

# “When Drinking, Politics, and Circumcision Divide a Church”

## // Acts 15:1–32 // SENT #17

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Well, it's summertime, which means a few things. **1. It's hot.** (You know that because you start picking out good parking spaces not based on distance but shade) **2.** People start going on **vacation**; **3.** As it turns out, we **always end up having some of our best preaching (& teaching)** in the summer. Don't plan it that way; it just kind of works out.

This **summer is already shaping up** that way. We're going to do the third and final segment of our *SENT* series through the book of Acts, and it's got some really great stuff in it. And I've got some great friends who will be coming in at different points in the summer to preach... I think this is going to be a great summer.

Well... **in case you forgot** (or you're joining us for the first time) the book of *Acts* tells the rather amazing story of how a group of ordinary people: blue-collar workers, tax collectors and a few women started the largest religious movement in history.

The story is really quite remarkable. *Never had a larger assignment been given to a less qualified group of people.* After Jesus had resurrected, he gathered his ragtag group of disciples together on the side of a mountain and said, “OK, your job is to spread this message and make disciples for me in every country in the world.” **And then he just floats off** into heaven.

And they were left just standing there saying, “Wait, what... The whole world? Does he even know how big the world is?” *Never had a larger assignment been given to a less qualified group of people.*

So how did they do it? Two things: 1. Jesus gave them his Holy Spirit, who guided and empowered them in the building his church.

- Acts 1: “*Jesus Continued.*”
  - Hand in the glove
- You get the sense in Acts that they are trying to keep up

So that was the first thing, they had the Holy Spirit. The second thing is they had a rock solid conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead, which changed how they looked at the world.

- **When they were confronted with questions they couldn't answer** (which seems to have happened a lot)... “Yeah, but Jesus rose from the dead.”
- **When they got into arguments they couldn't win...** (Ever got into an argument with a really smart person you felt like you couldn't win, even though you knew they were wrong? Peter got like that in Acts 4. And he says, “Look, I don't know how to answer all your questions, you're clearly smarter and more well-read than I am, but this guy we knew was dead, and now he's alive.”)
  - **If you believe Jesus was raised from the dead,** wouldn't that change how you approach questions? I often ask people who have objections... “What if Jesus came back right now and said, ‘Hey, I'm not going to answer this question right now... there is an answer, but I'm not going to give it to you yet,’ would you suspend your doubts until he could explain it to you?” They usually say, “Well, yes,” so then I say, “The problem is not the questions; the problem is your lack of certainty about Jesus' resurrection.” Is there sufficient proof that Jesus raised from the dead? I believe there is!
- **When they faced obstacles they couldn't overcome...** When they had no money; when Rome had put their leaders into prison, when their families were being fed to the lions, they said, “Yeah, but Jesus rose from the dead. It's not like this is outside his control.”

- **When they were discouraged because of personal failure...** (They blew it—which happens all throughout Acts; they messed up an opportunity; messed up their own lives) “Yeah, but Jesus rose from the dead.” And he did that for me, so he’s got plans for me—not to me to leave in the death of failure, but to bring triumph and success to my future.

**If we know that Jesus rose from the dead**, what kind of confidence does that give us as a church? What kind of plans ought we to be making? Big plans.

**So, Acts is the story** of how this early community, filled with the Spirit, and sure of the resurrection, spread the gospel message over the entire planet.

And **along the way Luke**, the author, stops to tell you these stories about things that happened to the church so that we can learn from their example.

And that brings us to **Acts 15**...

### Acts 15:1–32

The church encounters a problem that would have radically changed the future had they not handled it as they did.

Now, **a lot of people don’t preach on this text** because it’s about a theological debate and those can be **BORING**. But this one is going to answer some really important questions, like:

- What role should politics play in the church?
- How should we handle gray areas, like, “Is it ok to drink alcohol?” And what do you do if people in your small group disagree on that?
- And even, what should you do when a new believer cusses in church?
- (Some of you say, “This passage deals with all this?” Heck yeah. Yes, let’s take a look.)

[15:1] But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

- **A lot of the first Christians were Jews**, and Jews had been raised on Old Testament law, and one of the most important Old Testament laws was that every male had to be circumcised. Circumcision separated the people of God from the people of the world.
  - So, a lot of these new Jewish Christians were teaching, “If you are really going to be a child of God, you have to be circumcised.”
- **What this meant was that the new members classes in the early church primarily consisted of women and children.** The women all went to Starting Point, and the guys were out in the car, saying, “Honey, you go on ahead. I’m not so sure about all this.”
- (Btw, a couple of components of this message might get up into the PG13 realm...not because I’m trying to be funny, just the nature of what we’re talking about. We have great programming all the way up through middle school if you want to take advantage of it. That’s where my kids are.)

[2] And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

- Now, this was a long trip for Paul and Barnabas. And this is right in the middle of Paul’s ridiculously successful missionary and writing career.
  - Paul is out establishing churches in unreached areas and writing books.... Books we still study 2K years later. For an author, that’s successful, right? Most of my friends can’t even name the 3 books I’ve written.
- In the midst of this, Paul comes back to Jerusalem, because whatever is being discussed is so important he’s willing to come back to Jerusalem (on foot), to discuss it.

[6] The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. [7] And after there had been much debate, (that means, a lot of yelling) Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, 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. [8] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, [9] and he made no distinction between us and them, *having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

[10] Now, therefore, why are you testing God by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

- There were 613 Jewish laws. Circumcision was 1. 612 others...
- Peter’s like, “I don’t know about you guys, but I never felt like I was keeping them all. First of all, I could hardly keep them all straight... **How far could I walk** on the Sabbath again? Can we eat **llama meat**—is that unclean? How about **turkey bacon**? And what about **yoga pants**? Was that a forbidden fabric, or just in bad taste?
- No matter how hard I tried to keep the law, **I never felt righteous** before God. **Thaddeus**, did you? How about you, **Bartholomew**? *If we could barely keep these laws, why are we putting this onto the Gentiles?*

[11] But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” None of these things saved us. Faith in the finished work of Christ saved us!

[12] And all the assembly fell silent, and (then) they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. [13] After they finished speaking, James (who is, you recall, the half-brother of Jesus—which, I’ve told you, is another of the primary reasons I believe Jesus actually did rise from the dead—James, Jesus’ half-brother, was convinced. Think about it (and I’m not really trying to be funny): *How many of*

*you have an older brother? What would it take to convince you that he was God?* James) replied, “Brothers, listen to me.... It is my judgment, therefore, that *we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.*

- I would like to suggest we engrave that phrase into the cornerstone of this church: *We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.* Any obstacle we can eliminate, I think we should. Even preferences for things I really like; things I am comfortable with.
- **I think about it in my preaching.** I do not want to make it difficult for... **people unfamiliar with Christianity** to turn to God because I use a bunch of terms they don’t understand or by being a church full of cliques nearly impossible to penetrate... or having a bunch of artificial expectations people feel like they have to live up to in order to be accepted here
  - (Sometimes we project this sanitized, perfect life—‘hi brother,’ gleam in teeth.
  - At my home church we dressed up... WOMAN WHO wouldn’t dress up...
  - We communicate this perfection, and the guest far from God comes here and says, “My life is so messed up.” I don’t belong with these people.)
- I do not want to make it difficult for... **guests drawn to our church** who have heard God is at work here ... but then they get here and parking is bad; kids rooms are overcrowded; the place is messy. Because we don’t have enough volunteers.
- I do not want to make it difficult for... **people trying to get into discipleship** by having a cumbersome process difficult to figure out.
- I do not want to make it difficult for... the de-churched to turn back to God because they come and I preach in a way that mocks or speaks condescendingly about people on the outside (which is what turned a lot of people off to church to begin with)
- I do not want to make it difficult for... **African-Americans or people of other races that are turning to God** because we have no multi-cultural representation in our leadership

- I do not want to make it difficult for... those **struggling with same-sex attraction** who are turning to God by stigmatizing that sin, or treating it as different than my own (Lesbian girl's comment to me)
- I do not want to make it difficult for... for **Democrats** by mixing secondary political positions with the gospel message. Or Republicans.
- I don't want to make it difficult for **Duke fans** by rubbing it in their face that they got eliminated in the first round of the NCAA this year, or for **State fans** by pointing out they haven't had a good team since 1982.
- You catch my drift?

<sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them (the Gentiles), telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

- You read that and you say, "What?" Random list.
  - Sexual immorality: (Pagan world was notoriously promiscuous—just accepted). It's not that this was the only commandment they needed to obey, like stealing and murder were open season. Just that this was the one that was commonly accepted.
    - Christian theologians for 2000 years have separated the moral commandments from the ceremonial ones because of passages like this one. The moral dimensions of the commandments are still in effect because God doesn't change.
  - But what's with the "not eating meat from strangled animals and from blood, food polluted by idols..." Those things were really offensive to Jews—it would really cause fellowship problems. That's why he says, "Most Jews have developed an aversion to those things, and for Gentiles to just do them and flaunt them would really make it difficult for their fellow Jewish Christians."

- So, basically, they say only 2 things: 1. Obey the moral dimensions of the law, and 2. try not to overly offend other Christians.
- Everyone listening was like, "Wait, 613 down to 2. That's quite a reduction."

(By the way, I hear a lot of people say, "You conservative Christians don't take the Bible seriously. You just pick and choose what you want." They point to Leviticus... dietary laws. Fabric. "Why do you obey the Bible on sex but not on kinds of fabric? You're inconsistent."

- No! We are under the authority of the Bible until that authority tells you part of it is no longer binding. *We aren't picking and choosing. In putting aside the dietary and ceremonial restrictions we're putting aside what the Bible tells us we should put aside.*<sup>1</sup>

[22] ...They sent Judas (not the one that betrayed Jesus, but another one) ... and Silas, leading men among the brothers, [23] with the following letter... "Greetings... (28) It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: [29] that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled (who strangles an animals), and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." (Imagine the excitement reading that letter!)

[30] So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. [31] And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. (Acts 15:1-31) And all the men went to Starting Point the very next week.

**Andy Stanley** talks about several drifts this text warns us to avoid... I'm going to use a few of his and add a few of my own:

### 1. The drift from a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from sermon by Tim Keller on this passage.

- Every church tends to do this... When we first started, so focused on reaching those on the outside... but we get established... we got needs. It's so easy to start thinking about ourselves...
  - Hard for me... **I have preferences; and, I want to make you happy**, too. I like good job approval. And you, the ones sitting here in front of me, you're the one who write the letters to complain. *People who don't come don't complain. It's easy for me to re-engineer the church to please you or me.*
- But we ought not to make it hard for the Gentiles who are turning to God. So we have to constantly be asking that question, "Are we making it hard for them?"
  - Don't mean to be judgmental, but it is so sad going into churches stuck in old traditions... Group of people who have been there since the Great Depression... average age is 78. If you're in your 40's you're in the youth group... I walk in and I think, "Wow, if the 1950's eve come back, these people are going to be ready." But they won't change, even though they can see are not reaching the next generation. And I think it's sad because they love their traditions more than they love their grandchildren.
- Handbell story.
- If you've been here for a while... raise your hand. They did this.
  - We gave away the choir robes. Sold the organ to a funeral home. We make fun... but they loved that stuff.
- They didn't do it, so we can be selfish.
  - Even if none at your campus... you have a campus that we birthed by the faith and selflessness of a group of people who don't even attend there! They didn't do it so we could be selfish with our preferences.
- This church came to a crossroads,
  - We had our Jerusalem council on a Sunday night in 2002, and they chose to preserve the tradition rather than advance the mission.
  - During that season about 150 people left.
  - The 300 who stayed said, "Whatever it takes."

- We have to remake that same decision every year.

*So, the drift from a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders; from advancing the mission to preserving the tradition.*

## 2. The drift from grace to law

- The ones calling out for circumcision were saved. They believed they were saved by putting faith in Christ, but after that they started to drift back toward a rules-based relationship with God
- That's what always happens... We constantly drift from grace back to law. **Luther—hardwired**
- Now, our list is different. Circumcision is prob not a big deal to us, but we have our own lists... Lists of things, where we say, "If you do these things, these will make you right with God and show you are a good Christian."
  - They're **never bad things**... Are you *involved in ministry*? Doing a quiet time? How many people did you share Christ with? Do you adopt? How much do you give?
  - Good things... but these become the measure of our spiritual lives and the measure by which we evaluate others.
- Not only does this make us lose the gospel in our own lives, it makes it difficult for others to come to God.
  - **Illus.** Ever been really lost? Anyone who knows me knows I have a notoriously bad sense of direction. Most dangerous is when I go running in a new place. Don't know how to get back. Sometimes people who come in here are like that, and when we present the essence of Christianity as a bunch of rules to maintain, we make it hard.
  - **The gospel is that you are purified the moment you put faith in Christ;** not faith in what you are able to do but on what he's done.
  - **At any moment you can fully right with God;** fully found, by faith in the finished work of Christ, not in your ability to fix yourself.

3. After you drift from grace to law, you'll see a **The drift from a focus on internal transformation to one on external conformity.**

- The gospel's focus is transforming the heart.
  - Jesus said that the essence of the law was to love God and others, and everything else was an outworking of that.
  - (Now, the Bible helps us see what love looks like: truth, purity, justice).
  - But the core is a heart of love, and this heart is produced by faith in Christ.
- In places that lose the gospel, they replace a focus on inward transformation with a fervency about outward conformity. **When that happens, a whole host of things become laws that determine whether you are spiritual.**
- In their day, it was circumcision. Let me give you a few common in our church backgrounds
- **Alcohol**
  - Growing up with teetotalers... good reasoning.
    - **Bible often speaks very negatively** of alcohol, warning of the dangers
    - NYT article: **1 out of 6 people** who drink have a serious alcohol problem; **1 in 10 kids** in United States grow up in homes with alcohol abuse.<sup>2</sup>
    - **100K** alcohol related deaths last year
    - I commend you for thinking this way! If it's really what it's all about... that's very conscientious and loving toward your fellow man!
  - But... others say,
    - Well, just because something is abused, doesn't mean we should get rid of it totally: Sex is abused...do we get rid of it? Words

are abused...get rid of talking? Food is abused...stop eating?

- If you want to talk about things that kill... last year there were: 100k deaths related to alcohol; 300k deaths related to obesity. Nobody is advocating getting rid of desserts.
- And even though the Bible warns that alcohol can be abused, we clearly see people in the NT drinking fermented beverages... including Jesus, and at one point Paul even prescribes it for Timothy.
- What does that mean? It means we should follow our consciences and not judge each other based on this external standard. Godly people can choose either side of this.
- And we should try, in deference to each other, not to offend.
  - Some of you may hear this teaching on alcohol and say, "I'm looking forward to throwing this in the face of everyone." That just shows how selfish, and all-about-me your attitude is.
  - They told the Gentiles, "Don't throw this stuff in the face of your fellow Jewish Christians."
- This makes for some tense unity in our church...
  - Difference in Presbyterian and Baptist: Presbyterian will say hello to you in liquor store
  - Me in my marriage...
- **Christian appearance and vocabulary**
  - Some of you grew up in churches were Christians dress in certain ways... No tattoos.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/june/why-i-gave-up-alcohol.html>

- You typically don't see Christians using profanity... but I don't want us to get so focused on that we lose the heart behind it. "Pastor, that was one hell of a sermon"

#### ○ Politics

- I think the Bible needs to shape how we think about everything. I think there are wise, biblical ways to look at things like taxation or immigration reform.
- But for a lot of people certain positions become like religious "law," an external sign of whether you are right with God.
- And maybe you're right about those things. But I don't want to make it hard for the Gentiles...
  - I don't want someone to assume that to become a Christian means converting to a particular view of politics.
  - I'm going to say, "Let's have those discussions, but have them later." And never make them the main thing.
  - **Simon the zealot** and Matthew the tax collector
- Don't judge someone's heart based on whether they conform to your political "law" or not.
- Now, just like they told these people... there are a few things we should agree on... moral issues, things like abortion... but still we must handle them in the right way, with grace and love.

#### ○ Worship styles

- Many of you judge others by whether they worship like you or not

- From grace to law
- From a focus on internals to one on externals

This was a moment. A moment of incredible but subtle danger. Could have ended the rapid expansion of the Christian movement.

Many churches go through this and don't make it.

I don't want to make it hard for the Gentiles in our community to turn to God...

**The gospel is...** *God* wants to know you. He wants a relationship with you. He made a way! He came to earth to pay the penalty for your sin. He wants to come into your life, forgive your sin, make you a new person.

He can do that today. Right now. He'll purify your heart when you invite him to. Do you want to know him? You can start today.

The rest of the Christian life flows out of that. You don't have to clean up to come to him. He'll start cleaning you up when he comes into your life!

### Those 3 shifts destroy the forward movement of the church

- From a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders

**Bullpen:**