

Learning from the Council of Jerusalem – Community CRC, July 19, 2026 – Acts 15:1-19

Acts 15 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, 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 he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he 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.”

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’
¹⁸ things known from long ago.

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

So, we are being asked to discern the Spirit's leading in the life of this congregation. Two weeks ago, as this series began, some of you may remember brother Toyosi's statement that he was grateful that it was called an "art". The "art" of spiritual discernment. He reminded us that there is no formula for discernment since it depends on many different factors. And so, this series is intended to look at the different factors and different things that we might throw into the pot as we seek to discern the Lord's will. As the 4 working groups do their respective tasks, we trust that the Spirit will guide them.

Meanwhile, we go to the Scriptures and see what the Bible might have to say about how to discern the Spirit. As I set up the chosen passage for this morning let me begin by reminding us of what Pastor Tom stated last week about conflict. He made a point of saying that in the church there is always going to be conflict. No matter what congregation or denomination one might find themselves in, there is always going to be disagreement about something. And he stated that such conflict is there because the church is a hodgepodge of people who all have their own biases and weaknesses and we don't always see things as the next person might see them. So, if we accept that conflict is going to happen, we need to also have the tools to deal with it. Of course, we can always walk away, but that is not always very helpful. It is healthier if we know how to deal with conflict and when we know how to deal with it, we can see that sometimes God uses conflict to achieve amazing things. In the midst of conflict, we need to open up to the Spirit and ask what do we do? Lord, we need you and we pray that You will guide us and give us clarity and peace.

Acts 15 is a story of conflict in the early church and how they dealt with it. One of the things that we need to understand, as we come to Acts 15, is that the impact of the spread of the gospel after Pentecost meant that Gentile or non-Jews also came to believe in Jesus. It was hard for those who had been part of the church from the beginning and for those who were firmly rooted in the Jewish heritage to accept the fact that things were changing and others were also part of the Church. And because many of them, especially those of the party of the Pharisees, had spent their entire lives treating strict obedience to the Torah as essential for God's favor, they naturally believed that non-Jews should adopt the exact same Jewish traditions (such as circumcision and dietary laws) in order to become part of the community of God's people.

It is often difficult for those who are steeped in some tradition to accept new realities and new ways of doing things. “We like doing things the way we have always done them and we are not about to change, and if others want to join us then they have to do things and see things like we do and see them.” Such thinking has led racism and to bigotry, and in the church the death of many a congregation.

And so, as mentioned, one of the biggies in the days of the early church, that came to a head in Acts 15, was the thought that Gentile, or non-Jewish people, in order to be recognized as true Christian believers, ought to undergo the rite of circumcision, an Old Testament rite, that spoke of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants. Circumcision was a vital part of being a Jew. A covenant cut into the flesh. And then there were the Old Testament strict dietary laws. And those who held to these beliefs noted that Paul And Barnabas were not insisting on these rites and rituals. So, we read in verse 1, that men from Judea went to Antioch (which is quite a distance northward up the Mediterranean coast from Judea) and brought their message concerning certain expectations and fulfillment of Jewish customs and rites before being accepted as Christians.

But this message brought conflict – a sharp dispute and debate, says verse 2. We can just imagine what that must have been like from our own experiences with the women in office issue and now with the Human Sexuality Report – talk about sharp dispute and debate. And these sorts of disputes and debates have a way of bringing out the worse in people. People who claim to be disciples of Jesus, throw out all sorts of debasing statements and make wild declarations and judgements about their fellow believers. Some of you have read or heard such comments and perhaps you have been party to making them. Lord, have mercy! Rarely, in such battles, and that is what they often become, does anyone win, and most are certainly not very edifying or faith building. In fact, any time there are debates in the church, it damages people’s respect for the church and even faith. There are those who simply walk away from the church with the thought that if this is what church is all about, who needs it? And as Pastor Tom put it, we are a people who generally are conflict avoidant, I know I am, and so we leave and depart from one another, rather than work things through. Of course, not only is the conflict painful, but the departure of people and the seeming inability to even worship together is very painful. And, here we are and we are now called to discern the Spirit about the future and the question is “how do we do that?”

Well, the conflict brought to light in Acts 15 gives us at least some clues as to how to approach the matter. Notice what is done.

Paul Carter, a blogger for the Gospel Coalition writes: *“We notice first of all that they did not try to maintain unity by stifling honest conversation. Sometimes we hear people talk about unity as something that needs to be protected at all costs – and one of those costs is often conversation, dissent, and legitimate concern. In [Acts 15](#), however, no such concern is in evidence. On the contrary, as David Peterson points out: “In this historical framework, Luke presented conflict and debate as legitimate and necessary elements in the process of discerning God’s will. He showed how such disagreement ‘serves to reveal the true bases for fellowship, and elicit the fundamental principles of community identity.’”*

So, upon naming the issue, which is always important, it was decided that the parties involved in the dispute and disagreements should gather in Jerusalem, the center of the Christian faith at that time, to meet with the elders and apostles and talk things through. Ben Witherington III observes, *“that the way to resolve conflict in antiquity was to call a meeting of the assembly of the people (cf. vv. 12, 22), ‘and listen to and consider speeches, following the conventions of deliberative rhetoric’, the aim of which was to overcome stasis (‘conflict’, as in v. 2) and ‘produce concord or unity.’”*

This meant that Paul and Barnabas and others set out for the Synod meeting of the new church in Jerusalem. On the way south from Antioch they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, and everywhere they went they probably heard stories and told stories about how the Holy Spirit was at work in the church. And it was amazing! What they witnessed and experienced was that the good news of Jesus was not just confined to the Jews. Stunning as that may have been for those steeped in the Jewish traditions, nonetheless it was exciting news to pass along on the part of Paul and Barnabas. The Gentiles are being converted! The Holy Spirit has been poured out on others! There are more who belong in the covenant than simply Jews! The disciples discovered that it was true, as Jesus said, that he has sheep who were not from the sheep pen of Israel only! How exciting! When the disciples and elders and others heard this news, they were very glad (v. 3). Who wouldn’t be? This is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the father of all believers, as the apostle Paul calls him, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and as grains on the beach.

So, they came to Jerusalem and gathered for a discussion and to deal with an issue that had reared its ugly head in the church of the day. Once gathered the issue was placed squarely in front of them all by believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” (v.5)

Now this was a problem because, as Paul and Barnabas had preached, probably many times, “it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, not by works.” (v. 11) The Gospel was at stake in all of these discussions. All the religions of the world in that day required obedience to rites and rituals, to religious laws in order to find peace with a god (small g), whomever that god may be. And as Paul discovered while in Athens among all the gods being worshipped or paid attention to was an altar “to the unknown god”. And the more orthodox of the Jews, namely the party of the Pharisees, as they were known, not only sought to obey all 613 laws of the Torah (the Old Testament Scripture) but they added hundreds, if not thousands of other rules and expectations to those 613, all in order to find favour with God. They were enmeshed in legalism and works-righteousness.

Well, into that reality and into that religious world, Jesus was born. And he turned things upside-down. The kingdom of heaven is often referred to as the upside-down kingdom. Jesus said that he was the fulfillment of the law, and because of his death and resurrection, it is not by works that one finds peace with God. It is not by works that one finds hope or life or even one’s sense of belonging or identity. It is not by keeping every jot and tittle of the law that one is made righteous, after all, even our most righteous works are tainted by sin. No one, on their own, is able to gain eternal life or a place in the Kingdom, or a true sense of belonging. No one on their own is able to live in the comfort of knowing that they belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to their faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. It is only through the finished work of Jesus Christ that we are his and have any hope. That is the Gospel, the incredibly good news, that the apostles proclaimed and that the church continues to proclaim even today in a world where people are searching for belonging and for an identity. Come to Jesus! We are called to believe and accept a gift which is actually beyond our understanding. Christianity is actually quite simple, and Jesus is at the center.

I would have loved to sit in on that first church gathering, or that first synod. What would the discussions have been like? Apparently, the discussion was considerable. Verse 7 says, after much discussion, Peter stood up and spoke. He challenged the party of the Pharisees. And his challenge was based upon what he himself had experienced from his vision and subsequent visit to Cornelius’s house (Acts 10). What he had declared unclean, God had declared clean – a direct challenge to Jewish thinking. The Holy Spirit had also been poured out on Gentiles, just like on Jews, so that there was no distinction between them anymore.

Then Barnabas and Paul told story after story about their experiences on the mission field. They told about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Lord had worked among all the people to whom the gospel was preached. And “the whole assembly became silent as they listened.” (v. 12). This must have been quite something. I don’t expect that they used Roberts Rules of Order in their meeting and that one person calmly spoke one after another. To have silence and people listening only spoke to the wonder of it all. Things were different in the Kingdom. Stories were told. Stories that no doubt reflected the lives of those who had accepted the good news of Jesus. Their stories were used to explain what was happening.

Stories are always good to hear. The Voice of the Martyrs tells many a disquieting story about people facing persecution for the faith, but at the same time they cannot help but make one quiet in the presence of the working of the Spirit. Stories need to be told in any discernment process. One cannot just make up rules and demand obedience without knowing someone’s story of faith, or struggle with the faith or struggle with an addiction or struggle with identity or anything like that. We need to listen to one another before jumping to all sorts of conclusions or judgements. A good practice is to allow conversations to be shaped by listening.

And then when they had finished, James spoke up. James was a brother of Jesus and by now a prominent leader in the early church. He added an Old Testament Scripture passage to the discussion. He quoted from Amos 9 about how God was going to add to the remnant of Israel Gentiles, who would also bear his name. It was always the message of the Old Testament that God would gather his people from all the nations of the world and bring them together in the Kingdom. It was never the intention that it would only be the Jews, or one ethnic group. The church is much larger than that! And thank the Lord it is! People from all tribes and tongues and nations will proclaim that Jesus is Lord and gather in worship and praise.

Once all the speeches and discussions were held, James came up with some pastoral advice and concessions. If the Jews and Gentiles were to all be in the same church and all belong to Jesus, and if they were to be one body, then the Jewish Christians ought not to make things difficult for the Gentiles by asking them to obey the Old Testament rites and rituals. If the Jewish believers were ready to give up that expectation for the Gentiles, then in order for the Gentiles not to be a stumbling block to the Jews it was expected that the Gentiles ought to *“abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from meat of*

strangled animals and from blood.” (v. 20) “You do well to avoid these things” wrote the synod to the believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.

As one writer put it: “The instructions in Acts 15 were not given as absolute moral legislation for all time but as wise guidance for peace within a diverse body of believers. In fact, Acts 15:28 records the decision as a Spirit-led compromise: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.” The restrictions were about promoting holiness and avoiding unnecessary offense.”

In other words, if we are going to be one and not stumbling blocks to each other, then we will forget the requirement for circumcision and any other Jewish rite, but you ought to be prepared to give up the things that the Jews have followed from the time of Moses so that we are not a stumbling block to each other. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians, “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” (5:16) “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” (5:18) What a liberating gospel! Not one that allows for anarchy, but one that asks for a life of thanksgiving in response to what Jesus has done.

All of this was written in a communiqué carried by Judas and Silas along with Paul and Barnabas. The letter was well received and was encouraging and strengthening for all who heard it. One can only wish that such a Spirit-led discussion and unity would be the hallmark of the church, but alas, the Synod of Jerusalem did not end all battles – on the contrary, right afterwards Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement and even parted company (v. 36 ff). Ah, the church. A broken body so badly in need of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the church, there will be conflict – that is a given. Knowing that, the question will continue to be – how do we deal with it? Amen.

Prayer: Oh Lord, how we hate conflict and disagreements. They end up hurting us and hurting your name. Forgive us for our role in situations that cause things to flare and that cause us to debase others or even wonder about their faith status. Help us to find ways to talk and to listen and to accept and to love and to be gracious. But Lord, we confess that is not always easy. Help us, as a congregation, to discern your will for us going forward. Bless the working groups and our office bearers to be wise and gentle and loving and firm and to listen to the promptings of Your Spirit, so that we can reflect, in a good way, what it means to be the body of Christ. Grant us your peace as we work through all sorts of things, to the honour and glory of your name. The church is built on the solid foundation – namely our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh Lord, have mercy on us as we bumble our way through. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.