

WHITE MEMORIAL

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

WMPC – Men’s Bible Study

Acts

Lesson 7

Read Acts 15

3 Questions:

Q1: What is orthodoxy? Is it more important to faith, or to religion (is there a difference between faith and religion)? Who (or what) gets to determine what is orthodox or not?

Q2: How many times does the Holy Spirit get named in Acts 15? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in Acts (think all the way back to Acts 1 and 2)? How does the Holy Spirit factor into the arguments and debate which are offered in the Jerusalem council of Acts 15?

Q3: Law and gospel. What is the law? What is the gospel? How do they work together? Do they ever pull against each other? Should salvation be expansive or contracted? Does the law keep some out, the gospel let others in? What do you make of the argument of James in 15: 13 - 21? Does he get it right? (See link 2 below).

3 Insights:

I1: Lamar Williamson writes:

“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 with the Body of Christ? Who seated the Judean delegation anyway? Things were going 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?” (Williamson, [Acts](#), WJKP, 1988 and 2010, page 128)

I2: N.T. Wright names his chapter on Acts 15 - “Dealing with Disputes.” He writes:

“Acts 15 is about controversy in the early church. We can understand Paul and Peter, who insist that God has granted gentiles repentance that leads to life without the gentiles needing to be circumcised (as we saw in Acts 11). And we can understand the circumcision faction, who are named more precisely as believing Pharisees in Acts 15:5; Paul was himself a believer who had belong to the Pharasaic party. But we must be clear that Acts 15 is not simply a matter of tradition versus innovation. It is about a very specific and concrete point which is central to the whole of Christianity: because God has fulfilled his covenant with Israel in sending Jesus as Messiah, the covenant family is now thrown open to all, without distinction.”

Then Wright asks a series of very, very good questions:

- When have you seen a dispute among Christians settled in a Christ-like way?
- Why would the letter have delighted those who receive it (v. 15:31)?
- What key ideas do you see in Acts 15 that would help in dealing with disagreements among Christians?

- How might these be applied to disagreements among believers you are facing now?
(Wright, Acts: 24 Studies for Individuals and Groups, 2010, IVP Connect, pages 75 - 78)

I3: Willie James Jennings writes:

“This debate [Jews, gentiles, circumcision, salvation by grace] is a river that must be crossed. It is a mountain that must be climbed as they follow the Spirit. The fact that they could even have a debate might be interpreted as a sign of salvation and a sure mark of a shared story, a shared way of reasoning that could bring them light. But that would be too simplistic a way of grasping the salvation in their midst. The debate itself brought no light, only the need for light. Only when Peter recalled where the Spirit of God had led him, into the lives of those he did not want to know, did this group see the way forward. That way forward was found in testimony, in truth embodied in flesh. Yet it was the Spirit’s testimony, the Spirit’s experience of indwelling the gentiles, that Peter had heard and seen.”
(Jennings, Acts, 2017, WKJP page 142)

3 Links to further study:

L1: A short video on Acts 13 -14 by N.T. Wright. Taking a full account of 13 and 14 is necessary to understanding 15. At the end of the video, Wright begins to lay out the case as to why this text is a “stand alone” and one of the great texts of the Bible. In other words, chapters 13 and 14 are the episodic set up, by Luke, for the “official” decision to be made in chapter 15. Note: when you open the link, the video is erroneously labeled Acts 15. This is about 13.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6S0EdPqwx8I>

L2: And the follow up video, which is labeled, Acts 17, but the video poster is again incorrect. Here in the video we have the focus shifted to Acts 15. Listen to Wright’s thoughts on Acts 15 in this short follow up video. It begins with the stoning of Paul in 14. Acts 15 begins at about 1:00.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAzJ-6beVHk>

And the follow up video, labeled Acts 18 - but it is still about Acts 15. It is the conclusion of the video immediately above.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqywykNDk-A>

Wright’s main point: “We need to learn to tell the differences between the difference which don't make a difference, and the differences which do make a difference.”

L3: This painting is by the Renaissance master Raphael. It is the conversion of the Proconsul in Acts 13. We feature it here because the conversion of Rome is the “goal” and what is at stake in Acts 15. If the Jerusalem Council does not find a way to allow for conversion of gentiles, could the Christian movement have arrived in our lives today? Probably not.

<https://www.italian-renaissance-art.com/Conversion-of-the-Proconsul.html>