

Acts 15:1-16:5 // A Sharp Dispute

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[0 : 00] When they finished, James spoke up.

Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written, After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord. Even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 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.

For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. So then they send a letter spelling out their decision and circulate it to the church in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia via Judas and Silas.

[1 : 13] And again, picking up the reading in chapter 15, verse 36. Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they're doing.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them. But Paul did not think it wise to take him because he deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and left, commanded by the believers to the grace of God. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Paul came to Derby and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.

The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area. For they all knew that his father was a Greek.

[2 : 14] As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

This is the word of God. Thanks, Robbie. And let's bow our heads to pray and ask for God's help as we come to this passage.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word to us this evening. And we pray that your grace would be powerfully at work in us all.

We pray that by the Holy Spirit, you'd prepare our hearts to receive your words and respond to the gospel message with joy.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, Stanislav Petrov. Not a household name, but hands off if you've heard of this guy.

[3 : 19] Not many of you. He's not very well known here in the West. But Stanislav Petrov made a decision back in 1983 that had massive consequences for hundreds of millions of people.

On the 26th of September 1983, Stanislav Petrov was on duty in a compound outside Moscow when a radar screen alerted them to five intercontinental ballistic missiles approaching from the U.S.

towards the Soviet Union. Now, Soviet protocol at that time, as is now probably, would order a retaliatory strike with nuclear weapons.

But Petrov ignored the warning. But Petrov ignored the warning. He was then just a young man of 44 years. Instead, he relied on a gut instinct that it was a false alert.

He made a decision that saved hundreds of lives. He made a decision that avoided triggering the Third World War. Now, there's moments like that that change our lives.

[4 : 29] Moments in history where everything's hanging on a thread. Moments when everything's on a knife edge, so to speak. And our passage this evening is about a church council meeting.

And admittedly, church councils don't always have the best rep for being the most exciting things in the world. Don't let that put you off the upcoming AGM at St. Silas.

But this church council meeting is probably the most important church council meeting in history. One of those moments when everything's on a knife edge.

Everything's hanging by a thread. And so if you're new this evening, just sort of exploring the Christian faith for yourself, then this subject gets right to the heart of the Christian faith.

What do you need in order to be saved? And that's a crucial question for us all. What do you need in order to be saved? That's what's at stake here.

[5 : 36] And many have noted that this chapter is absolutely central in every way to the book of Acts. Absolutely central. We've got three headings this evening.

Firstly, on a knife edge. That's the issue at the heart of it. What caused the problem in the first place in the first five verses. Secondly, bringing out the big guns.

The apostles' unanimous decision for the gospel, for the sake of the gospel. And thirdly, taking one for the team. Missional flexibility for the sake of the gospel.

And that's what happens next sort of thing. So firstly, on a knife edge. Doctrinal rigidity for the sake of the gospel. Well, perhaps you noticed when Robbie read for us, this passage is topped and tailed with this issue of circumcision.

At the beginning of chapter 15, Paul is passionately opposed to those insisting you have to be circumcised. But then at the beginning of chapter 16, verse 3, Paul himself takes Timothy to be circumcised before taking him on mission.

[6 : 48] So that immediately raises eyebrows, doesn't it? What on earth is going on, Paul? What are you up to? It seems inconsistent. It's not, as we will see.

But it seems inconsistent. Well, perhaps you also noticed the passage is also topped and tailed with two sharp disputes or disagreements.

So in 15, verse 2, Paul and Barnabas have a sharp dispute and debate with the guys from Judea. And then in verse 39 of chapter 15, at the end of our passage, Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement between themselves.

We're going to see that the first one is a matter of absolute primary importance. And the second one is a matter of secondary importance.

So the presenting issue at the beginning of chapter 15 is circumcision. But right at the heart of it is this. Is faith in Jesus enough?

[7 : 56] Is trusting in Jesus enough to be saved? So in verse 1, if you read along with me, certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers, unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved.

So already we see it's a salvation issue. It's got to do with what's necessary to be saved. How can a person get saved?

It's high stakes. Notice these guys are not saying you don't need to trust in Jesus. That's a given. Both sides are saying you've got to trust in Jesus. All they seem to be suggesting is you've got to trust in Jesus and add something else.

In addition to trusting in Jesus, you've got to do this other thing, this Jewish rite of circumcision, a sign of belonging that's been there ever since the time of Abraham, some 2,000 years prior to that. So why change that now? That's the logic of the guys from Judea. Come to Christ and get circumcised. Then you can be saved. So lots at stake.

[9 : 06] And it's not just that non-Jews have to become Jews first before being saved. It's deeper than that. It actually threatens the whole grace of the gospel.

And so this verse 2 brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp disputes and debates with them. Well, this is Luke's understated way of saying that it all kicks off here.

There's no question for Paul and Barnabas, is there? If you've been following along in our series on Acts on Sunday evenings, they've been on a missionary journey. And place by place, they've been taking this message of salvation to the Gentile nations.

Believe in Jesus to be saved. That's all that's required for your salvation. But Paul and Barnabas know that it's not enough to be right. And they are right.

They know that this needs settled, not just in Antioch, but in the church everywhere. So Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem. The gospel is on a knife edge.

[10:11] It's not simply that the church could split over this. It's even more high stakes than that. So Peter and the other apostles are based in Jerusalem.

If they're wrong about the gospel, if the apostles are wrong, then the whole foundation of Christ's church built on the apostles' foundation, the whole thing is undermined and could collapse.

The stakes couldn't be higher. So the gospel is on a knife edge, verse 4. If you track along with me, when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles.

Then some of the believers stood up and said, the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses. So the rumors are true.

But it's clear now that it's not just about circumcision. Did you notice? It's taking on the whole law of Moses, keeping the food laws, the festivals, the whole shebang.

[11:13] So to be a Christian, first you've got to become a Jew. That's what they're saying. So just to be clear, the question is, is trusting in Jesus as your Savior enough?

Or do we need faith in Jesus plus something else? In this case, circumcision and law keeping. And it's relevant for us today.

It's this idea of works righteousness. You may be heard of that phrase. And even when it's not taught explicitly, implicitly we can start to begin to believe in that ourselves.

That we're saved by faith in Jesus. Yes, that's a good start. But then we need to kind of live day by day, earning salvation by our own good works.

Jesus died to pay for your sins. That's a good start. But now it's over to you sort of thing. Not what the Bible teaches. It's a simple equation.

[12:12] The gospel is you're saved by faith in Christ alone. The gospel is not you're saved by faith in Jesus plus circumcision.

Not you're saved by faith in Jesus plus law keeping. Not you're saved by faith in Christ plus works. Not you're saved by faith plus or minus anything else. No. Jesus plus how well you've lived today.

That's not the gospel. So that's the issue. That's what we're thinking about. Is faith in Jesus enough to be saved? Well next we're going to be thinking about the council's verdict.

And they bring out the big guns, don't they? So there's three major speeches. Three big arguments made in the council. First from Peter. Then from Paul and Barnabas. And then finally from James.

And they're basically all saying the same thing. There's consensus among the apostles. Faith in Jesus is enough. So first up it's Peter.

[13:11] And he shows that God confirmed this teaching through Peter's ministry to Cornelius. So let's pick up in verse 6.

Brothers, you know. And he's reminding them that they already know this. That some time ago God made a choice that the Gentiles should hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

So he's reminding them of a bit in Acts a little bit early in chapter 10 and 11. When Peter brought the gospel to a Roman soldier, Cornelius.

And then the whole household believed. And then he goes on in verse 8. So he's reminding them of Cornelius.

He's saying, look guys, we already know this. We've already seen this. Don't you remember? But God took the initiative with Cornelius, this Roman soldier. And his whole family was saved. They didn't have to become Jews first. Nobody got circumcised there.

[14:23] I preached the gospel. They believed. And God gave them the Holy Spirit. Simple as that. Same as he gave the Jews at Pentecost. So then Peter goes on the offensive in verse 10.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that we haven't been able to bear? He's saying, look, this is serious.

Stop provoking God by twisting the gospel. Being under the burden of the law didn't really pan out very well for us, did it? No. Verse 11. We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we're saved, just as they are.

It's faith in Christ that counts. Same for Jews, same for Gentiles. Faith in Christ alone. So that's Peter's opening speech.

It's a strong start. Next up, it's Paul and Barnabas. And they agree, faith in Jesus is enough. And they show it by the fact that God confirmed it through their ministry.

[15:27] That's what we've been looking at these past Sundays. So picking up in verse 12. The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling them about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

So we're not given loads of details, are we? But that's because we know what just happened. And we've just read those previous chapters of previous weeks. Paul and Barnabas were on a mission calling non-Jewish people to Christ.

Not to be circumcised, simply to trust in Christ. And again and again, God showed that he was behind this by the signs and wonders that they performed.

So we saw that last week in Andrew's sermon. If you're here, the man who was lame from birth jumped up and began to walk for the first time in his life after Paul commanded him.

So we see that God was behind their ministry, affirming its faith in Jesus that counts. So that's Paul and Barnabas. Last up, James.

[16:32] This is the closing speech of the conference. And he declares God confirmed this teaching in Old Testament scripture. So let's look at this in verse 13.

When they finished, James spoke up. Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon Peter has described to us how God chose a people for his name from the Gentiles.

The words of the prophets are in agreement with this. So James takes one example. This prophet Amos prophesying some 700 years or so before Jesus looking forward to a day, verse 16, when David's fallen tent will be restored.

So that's his kind of poetic, prophetic way of saying that God's kingdom will be reestablished with a king from David's line. So that's Jesus, what Jesus came to do.

And there's more because Amos is saying the purpose, verse 17, was that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name.

[17:45] So do we see the point? Amos is saying one day there'll be a new king, Jesus. He will restore the kingdom of God. And the point of him coming is to bring in the rest of mankind into the kingdom.

And crucially, they wouldn't have to become Jewish. It says the Gentiles who bear the Lord's name. In other words, they belong to him in their own right as Gentiles.

And so we have this complete consensus. The apostles, Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and the prophets like Amos, all in agreement.

Therefore, verse 19, James says, It's my judgment that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. So the council gives its verdict.

Gentiles don't need to become Jews first to be saved. Faith in Jesus is all you need. So that's brilliant. The doctrine of the church is safeguarded. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

[18:54] Anyone can come to Jesus. Just put your faith in him. So that's the most pressing thing that the council establishes.

Faith in Jesus is enough. But the council also clarifies a second thing. And that's that true faith always involves turning away from idols.

So the first part is no works righteousness, no legalism, no salvation by faith, plus something else. And the flip side is there's no cheap grace. Someone claiming to come to Christ, but no real evidence in their lives.

So verse 19, end of verse 19. We shouldn't make it difficult. Instead, we should write to them telling to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and blood.

So that's a strange list. Why these four particular things? Why is avoiding sexual immorality, a timeless moral truth, lumped in with these temporary cultural things?

[20:12] Now, lots of ink has been spilt in this, but the best way to make sense of it, I think, is that all these things were to do with pagan temple idolatry.

Feasting on meat, access to temple prostitutes. And I think James gives us a clue that he has this in mind by flagging it up in his first item, things polluted by idols.

So that's a kind of headline for the rest of the list. So the issue here is not that he's for, at all times, us not enjoying steak, medium rare, or stonaway black puddings, or things like that.

He's saying, yes, Gentiles don't need to become Jews. Faith in Jesus is enough. But in turning to Jesus, we do need to be turning away from idols.

It's not working your way into God's good books sort of thing. But you do need to leave behind your former idolatrous lifestyle, turning it back on your old life.

[21 : 17] And he picks an example that's relevant to his own context, pagan idolatry. For us, it might look like turning away from the idols of hedonism, or money, or comfort, or the idols of sex, or power, or beauty, recognition, things like that.

Whatever it may be, that's taking the place of Jesus in our lives. He's the one we're to live for. True faith means not living for those idols of old anymore.

So it's unanimous, and they put it in writing. And send a letter, verse 22, with two from the Antioch church, and two from the Jerusalem church, Judas, Barsabbas, and Silas.

With the result, verse 31, that the church is encouraged and strengthened, and the two delegates go back to Jerusalem with the blessing of peace. So notice, this is interesting.

When the church prioritizes the truth, peace here is the outcome. When the church pursues truth, peace is the outcome.

[22 : 28] Pursuing unity for unity's sake at the expense of truth is always disastrous. But this here is a great moment. The gospel has been on a knife edge, but they made a decision in Jerusalem that safeguarded the gospel.

And we need to be ready to guard and uphold the gospel in our own time, too. Well, that's the council's verdict. Let's see what unfolds next.

Taking one for the team. We saw earlier that the passage is topped and tailed with this issue of circumcision.

It's also topped and tailed with two sharp disputes. The first sharp dispute was of primary importance, a disagreement that threatened the very truth of the gospel.

And here, the disagreement doesn't threaten the gospel at all, whether to take Barnabas's cousin, John Mark, on their mission or not.

[23 : 30] But it is a disagreement nonetheless, and it's not pretty, verse 37. So Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them, but Paul didn't think it wise to take him, because he deserted them in their first missionary journey.

He had such a sharp disagreement that Paul and Barnabas parted company. So this is a kind of sad moment, but you can imagine the different viewpoints.

Paul's logic is the gospel's the most important thing. He was too flaky on the first mission. He's too much of a risk for the second mission.

And then Barnabas's logic, you might imagine, is the gospel's the most important thing. Isn't second chances what we're all about?

This is an opportunity for grace, surely. I think the most incredible thing in these verses is this. It's by God's grace that he still uses it for his good, verse 38.

[24 : 34] So they parted company, Barnabas took John Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas. The result of this disagreement outcome is that there's a doubling of missional opportunity.

Previously, there was just one team, and now there's two teams, which in God's providence are peculiarly well-suited for their respective missions.

So Barnabas is a Cypriot. He's from Cyprus. He and his cousin are uniquely equipped to get the gospel out there in Cyprus. Paul, on the other hand, chose Silas.

Yay for Silas. And Silas is a Roman citizen like Paul. This is going to become significant in the following chapters.

But the fact that he's from the Jerusalem church immediately gives a stamp of approval to Paul's ministry. So if anybody thinks that Paul's ministry is just a little bit dodgy, well, he's got the Jerusalem church behind him in Silas.

[25 : 46] Verse 41, as he goes through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches there. So here we see that God even uses human shortcomings and failures to advance his gospel.

Jesus is the one building his church through the power of the Holy Spirit. It doesn't depend on human failures and fallible human agents like us.

He even uses our weakness and our human failures to advance his gospel. And surely that frees us up just to get on with it and leave it up to him.

And so finally we have this really odd section at the beginning of chapter 16. Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra where a disciple named Timothy lived.

His mother was Jewish and a believer but his father was a Greek. The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. This is our first introduction in the New Testament to Timothy.

[26 : 49] He's going to become a major player in the New Testament. And then in verse 3, Paul wanted to take him along on a journey. So he circumcised him.

Now this seems like a very strange moment, doesn't it? What on earth is Paul thinking? We've already seen and thought about how Paul was passionately against those who insisted on circumcising before you're saved.

So how can Paul be so rigid at the beginning of chapter 15? You do not need to be circumcised to be saved. And yet here he seems to be going back on it.

So what's going on? It seems inconsistent. Really it's not. There's different things at play here. You can't mess with the gospel message.

Saved by Christ alone and not works. So Paul is completely rigid, immovable when it comes to guarding the truth of the gospel.

[27 : 57] But Paul is completely flexible where he can be when it's about getting the gospel out there. And verse 3 of chapter 16 tells us the reason Timothy is circumcised.

Because of the Jews who lived in that area. For they all knew his father was a Greek. So Paul knows, he's wise to it. He knows that this is just the kind of thing that if Timothy is going to be involved in this mission where he's going to this ministry to these particular people, it's just the kind of thing that's going to get in the way of getting the gospel out there.

Paul takes Timothy for his team. And Timothy takes a rather painful one for the team and has a few uncomfortable days afterwards.

Paul's policy is if it's not threatening the truth of the gospel, then be as flexible as possible. Where it's an area of Christian freedom, then just flex.

Flex, that's his principle in 1 Corinthians 9. I've become all things to all people. Why? That by all means I might save some. So hands up if you've heard of this guy.

[29 : 12] Adoniram Judson. A couple, well, yeah, a few hands up. I suppose not a household name, but perhaps if you have particular niche interests.

But in the early 1800s, Adoniram Judson took the gospel to Burma, and he flexed like mad for the gospel. He learned the language, got a tutor, spent 12 hours a day practicing the language. It took three years learning the grammar before he began to speak it. And he tried wearing a yellow robe to mark himself as a teacher of religion. And he switched to a white robe when he started getting mistaken for being a Buddhist guru.

He eventually gave up, I think. But instead of building a church with a steeple, he built a meeting house in a local vernacular style. He improvised in getting the gospel out there.

Okay, last one, Andy Robertson, known to some of us here, friend of St. Silas. A few years ago, Andy planted a church in Charleston, one of his schemes in Dundee.

[30 : 22] And he knew that in that context, it's not going to help the cause of the gospel if he turns up wearing a shirt and chinos. So when he's sharing the gospel in Charleston, he's got on his trademark trackie and baseball cap.

He's rigid when it comes to the gospel itself, but as flexible as he can be in getting the gospel out. And by the way, it's not without risk.

I think on at least one occasion, when I was in the park doing a one-to-one with a new believer, he was mistaken by the local drug dealer for a potential client until his friend he was doing a one-to-one with intervened, and said, this is the priest.

But rigid when it comes to the gospel itself, as flexible as possible in getting the gospel out there.

Well, it's an area clearly where we need wisdom and grace, and it shows that a lot of thought is required in how we get the gospel out there, how we reach the people around us.

And hopefully this will trigger some thoughts in our own contexts, wherever it is that God has placed you to reach others for Christ.

[31 : 43] And certainly as we think about our own church plant in the east end of the city, it would be worth thinking about this, spending some time thinking about this.

Where might we need to flex so that we're not putting up unnecessary barriers to folk? The church in Jerusalem made a monumental decision.

It's had consequences for hundreds of millions of people about salvation down through the centuries. Faith in Jesus is enough to be saved.

Turning to Jesus involves turning away from idols. Because we need to guard that gospel. Rigid in upholding it in our generation, but having established this truth, it frees us up to be as flexible as possible.

So let's get on with getting the gospel out there. And let's close by praying to that end. Great is the gospel of our glorious God.

[32 : 52] We thank you, Father, for the precious gift of the gospel that we're saved, not by our own works, but by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to rigidly uphold and guard the truth of the gospel.

And help us, by your Spirit, to be as creative and flexible as possible and getting the gospel out there to the city of Glasgow and beyond. Seeking opportunities to share it with those around us, in whichever context you place us.

Use us, we pray. Even in our weakness and shortcomings and failures, we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen.