

# Success in Mission, Trouble at Home

## ACTS 15:1–35

“But some men came down from Judea...” With that abrupt insertion, the narrative shifts direction. The joy and peace which ended the account of the first stages of the gentile mission (13:1–14:28) is broken with this story of “no small dissension and debate” over the issue of whether gentile converts should be circumcised and become Jews before they could be Christians.

How many Christians have had their enthusiasm smothered by the bickering of the church? A member comes forward with an exciting idea for a church-sponsored after-school program for the children in the neighborhood. Put the gospel into practice! Reach out to the little ones who need us! The Board rejects the idea because the children might damage the church’s new carpet. These church meetings with people crowding the microphone, bickering over budgets, basing their vote on their personal prejudices rather than on the Word of God—how many Christians have had the fire of their initial enthusiasm extinguished by unpleasant church meetings? Why can we not all act like Christians and agree? Why does there have to be such contentiousness within the Body of Christ? Who seated the Judean delegation anyway? Things were going so well for the church before they called for the microphone and opened the can of worms otherwise known as the mission to the gentiles. Why do they not just sit down and be quiet and leave the church in peace? How is this church ruckus going to appear when the newspapers hear of it?

Lest we be too quick to label these adversaries of Paul as conservative reactionaries, let us be sure that we know their motivation. None of them object to preaching to gentiles. They know that Israel’s covenant included blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). The sign of that covenant and that blessing was circumcision, a sign in which Jesus himself participated (Luke 2:21). Without circumcision, how could a gentile possibly participate in the blessings promised to the covenant people; in short, how could they be saved? The concern is not over racial exclusion but covenant inclusion. Although Paul labeled these opponents as “false brothers” (Gal. 2:4), let us grant the legitimacy of their concern faithfully to include gentiles within all of the promises to Israel and all of the beauty of a life lived by the Torah. Adherence to the beloved Torah is

the way in which a Jew remains a Jew. How dare Paul, Barnabas, and the church at Antioch take it upon themselves to abrogate these sacred demands? A delegation is sent to “the apostles and the elders at Jerusalem” to settle the issue. Once again, when there is a dispute about innovation or new twists in the task of applying the gospel to contemporary challenges, our missionaries touch base with apostolic authority in Jerusalem, with normative tradition.

At Jerusalem, “they declared all that God had done with them” (15:4). But some of the “party of the Pharisees” were unconvinced and demanded that gentiles be circumcised and keep the Torah. After much debate Peter speaks (vv. 7–11), alluding to his own experience in the Cornelius episode (10:1–11:18). In his vision Peter learned that God “made no distinction between us and them” (v. 9). Realization of God’s inclusive grace (cf. Rom. 2:11) has led Peter to the stunning conclusion that “we believe that we shall be saved by grace,” a conclusion that would have pleased the Paul of Romans as well as Luther. Peter bases his argument upon new revelation (the vision) as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit and the actual *experience* of gentiles coming into the fellowship. Peter’s evidence is confirmed by Barnabas and Paul, who narrate the “signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12), another argument from experience. As if to seal their argument, James (someone we have not met before) rises to cite *Scripture* in support of the gentile mission, claiming prophetic agreement (vv. 15–18). James quotes Amos 9:11–12 (Septuagint), a text which refers to the restoration of the true People of God (v. 16) and of the inclusion of “Gentiles who are called by my name” (v. 17), a wise choice of Scripture since Amos says nothing about the need for these gentile converts to follow the requirements of the law.

The method of debate in 15:7–21 is a useful guide for how the church ought to argue. For one thing, the church listens to its leaders. Paul’s comments in his epistles about troubles with Peter on the subject of gentile circumcision suggest that Peter was not as agreeable as he is depicted as being in 15:7–11. Nevertheless, the church depends upon its leaders to be more than mere managers or bureaucratic functionaries. The church needs people of bold vision who know what is at stake in our arguments and who argue with clarity and courage. Yet, when the church decides on a proper course of action, feelings, sentiment, the power of caucuses, ethnic or gender considerations, the opinions of leaders, or the majority vote of the members (the ways the church often adjudicates its

disputes today) count for little. New revelation along with confirmation by experience and with testing by Scripture are the proper measurements for the church. A church without these three standards is unable to have a good argument. All differences must be suppressed, and we dare not admit them for fear that the church be destroyed by our debate, since we have no commonly recognized authority for adjudicating our disputes. Congeniality and open-mindedness become the only values for a church without authority, values which ultimately prove inadequate for keeping the church faithful. Appeals to revelation, Scripture, and experience do not settle the church's inner differences. But these three criteria determine the boundaries for our debates. They are the ultimate court of appeal.

Based upon the evidence of experience and Scripture, James proposes that “we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (v. 19). Luke's Jesus has separated salvation from Torah, or at least has found a way to include gentiles without first making them Jews. Yet Christian love and the concerns of community temper this inclusive spirit. Out of care for the sensibilities of Jewish Christians (a major concern of Gal. 2:11–21), gentile Christians are asked to observe four things: eat nothing sacrificed to pagan gods, abstain from incestuous marriages, eat no meat of strangled animals, abstain from partaking of blood (15:20–21). Leviticus 17–18 applies these rules to both Jews and to aliens who reside within Israel. James seems to regard these gentiles as analogous to “strangers” in the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, gentile Christians are compelled to observe the minimum requirements that had been set for strangers wanting to enjoy fellowship with conscientious Jews. At the table of the Lord, we gentiles continue to be the guests of a Jewish host.

Converts into the church are welcomed, but not without limits. Even as change was required of Jewish Christians to include converted gentiles in their fellowship, so converted gentiles must change for the good of the fellowship. Luke, in his enthusiasm for the gentile mission, does not claim that old Israel is replaced by a new Israel, the church. Rather, gentiles are welcomed into a reconstituted Israel which demands that they adhere to certain basic Levitical standards for the good of all.

Nowhere does Luke suggest that Jesus abrogates the Torah. Even gentiles are to keep that part of the Torah which applies to them as non-Jews. Our Protestant tendency to equate Torah with legalism deters us from seeing the Torah as Luke sees it. In Judaism,

Torah was not a means of winning salvation. Jews knew that God is gracious and forgiving. For Luke, the law is not a means of salvation but rather is a means of signifying ones identity as a member of God's people —although, strictly speaking, no Jew would have understood a separation of salvation by God through the gift of the Torah and identity as God's people. Ceremonial rules for eating were just as important as ethical rules for marriage, money, and murder. Jews must be witnesses in the midst of a pagan world of God's gracious determination to have a people. As other signs of Jewish distinctiveness were destroyed, like their king, their land, and their temple, Torah held the people together. Torah was the Jews' joyful witness to the one true God in a world full of idols (E. P. Sanders).

This was Luke's view of Torah. God's people will live by God's law. To fail to do so would be to risk the disintegration of the community of the elect into another co-opted cult of the Empire. Paul solved the Jew-gentile problem in one way, Luke in another. Luke would never have said, "Christ is the end of the law ..." ([Rom. 10:4](#)). Gentiles must be included in God's family, but on the family's terms—through belief in the Word and gift of the Spirit.

James' proposal "seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church" (v. 22). A letter is sent from the Jerusalem mother church to Antioch (vv. 22–29) outlining the plan. The new congregation in Antioch was much pleased (v. 31), and the work among the gentiles continued. The young church which has had to prevail against external adversaries, both Jew and gentile, as well as internal infidelity has demonstrated that it can prevail against perhaps the toughest foe of all—disagreements with fellow Christians about church policy. Rather than do what churches often do on such occasions—flee from the fight, submerge our differences, or else storm off in a huff—the apostles demonstrate that the gospel has given them the resources to confront controversy without being destroyed by it. There are congregations who are too weak, too fearful of possible fragmentation, too bereft of any common, binding faith to have a good argument. Luke does not discuss those churches because their timid and supercilious stories could not give courage to anyone.

Why all this fuss over such archaic prejudices as not eating blood? Against our tendency to see Paul and Barnabas as the good, open "liberals" at the Jerusalem conference and their opponents as reactionary "conservatives," let us remind ourselves that Luke

wants to demonstrate that the gentile mission and all of its exponents acted in fidelity to the true and historic faith of Israel. In Luke's story Paul could not have been faithful to the historic witness (represented in James' citation of [Amos 9](#)) had he refused to be a light to the gentiles. In our own decidedly anti-traditional, antinomian, "if-it-feels-good-to-you-then-do-it" environment, we may wonder why Paul and the apostles went to all the trouble to pacify the concerns of the circumcisers. For us, the church is more concerned with inclusiveness, openness, and affirmation rather than with fidelity to the historic faith of Israel. We are quick to lay aside historic standards of doctrine and morality as being historically conditioned and culture-bound and thoroughly irrelevant to our more progressive world view.

The apostles commended Paul and Barnabas to the new mission churches as "men who have risked their lives for the sake of our [Lord Jesus Christ](#)" (v. 26). Before we arrogantly dispose of their witness in our contemporary debates over church policy, we ought at least to recognize the authority of their credentials, written as they are in blood.