

The Most Neglected but Necessary Doctrine

Acts 15:1–35

Studies in Acts #19

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Take a moment to think about basic biblical doctrines. What are the most important doctrines? Obviously God is a Trinity. The Bible alone is our ultimate standard of truth. Jesus Christ is both God and man. We are saved through faith alone. Now, think about the situation of the church today and ask yourself, what is the most neglected doctrine? I want to say tonight that given the situation the church finds itself in today that the church is *the most neglected but necessary doctrine*.

In particular, what I want to ask is why do we need church government?

1. *Because a Church is Made Up of Sinners*
2. *Because a Church Needs Outside Help*

Because a Church is Made Up of Sinners

Why do we need church government? *Because the church is made up of sinners.*

This should be so obvious to us! What happens when you get two sinners in a room? You end up with four different churches: two when they excommunicate from each other and then two ore when excommunicate from themselves. Here in our story Paul and Barnabus have returned from a mission trip, they report the spread of the grace of God, the church rejoices with them, and then we read: **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”** (v. 1). It’s like a huge bucket of ice water was just dumped down on their heads. So the church in Antioch sends them to Jerusalem, and when they

get there we read, **But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses”** (v. 5). The church is going to have people in it that bring it down when it is up, who pour water on the fire of the Holy Spirit, and who bring a spirit of heaviness when there should be nothing but joy.

In particular, because of sin there is going to be doctrinal controversy in the church. These Pharisees brought controversy as to what it means to be saved. They called themselves “the Circumcision” (Eph. 2:11) because circumcision was a part for whole law. There message was one of faith plus works, the Gospel plus the Law, trust plus obedience.

One thing that should encourage us in this is that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:19 that we must have heresies in order to determine which Gospel is approved by God. Perhaps Paul was contemplating his experience in Antioch and Jerusalem?

Because a Church Needs Outside Help

Why do we need church government? *Because a church needs outside help.* So a controversy arises within the church of Antioch and rages within. Then **after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with these false teachers, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question** (v. 2).

There are several principles at work here. First, no individual Christian exists apart for him or herself. We are united to Christ and his catholic church, and should be united with other believers in a local congregation. Second, no congregation exists apart from

other congregations. Paul writes to the Colossians and tells them to send their letter to the Laodiceans. John writes to seven churches in Asia Minor. And the list goes on. Third, it is necessary to enlist a multitude of counselors when facing a struggle. And so congregations ought to meet together in consultation to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of a multitude of counselors in assemblies (Prov. 11:14).

And we see that here. Paul, Barnabus, and some others were **sent on their way** (the Greek word *propempein* denotes financial support¹) **by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers** (v. 3). Note the mutuality of Paul's ministry on behalf of the Antioch church. And **when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them** (v. 4).

Then the assembly takes place in verse 6 and following between **the apostles and the elders** (v. 6). And there was much debate, with reports from Peter (vv. 7–11), Paul and Barnabus (v. 12), and finally James (vv. 13–). And they all say the same thing: the Gentiles like the Jews are justified by faith alone apart from obedience to the works of the law. Peter says God gave the Gentiles **the Holy Spirit just as he did to us and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith** (vv. 8–9). In fact, he says **why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?** (v. 10) What a

¹ Waters, 353 n11.

statement! And note that James says in response that **with this the words of the prophets agree** (v. 15).

How does he prove this? He cites Amos chapter 9, which speaks of the **rebuild[ing] of the tent of David** (v. 16) and it's purpose of **the remnant of mankind...seek[ing] the Lord** (v. 17). David's **tent** is used as a metonymy for the fallen royal line of David's dynasty. How has God done this? In the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

So what help did the church in Jerusalem offer to the church in Antioch? We see it in verses 19 and following with the fourfold advice that **the Gentiles who turn to God should abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood** (vv. 19, 20). Does this contradict previous? It is about not upsetting Jewish sensibilities. Using Christian freedom positively (1 Cor. 8, 10; Rom. 14–15). These four things were performed in pagan temples. No longer binding as were given as pastoral direction at the time.

How was this help communicated? We read in verse 22 that **the apostles and the elders, with the whole church...choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas** (v. 22). They wrote a personal letter and delivered it personally, face to face, with leaders from both churches. As we read in verse 30, **and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.**

What was the result? **And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement** (v. 31). Wouldn't it be great if more struggles in the church ended this

way, with joy and as verse 33 says with **peace**?

Conclusion

We live in an age of self-feeding Christianity, where Christians are detached from the church to nourish their own souls. And who can blame people? Pastors are involved in sexual scandals and where are the elders? Pastors are involved in financial scandals and where are the elders? Pastors are involved in spiritual abuse and where are the elders? Acts 15 gives us a pattern to follow and to apply, brothers and sisters to bring wandering souls home to Christ and his people.

Church government, believe it or not, is the most neglected but necessary doctrine of the moment. Amen.