

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Cooperating with the Holy Spirit

Acts 15:1-35

On Wednesday night, our church had its bimonthly business meeting. I don't see many eyes lighting up, or any of you scooting up to the edge of your pew. I'm not surprised at such a neutral reaction. After all, church business meetings don't have a reputation for being very exciting gatherings. As one person has observed, "most church business meetings fit one of two descriptors: boring or divisive."¹

This week's meeting was pretty serene and routine. We received reports from the various committees, ministry groups, and organizations in our church. We listened, asked questions, and dialogued respectfully with each other. We weighed the pros and cons of various options. We looked back at where we've been over the past couple of months, and forward to what's coming up in the rest of 2019. By the end of the meeting, there had been no voices raised and no punches thrown. We all left the building encouraged by the ways God has been with us, working among us and through us.

In today's Scripture passage from Acts 15, the church in Antioch calls a special business meeting to take up a contentious issue with enormous implications for the future of the community of Jesus' followers. The basic issue is this: Do Gentiles who are coming to faith in Christ need to be circumcised, and also presumably observe the rest of the Jewish law, in order to be saved and become full-fledged members of the people of God? As Luke puts it, this question generates "sharp dispute and debate" (v. 2). When the time comes for the meeting, the pews are full. Lots of folks are eager to get their turn at the microphone.

Some in the community of believers, particularly representatives from the church in Jerusalem, argue that yes, Gentile converts should receive the covenant sign, circumcision, and adhere to the beloved Torah. These things are necessary in order to participate in the blessings promised to Israel. Others argue that circumcision and following the requirements of the Law should not be prerequisites for membership in the covenant community of God's people. The way these folks see it, demanding such things of Gentile converts amounts to saying that they have to become Jews before they can become Christians.

By this point, hours have passed, and patience is starting to run thin. No consensus is emerging. Lots of folks need to get home and get to bed, so they can head out to work the next day. Plus, the church clerk's wrist is sore from all the note-taking. It's becoming increasingly clear that this issue won't be resolved in the context of one business meeting. In this case, the congregation needs to look out beyond itself for guidance and direction. So they decide to send a delegation to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, the mother church. Maybe they can reach a decision and issue a ruling on this matter.

Keep in mind that the early church finds itself in this pickle because it has been doing what it was commissioned to do, namely, spread the word of God. The followers of Jesus haven't been stingy with the gospel. Just as Jesus said, the Holy Spirit has come upon them, and more and more, they've become what their risen Lord said they would be, his witnesses, in

ever-expanding territory. And doing so has meant incorporating non-Jews into a salvation project launched by the God of Israel.

We ourselves are part of God's ongoing mission of redemption in the world. We're still discerning our way into the far-reaching and inclusive grace of God. We're still proclaiming the good news that calls forth repentance and faith, bringing people to Christ and to life in the community of God's people. Granted, our specific circumstances aren't identical to what our spiritual ancestors in Antioch and Jerusalem were grappling with. But our identity as witnesses, and our responsibility to discern the will of God together, haven't changed. We're still participants in this ongoing story that calls for us to make decisions that are in keeping with the direction that God is moving.

In the meeting at Jerusalem, leaders in the early church decided that circumcision and complete adherence to the Jewish Law should not be required of Gentile believers. But this inclusive spirit was tempered by the realities of fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Gentile Christians would be welcomed, but not without limits. They would be expected to follow certain basic standards for fellowship with Jewish Christians, so as to promote the unity of God's people. So what essentially came out of this church meeting was a decision to seek the good of all and preserve the oneness of the community of faith.

The experience of the early church can shed light on our ongoing participation in God's mission. We need to pay attention not only to what the early church decided but also to how it decided. In our text, Luke gives us a condensed version of a process that probably took an extended period of time. But his compressed account doesn't paper over the difficulties and complexities of the situation. Luke is honest about the challenge, and clear about the early Christians' desire to be faithful to the Spirit's leading. And that's what we want as well. We want our congregation's decision-making to be guided and directed by the Spirit, so that we're in sync with God's redeeming purposes in the world.

Leadership is a critical part of that mission. Not just the leadership of the Spirit, but the leadership of the Spirit in and through the leaders of the church. Luke tells us that in the midst of growing debate about how to experience salvation and how to be a member of God's family, the church sought out and gathered some of its key leaders. "The apostles and elders met to consider this question" (v. 6). In order to go in the right direction, the community of believers needed the experience, the wisdom, and the vision of its leaders.

Pastor and author Stuart Briscoe tells the following story about the importance of following the right leader:

One of my young colleagues was officiating at the funeral of a war veteran. The dead man's military friends wished to have a part in the service at the funeral home, so they requested the pastor to lead them down to the casket, stand with them for a solemn moment of remembrance, and then lead them out through the side door. This he proceeded to do, but unfortunately the effect was somewhat marred when he picked the wrong door. The result was that they marched with military precision into a broom closet, in full view of the mourners, and had to beat a hasty retreat covered with confusion.

This true story illustrates a cardinal rule or two. First, if you're going to lead, make sure you know where you're going. Second, if you're going to follow, make sure that you are following someone who knows what he is doing!

We recently elected the individuals who will serve in places of leadership in our church during 2019-2020. That vote was more than just an organizational formality. It was an affirmation of how our leaders, particularly myself and our deacons, are entrusted with a

great responsibility for guiding our church in ways that fit with God's will and purpose, particularly the spread of the gospel and the forming of a solid, unified fellowship here in our congregation. So when you remember and pray for our church, pray particularly for those of us who are in positions of leadership, that we'll have clarity about where we're going, and how to get there.

In addition to leadership, the early church's process of discernment and decision-making included testimony about how the Holy Spirit was at work. First, Peter spoke about what God had done through him to take the gospel beyond traditional boundaries. Then Barnabas and Paul gave an account of signs and wonders that had happened in their ministry. These were testimonies to how the Spirit had been operating in surprising and unexpected ways in order to bring others into the experience of salvation and the life of God's people.

This kind of testimonial evidence carried significant weight. But notice that the church's leaders had to test it and measure it by the testimony of Scripture. After Peter, Barnabas, and Paul have spoken, James gets a turn. He cites the prophet Amos as an example of how Scripture agrees with what the others have been saying. In other words, Scripture, which reveals the character of God, confirms that God, though doing something new through Christ, is also doing what he has always been doing, namely, showing mercy, and creating a people for himself, to be a light to the world about his redeeming purposes.

Leaders, testimony, Scripture. These are all essential to how we as a congregation discern and do the will of God. They're all part of an extended process of listening. Spiritual director and teacher Ruth Haley Barton has written:

Discernment involves listening with love and attention to our experiences, to each other, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.²

Listening that leads to discernment, that leads to decisions. Decisions that actually do the will of God. Remember that our church's life and ministry and mission are deeply shaped by decisions made across time. Decisions about how to spread the gospel. Decisions about how to welcome others. Decisions about how to serve our community. Decisions about programs, projects, and policies. Decisions about buildings and budgets. Decisions about worship style. Decisions about doctrine. Decisions about who will lead us. Decisions about with whom to partner. Decisions about how to make decisions.

In all of our church's decisions, what matters most is that we follow the leadership and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our objective is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, to be aligned with God's presence and action in the world. As one person has put it, "It's not our job to determine which way we want the wind to blow, but to adjust our sails to the direction in which the wind of the Holy Spirit is already blowing."³ In our life together as God's people, may the Holy Spirit continue to direct all our listening, all our discerning, and all our decision-making.

¹ Thom S. Rainer, *Who Moved My Pulpit: Leading Change in the Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2016) n.p.

² Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) n.p.

³ Josh Daffern, "4 Ways to Adjust Your Sails to the Wind of the Holy Spirit." Patheos website. June 15, 2015. Accessed October 10, 2019 < <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/newwineskins/4-ways-to-adjust-your-sails-to-the-wind-of-the-holy-spirit/> >.