

October 3, 2010

A New Direction – Decision Making in the Early Church

Acts 15: 1-29 (The Message)

*I*t wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: *If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved.* Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

3. After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

4-5. When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. *You have to circumcise the pagan converts,* they said. *You must make them keep the Law of Moses.*

6-13. The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: *Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward,*



cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him. So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about? There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.

13-21. James broke the silence. *Friends, listen. Simeon has told us the story of how God at the very outset made sure that racial outsiders were included. This is in perfect agreement with the words of the prophets:*

'After this, I'm coming back; I'll rebuild David's ruined house; I'll put all the pieces together again; I'll make it look like new so outsiders who seek will find, so they'll have a place to come to, All the pagan peoples included in what I'm doing.'

God said it and now he's doing it. It's no afterthought; he's always known he would do this. So here is my decision: We're not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. We'll write them a letter and tell them, 'Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians—blood, for instance.' This is basic wisdom from Moses, preached and honored for

centuries now in city after city as we have met and kept the Sabbath.

22-27. Everyone agreed: apostles, leaders, all the people...

The Church Born, The Church Afire, The Church Still Alive



August 22 – November 21, 2010

**Acts Sermon Series Study Guide: Rethinking Church –
A New Direction – Decision Making in the Early Church**

Read and meditate upon each of these passages of scripture:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... ~ Philipians 2:5

I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called..bearing with one another in love... ~ Ephesians 4:1-2

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ~ Romans 12:14-18

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil....Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is needs, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ~ Ephesians 4:25-29

Paul says to the Church at Corinth: *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.* ~1 Corinthians 1:10

He knows there will be disagreements but he is urging us to have the same mind, that is, “the mind of Christ” and the same purpose, to be witnesses to the new life in Christ. He knows that when this is the center of our lives, our disagreements often become less consequential than the unity of mind and purpose that we have in Christ. Looking at this and the other Biblical quotes listed above, what demands do they make on you for change in attitude and approach to others, especially in situations of conflict. What other Biblical passages shape your handling of conflict? _____

In his commentary on Acts, Bishop William Willimon says: *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.* Notice the way in which the early church used a process for confronting controversy. They used essentially 5 different lenses, practices to help them in this process of discernment: reason, experience, tradition, scripture and a commitment to consensus. Spend a moment looking at each of these practices. How did they each help to resolve this particular controversy and how are they generally helpful in any dealing with any controversy? _____

Dr. Charles Williamson: *As the young Christian church sought to establish their rules for life together, they realize that there were some things that were essential: protect human life, protect the human spirit and a relationship to God, protect the community so that all can live and work in harmony and peace. And these things are just as important today as they were centuries ago.* What rules of life, what basic values would you insist upon as you involve yourself in shaping resolution of conflicts? _____

Roderick Durst says: *Church consultants have concluded that churches have a very specific pattern of development. Churches tend to move from risk taking to care taking and finally to undertaking. When a church is just starting, the members take many risks to grow. In middle-age, the church just takes care of what and who it has. Finally, in old age, the church calls for an undertake-pastor to preach until the church dies for lack of new members. The Spirit of God calls the Church to always be risk takers.* CFUMC has been around since 1832 and is still a growing church. Where do you see the need for this Church to take risks in our mission today? Where do you see us hesitant to do so? _____

Pray this prayer each day this week in your daily meditation:

Lord, let the mind of Christ be formed in us and keep us focused of the mission of being witnesses to the power of resurrection of life. Give the wisdom to handle conflict with grace and clarity that we may stay focused on your mission for us. Give us courage to take risks for the work of the kingdom that we may glorify you in our living. Amen.