notice that this issue was not resolved by a miraculous message through an apostle or prophet. James, the James who wrote the book of James, James the brother of Jesus, James one of the elders of the church in Jerusalem, made the closing summary. It was not a pronouncement, like from a king, but a logical conclusion based on the facts presented, like a judge. That is how the church is supposed to work.

A lot of Christians have missed this concept, both back then and today. Paul had to cover it several times, in Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians, that he had received his message from God; that he was not subservient to the elders at Jerusalem, not because he rejected authority, but because he understood the difference between a judge and a king.

Here's the difference. Back in the Old Testament, during those rare times when Israel was running reasonably well, the retirement age was 50. But you did not retire to Florida and take up golf. You became a town elder. You were available to settle disputes. You had no real authority. Rather, both sides in a dispute would submit the case to you, agreeing that they would both abide by your decision based on your experience and wisdom, not your authority. Elders did not command obedience, they were simply available to be consulted due to their wisdom as a judge, not their authority as a king.

This may be why there is no church unity. Perhaps we have a lot of people who believe they have authority like kings instead of wisdom like judges. Perhaps we lack those of widespread reputation for wisdom and level-headedness that would be required for such leadership.

Notice that James even made sure to pacify the Christian Pharisees. He didn't just cut them off, telling them they were just plain wrong. He addressed what he must have perceived as the heart of the Pharisees concern. He told them not to worry, that Moses wouldn't be forgotten, that he was still important. He did not leave the opposition defeated, but rather comforted.

And finally, notice that James summarized, he did not deliver a long and detailed treatise on every point of contention. His summary showed that there are some absolutes, but they are few in number. He left lots of room for individuality, differences in culture, and differences in people.

After the problem was resolved, the conclusion was spread.

Acts 15:22-32

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with {their} words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word {of mouth}. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell." So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas

and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

This last step is exceedingly important: not the 'lengthy message' part, but the fact that they spread this newfound unity. Obviously, all of the brethren could not have attended this meeting, or they would all have starved. Somehow, the results had to be spread. James and the other elders and the apostles made a conscientious effort to keep everyone informed.

First, there was no claim of victory by either side. Obviously, Paul had been right. But the resolution is not stated that way. The message simply presented the truth.

Second, there was an obvious display of unity. Judas and Silas were men of reputation from Jerusalem, so would be identified with the losers in the recent debate (regardless of the side they had started on). The church leaders made sure that everyone understood how universal was this agreement by sending some who might be supposed to be against it.

Third, they were not afraid to point out the real problem. Some had been claiming authority (like from a king) as they went about sincerely teaching among the Gentiles that they must follow the Law of Moses. The elders in Jerusalem made it clear that the source of the problem was in those who falsely claimed authority. There was no hint of censure for simply holding a wrong opinion. Correcting erroneous opinions is a part of learning. But claiming to have authority is lying; it is sin. There is a big difference there.

In contrast to those who simply have wrong notions that haven't been corrected yet are those who use their wrong opinions as a covering for evil. Such people are described in Revelation 2 and 3, the Nicolaitans. There is a difference between those who haven't sorted everything out, and those who revel in ignorance.

Finally, the elders were careful to include the Holy Spirit (verse 28). Perhaps this was through prayer, or by some sign or wonder.

So, what can we learn from this scene?

First, differences between Christians and groups of Christians are not insurmountable. That is a sad commentary on our time, when unity is rarely if ever pursued.

Second, church leadership in these matters functions in the role of a judge, not a ruler. Church leaders make judgments based on their wisdom and experience, not rules based on their authority.

Third, holding wrong views is not what is bad. Failing to resolve those differences is.