



## **FAITH INSPIRED ONENESS**

~ Acts 15:1-21

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Have you ever walked into a room filled with people you really did not know and immediately wondered "Do I belong here?" That can also happen when people walk into a church, wondering "Would I belong here if they knew my past, my struggles, my doubts, my insecurity?" The answer should be "Yes, you belong." But that sadly is not always the case.

This isn't a new problem. In Acts 15, the early church faced this very question. As the Gospel began reaching Gentiles - outsiders, foreigners, people without the traditional signs of belonging, the church had to wrestle with a crucial issue. "What really makes someone fully part of God's people?" It is faith in Jesus alone or is it faith plus something else like tradition, rituals, heritage, social standing, educational background, the job we hold, the money we have, etc., etc.

Acts 15 deals with these issues in the early church. In somewhat different ways we might see it today, but the principles still stand.

First, as a matter of introduction we want to just briefly look at what the issue the early church was faced with and then we want to look at how they addressed this issue and how these same principles apply to us today.

At this point in the book of Acts, Luke the writer tells us that Gentiles (non Jews) had become Christians. Well, that was great. There was however one problem at this point - the church mainly consisted of Jews who had all kind of rules and regulations that they followed based on the Old Testament and of course self-made rules, even how to relate to Gentiles which they considered inferior when it came to the matter of faith. So they thought and believed that's fine, Gentiles could be Christians and be part of the church, but they had to first become Jews. In other words, they had to first follow the laws and regulations the Jews followed. They were many, some of which have already been addressed in the messages from Ephesians and now from the book of Acts.

In the meantime the group of Gentiles who had accepted Christ had grown. The apostles had clearly witnessed that the Gentiles too received the Holy Spirit in the same way they had received it, which proved that God accepted them in the same way He accepted the Jews. Yet a group of Jews still insisted that in order to be a full-fledged Christian, they needed to become Jews first.

The solution was not easy, but in the end the church made the decision that there should be no difference between Jew and Gentile. Acts 15 tells us how it was resolved. The Council of Jerusalem took that decision. This decision became what can be called the Charter of Freedom for the Gentiles. This council included Paul, Barnabas, and yes elders from the Gentile area as well as other apostles and elders including Peter and James (Jesus' half brother) who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

We want to consider the steps that were taken which resolved the issue of Jews and Gentiles being equals and how we can apply it to situations churches face today and inspire us to obtain Faith Inspired Oneness which Jesus prayed for just before He went to the cross.

**Let's look at the steps which led to Faith Inspired Oneness in the early church.**

**TS.: What were they or what are they?**

**I- FAITH INSPIRED ONENESS requires to respectfully talk and listen to each other.  
(Acts 15:1-21)**

When there is an issue that needs resolving, the first thing that needs to happen is to respectfully communicate with one another. This applies to church, but also to our relationship as families, husband wife, children, relatives, friends and to society. So that is what we find here. Verse 7 tells us after there was much debate - I would imagine that this was a lively debate. If you have ever heard two Jews debate something, it gets quite lively. Luke tells us that back in Antioch, where the debate started and led to the Council of Jerusalem - Luke tells us in Verse 2 "And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them." The debate originated with those who said that the Gentiles who came to faith had to become a Jew before they could be full-fledged Christians. So this was a debate about legalism, tradition versus salvation solely by God's grace.

We can learn from this that to solve a problem or disagreement, we must respectfully talk to each other. In this case there was one aspect that was not up for negotiation. Salvation is by grace alone which Jesus offers to all. He is the only one who can offer it to us because He paid for our sins on the cross and we simply accept Him as our Saviour and repent of our sins, we belong to the family of God.



## **II- SECONDLY, FAITH INSPIRED ONENESS requires that we pay attention to the work of the Holy Spirit among us. (15:6-14)**

After the initial discussions and debate, they stopped the arguments. They started to look at what God was doing amongst them. In other words, instead of arguments or legalism, they start with testimonies. Paul and Barnabas stand before the council and share story after story of how God has been working amongst the Gentiles. How lives were changed. Miracles were happening. Communities were being formed. Hearts were transformed. What they were saying in effect, "We don't make this up. God is already doing it."

Then Peter stands up. And when Peter talks, everyone listens. He was the one who saw the Holy Spirit fall on Cornelius - a Gentile back in Acts 10. He simply shared what he has learned "God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them, by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.

Note "He made no distinction." - Peter's words. If the Holy Spirit has already embraced them, who are we to reject them? God didn't wait for them to become Jewish. He looked at their hearts, saw their faith, and poured out His Spirit. It is not tradition that defines people, including us this morning. It is not external signs, background, nationality, the money we possess, etc. It is the inward reality of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who convicts, transforms and empowers. That matters for us today just the same because we are called to be the church of Jesus Christ. And He calls all people unto Himself. In fact, it is our calling to reach out to everyone without distinction and join God in building His church through faith, by grace, through the Holy Spirit. We are not called to be gatekeepers. We are called to be greeters and welcome sinners and bring them to Jesus and help them grow in their faith.

## **III- FAITH INSPIRED ONENESS requires that we listen to Spirit led wisdom of godly men. (15:12-18)**

Although I am making reference to the early church, this principle applies to us as a church today just the same. After Peter finishes speaking, (it appears) the room falls silent. No one is arguing. Everyone is listening. Paul and Barnabas most likely continued to share stories about the unmistakable transformation in the life of Gentile believers. Then James speaks. He isn't just any church leader. He is the brother of Jesus, a deeply respected voice in the Jerusalem church. And even though he knows Jesus first hand,

he also understands the traditions. What he says next reveals a remarkable Spirit-led wisdom. He does not dismiss the testimonies. He does not argue the theology. Instead he does what faithful leaders do. He turns to Scripture. He quotes from the prophet Amos chapter 9:16-18. ***“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant 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.”***

What James is basically saying, “This isn’t new. It is what God had promised all along.” From the beginning, God’s plan was to draw all nations to Himself - not to erase Israel’s story but to fulfill it in Jesus Christ.

What makes this moment so powerful? James does not reject tradition. He honours the past, but he also sees where the Spirit is moving now. He is not asking “What are we losing?” He is asking “What is God doing?” And that is wisdom, which the church back then benefited from and we can benefit from today. And yes, we can benefit from listening, paying attention to what godly men and women have to say, but we also need to ask and carefully pay attention to what God is doing amongst us today. What is He doing in our church? What He is doing in your and my life? How are we responding to the Spirit’s voice within us and amongst us? You say, but God doesn’t speak to me. Yes, He does when you read His Word and sincerely pray, He speaks to you. That is the way He also speaks to us as a church.

James, after quoting from the book of Amos says, “It’s my judgement that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

This meant that Jewish Christians needed to lay down some traditions which are not essential for salvation for the sake of unity. The Gentiles also needed to respect some things that were offensive to the Jews like food sacrificed to idols, eating of blood. The one that is not up for discussion is sexual immorality.

So this was about unity. About living in such a way that honoured the conscience of others and built the kind of community where grace wasn’t just a doorway to salvation, it was a lifestyle, and still is.

Yes, all this might mean that we lay down our preferences like the songs we sing, the order of service and others not essential for salvation, for the sake of unity. Where the statement “We’ve always done it that way” is not part of our vocabulary. Sometimes there



are traditions which are not essential to salvation that can become a hindrance to unity, to oneness in the church. May that not be the case.

#### **IV- FOURTHLY, FAITH INSPIRED ONENESS is the answer to Jesus' prayer and command for unity (John 17:20-23)**

***"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."***

It is remarkable that in Jesus' last prayer before He goes to the cross, His deepest desire before the cross was that His followers would be united in heart, mind and spirit. He does not pray for miracles, influence, not even safety. It was for unity among His people. That does not mean we agree on everything. In Acts 15 we learn how the early church did it which we just looked at. We have been given an example how to solve issues that come our way and they will. In a sense the result of the first council, the Council of Jerusalem, is an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity. It should also be our desire to be an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity.

There are practical aspects to this as well. This calls that we pray together. This can take on different forms. Small groups are very helpful in this area. This is the place to share our joys and sorrows, it brings us closer together than just a little chit chat in the foyer.

Listen again to verse 22 (these are words of Jesus) ***"The glory that you have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one."*** Jesus is offering something supernatural. He is talking about the same unity He and the Father have. It speaks of deep inner harmony, of a shared life. This is far beyond friendliness in the church lobby. Do our differences disappear? NO. But they cease to divide. Unity is maintained when we let the Spirit keep us humble, when we forgive quickly, when we speak truth in love, and when we place the mission of Christ over our personal preferences. It asks me (us) to lay down my right to always be right. It asks you to open your heart to brothers and sisters who may not look like you, vote like you, or sing like you and we admit "we don't have all the answers." We let others speak the truth in love (and we do as well) so we can grow.. Where we avoid the gossip and fault-finding, instead we open our resources - time, skill, finances so God can use them to meet the



needs of His people and advance the mission of the church. These practices are not burdensome rules. They are pathways of grace where the Spirit created unity that programs and committees as important as they are can never manufacture.

When believers who have been to the cross together walk together, they discover the joy of fellowship that the world cannot counterfeit and hell cannot conquer. You see, at the the cross we all stand on level ground, we are all equal. There is no elitism, no hierarchy.

Yes, unity matters to God. Jesus prayed for this unity. He prayed that you and I would be one for our sake, the Kingdom's sake and it is the greatest tool to reach others for Christ. If unity matters to God, then it must matter to us. It is up to us if we want to be an answer to Jesus's prayer. The story does not end there, alone we cannot do it, but that is why He sent, yes, gave us the Holy Spirit to be our helper, to be an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity.

Just a quick reminder how the early church did it.

Faith Inspired oneness.

They respectfully listened to each other.

They paid attention to the work of the Holy Spirit amongst them.

They listened to the wise counsel of godly men and women.

Consequently they became the answer to Jesus' prayer.

We are called to live in Faith Inspired Oneness. Not only at church but during the week. Let it be part of our family life, with our spouse and children and others

Yes, we all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

If you haven't been to the cross of Jesus, today is the day.

If you have drifted, this is a call to come back. Would you do that?

Yes, you belong right here.