

Debate and Trouble

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're coming to this pretty significant and important chapter in the middle of Acts. And I think it for us, it's easy to look at Acts in our lives through, as Christians, who rose coloured, rose tinted spectacles where everything seems to have been great, kind of blue-eyed days, this great blossoming time in the church when lots and lots of people became Christians, and there was amazing blessing, and there were miracles, and there were healings, and all kinds of things were going on in tremendous days.

But we need also to recognise and see that the Holy Spirit gives us a picture of a church, which is very real as well, very ordinary at some levels, that had major disagreements.

That sounds familiar, doesn't it? A church with disagreements. Major theological disagreements, and also personal disagreements. And I think in this chapter, at some levels at least, we're given a right way to deal with these major disagreements, and sometimes a wrong way to deal with lesser disagreements.

Very often in our lives as Christians, we look at everything in a very black and white way, and sometimes in a very self-righteous way, an unforgiving way.

It's my way or the highway. And we see here the importance of instilling and installing grace into all that we do as churches and as individuals, even when we disagree on theology and personally with one another.

[1 : 4 8] So I'm going to just move down here, and we'll go through. These questions went on the internet, on the website on Friday, so one or two people have answered on the website, just I guess for my information, which is helpful.

But if we can quickly just ask the question, what do you think, and this I guess is a matter of opinion, what do you think is the most important verse in this section?

This section we've read from the beginning of the chapter through to verse 35, does anyone have what they think is a seminal verse, a most important central verse to the whole discussion and argument that the church is having here?

Ian says verse 11. No, we believe that it's through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.

Any advance on verse 11? Brave man to disagree, we in Nevison. Verse 11, which certainly would be the verse that I would suggest is absolutely central to this chapter.

[3 : 0 3] We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are. It's a watershed chapter, it's a hugely significant chapter in the life of the church, because the very gospel is at stake.

The gospel is at stake here because there's people coming into the various churches that we'd looked at before that the gospel had been planted in, and they were saying, that's great hearing about Christ, but you need more than Christ.

You need Christ plus circumcision. You need Christ plus obeying the law of Moses. You need to justify yourself before God, not simply by believing in what Jesus has done.

We see that it was at the very core of disrupting the gospel message and the gospel truth in the New Testament, and that Satan was using this as a way of trying to move away from the gospel of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the first couple of chapters, if you have time to read them in Galatians, you'll have this kind of the same issue, which would have given rise to this discussion happening in Galatia in that church, where it was Jesus Christ plus circumcision plus the ways of the law.

[4 : 18] And if you remember, because of what happened there, even the leaders in the church were taking different opinions. Peter, who we know and love, who was eating with the Christian Gentiles in Galatia, stopped eating with them, because some Jewish people came up from Jerusalem and said, you shouldn't be eating with them, they've not been circumcised.

So he was taken in by this false teaching. And then James, who's also one of the main leaders in the church, probably a conservative believer in Jerusalem, he had sent out some of these theological thugs, these theological hardliners.

He'd sent them out to talk about this. It seems strange, doesn't it? These guys that had come when they had severe faces and they were joyless and they were telling everyone that they were doing it wrong and they weren't real Christians.

Black suits and ties going out there. We all misery people who were saying that the gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't enough. So powerful were they, the even Barnabas, that son of encouragement.

He was led astray by it, we're told in Galatians. So this council in Jerusalem is getting back to important basics, reminding us how important the sufficiency of Christ is for the church.

[5 : 47] And that is why this verse is so significant. We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.

See, the church was growing, church was growing with Jewish Christians, Jewish becoming Christians, our Gentiles becoming Christians. And it was making things difficult.

It was taking the Jewish Christians out of their comfort zone and they were hearing new ideas and new thinking. And it was okay in principle to have Gentiles becoming Christians, but when the reality happened it was difficult.

And sometimes in our setup, the idea of Christian growth is great in principle and we love the idea of ever and ever and ever coming into the church and filling up the church.

But when that happens, we can know and recognize even with the blessing of God that we will be challenged about what we believe. And we need to know what we believe and keep to the truth and the foundational truths of the gospel.

[6 : 51] Not our traditions, not our comfort zones, not our free church identity, but identity in Christ and in the gospel and in the truth of the gospel and in the sufficiency of grace.

So that verse is hugely significant. Okay, moving on to the second question. Highlight some of the features of this section. There's a council in Jerusalem and they make a decision and they write a letter and they put that decision out to the churches.

So highlight some of the features of this section that shows that they dealt very well with the important issue. What is hard to understand, what lessons can we learn? Okay, there's three questions there.

But we'll do it briefly and quickly. So it's quite a difficult section really. There's a council of Jerusalem. I'm not going to say any more.

Is there anything as you go through this that shows that they've dealt with the situation well, what might be hard to understand or any lessons we can learn? Does anyone want to say anything about any of these things?

[7 : 53] Verse 15. Yep. Yeah, so they've gone back to scripture. Okay, it's a really important question.

The church is divided over it, so they go back to scripture to find the answer. Okay, that's important, significant. Anything else? Yeah, I think that's hugely significant, as they take the elders, they take the verse 6, they take the issue seriously, and after much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them.

So there was a lot of discussion about this important point in the church. They discussed it as leaders in the church. The council got together and discussed this really important issue. Anything else?

Is that a lecture to the general and then to the things like the issues that are not in the church, and the language?

Yeah, so they made a decision in the council, and then they communicated that decision. I would love to tell that to every free church leader that we have, that they make decisions, but they communicate them, they talk about them, they make sure everyone knows.

[9 : 10] So often problems come in a church when things aren't communicated, when people don't speak, when leaders don't communicate things, when we don't communicate with one another. And we see here the importance of talking through, making the decision, and then communicating that decision, not just by letter, but also personally, so that it wasn't up to misrepresentation.

It wasn't an email or a Facebook notice or a text, all these flat ways of communicating, which are easier sometimes in trouble, aren't they? It's easier to write a letter because it's much more than personal, but take that letter and personally to explain it and to give the reasons behind it as very significant.

Okay, I'm going to move on here because time is going on tonight, but the council here, the church does things that are very important.

They do, as we said, they involve all the leaders. There's lots of discussion. In other words, and I've got a few things beginning with C here, they confronted the issue, it's good to talk.

See what's terrible in churches is people are unhappy and they just grumble about it behind their backs, and they never talk through issues and never deal with them.

[10 : 28] They confront it, it's good to talk and work through them. And then we see that Peter, who had previously been taken aside or taken in by this circumcision group, Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas explained from Scripture and from their experiences that the gospel was indeed all that was needed.

There wasn't the gospel plus, so they were confident themselves in their leadership and in what God was doing. They knew the basics of the gospel and they had the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And then having discussed it all, there's kind of, it seems like there's a moderator here, I don't know if moderators are the right word, there's a leader, James, who is the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and he's the one who consolidates the truth by making this judgment.

In verse 19 he says, it's my judgment therefore that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles. So he consolidates the truth. He's a traditionalist, his word is powerful and strong and people would accept it.

He makes a wise judgment. He says the gospel is the gospel, the truth is the truth, and that's what we must do. We must stick to that truth, but we will ask the Gentile believers to compromise as well, or shall we say to be sensitive.

[11 : 55] And this might be one of the areas that when you looked at this chapter you thought was very difficult, because they say exactly what he says. He says the gospel is the gospel, we're not going to make you do anything else, but we should write to them, tell them to stay in food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

Now what on earth is that about? What is that about? These four restrictions that are made. Do we recognize them?

Why these four? Are these essential to the gospel? Are they something terribly significant? Do they still matter today?

Should we ourselves, well we would regard sexual immorality, yeah okay, why is that singled out? Because all the Christians should have avoided that, should they not? But strangled animals and blood and stuff, given to idols, is that any relevant today?

Well it would seem in this situation that the Jews, the Christians who became Jews, would be living with the Gentiles who became Christians, the Jews who became Christians, would be living with the Gentiles who became Christians.

[13 : 08] And there was an intermediary kind of period where a lot of these Jews still kind of held on to some of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament and most commentators would regard the four things that are mentioned here as part of that Old Testament ceremonial law that comes in Leviticus 16 and 17 which talks about the kind of, the food laws, the kosher laws and also the marriage laws.

It's not I think a general restriction on sexual immorality at that level, it is I think speaking specifically about the kind of, the marital laws that the Jews had with regard to marrying close relatives.

Something that they would find abhorrent, particularly from Leviticus 16 and 17, but would have been quite okay for the Gentiles of the day to be engaged in these close sexual relations in marriage with relatives.

And so it seems that the Council is asking the Gentile Christians to accept the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters with regard to these ceremonial issues which eventually would pass away from the church.

No, maybe you don't eat black pudding today because of this verse, I don't know, because it's got blood in it. But generally most people would argue that this was a sensitive compromise so that for example with the kosher laws particularly it meant that the Gentile believers could happily eat meals with the Jewish believers who still maintain the kosher laws.

[14 : 59] And you know meals and fellowship was so important in the early church so it was a way of being sensitive to their culture and to their conscience. And as we see, they communicated that truth.

Hugely important, not just by letter but with the personal touch, face to face contact. These leaders went to the various cities and shared with them the truth, which was an encouragement and which is a great help.

So there was a potentially massive disruption in the church. It could have blown away the gospel completely.

It could have meant that Christianity drifted down a side corridor that was a sect of Judaism. And at that point the church said no, the gospel of grace were justified by faith alone but they did it in such a sensitive way that they brought Jews and Gentiles together and they communicated that and they shared that.

So it's a great example of how to deal well with controversy in the church. Now we can think of lots of examples from our own church where sometimes we've taken some of these things and used them and dealt well with them.

[16 : 14] We can also think of many other situations where we didn't deal so well with it. Now very briefly can we read the end of this chapter. Sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord, see how they are doing.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark with him. But Paul did not think it wise to take him because he had 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 commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.

He went through Syria and Silasia strengthening the churches. So very briefly do you think that Paul and Barnabas dealt with their disagreement in a Christlike way?

Could we learn anything from that for our Christian lives? So there was a big church disagreement which was dealt with in a certain way. What about Paul and Barnabas? Did they deal with their disagreement well?

[17 : 15] Do you think or not? A few heads shaking, Ross. You do not think so? Okay, why?

Why? They always got the first, second and sharp disagreement that they parted company through the direct and thought they parted company after the fight.

Okay, they parted company after a fight which does not seem particularly Christ-centered and graceful, does it? Anyone else think they did a good job?

Good. Nothing really to worry about? Brain death is sitting slowly, gradually.

They are all dying in front of me. Okay, so yeah, it is.

[18 : 21] There is very little information given to us in this text but it does say that Paul was commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord as he with Silas left to do more missionary work.

So good or bad do you think? I think bad because it feels as though they were left in a bad mood.

Okay. And it may have been bad because they think they wanted to take the gospel to death at the age of twenty-twenty. So they get a sense that they were left in a bad mood. Certainly from the text it would seem to suggest to us that they had such a sharp disagreement that they parted on bad terms and that can't be good, is it, as Christians?

Maybe it was that, and we are reading into this a little bit, maybe Paul was a bit domineering and he said, no way, I am not taking John Mark with me. He let us down last time, there is no way we are going to have him again.

And it didn't matter what we said that he didn't suffer fools and that was it. On the other hand maybe Barnabas who was a cousin of John Mark's, maybe his blood was thicker than water for Barnabas and he was saying, look, you will be alright this time.

[19 : 31] I know he is a relative of mine, we should go with it. And he wasn't willing to listen to Paul. But whatever it was, neither of them backed down and it seems strange that they didn't learn at all from the counsel that they had just been at about how to deal really with disagreements.

And this was a much more minor one. This wasn't at the heart of the gospel. This wasn't about whether Christ was sufficient or not. This was about personalities. Bingo!

Isn't that nearly what all churches divide over? Personalities. It is very rarely over theology and over genuine truth. It is over people not liking one another and not being willing to back down.

It is not an issue of first importance. Not just in churches but in families and in homes. Very often people, families who end up hating one another and not speaking to one another for 40 years, when they are asked what it is about, they will say, we don't even remember.

Because it wasn't an important issue but it became one because they let it, because they walked away their own separate ways. Interestingly or not, maybe, we don't hear of Barnabas ever again.

[20 : 47] I'm not sure whether that necessarily is significant but we don't hear much about him. We do know that Paul, made up with John Mark, 2 Timothy 4, 11, speaks about wanting John Mark to come with him.

Maybe Paul softened in his old age, maybe he was more forgiving and wiser and had recognised that he was a bit harsh with John Mark. But you know the amazing thing is still, isn't it, as one or two people mentioned in the notes as well, that God used it positively still.

Even though they probably disagreed and let the sun go down on the wrath, which is never a good thing for a Christian, the parted company not healing with one another.

But God still used them both. They both, the two split to four. So the one partner, the one party going out with the gospel became two parties going out with the gospel and the gospel spread nonetheless.

And God is hugely, hugely condescending. And he even will use us despite what we are like sometimes.

[21 : 56] And I think learning from this, sort of in practical ways, remember we don't always need to be right. We don't always know the right answer.

Because it's better for us in Christian service, Christian work, Christian company, just to be willing to be wronged.

Don't walk out of here this evening divided or separated from any of our Christian brothers or sisters. Deal with these things. It's hugely significant that you don't walk away and let the sun go down on your wrath.

Remember with the gospel in our lives it's not always it's my way or I hit the highway. Remember as a people there will be lots of things we don't particularly like.

Some of you like will like some things and not other things. Other people and you might like more than others. But don't make big, massive issues over these things.

[22 : 59] But learn to be different and learn to compromise on secondary issues. It's not all black and white. Not everything is of first importance.

Don't get on your high horse about things that aren't of first importance. Remember that the gospel is what matters. And we live to compromise with one another on other issues of secondary importance.

And I think that helps us in our Christian lives. It helps us to put grace into practice. It helps us to consider others better than ourselves. It reminds us that we look at the bigger picture of the gospel in our lives and in our churches.

I've been a minister for 21 years and it's hugely sad how much time has been spent dealing with division and hatred and fallout from matters that are not of the essence of the gospel.

And we've seen so much pain and suffering from that. We need to get back to scripture and learn what scripture says and teaches us and putting grace into practice.

[24 : 16] Let's put our heads in prayer. Father God, we ask and pray that you would bless us. We thank you for the reality and the wisdom of scripture in its honesty in dealing with good and bad ways of dealing with trouble in church.

Thank you that it doesn't gloss over these things and doesn't give a hagiographic biography of the church or of the individuals within it.

We thank you by your grace that we can learn both what we must never compromise on in the terms of the truth but what we can be sensitive to and aware of others' cultures and their conscience and aware that you deal with us in a hugely humble way.

We ask that we would love one another deeply from the heart and that that would show itself most clearly in the way that we deal with difficulties and disputes and troubles that we face in our lives.

So help us God, we pray. We remember as we think of our missionary friends also, we remember Ramat in India and the amazing work he is doing in difficult circumstances oppressed and persecuted.

[25 : 43] Protect him Lord. We pray that you would watch over him. We pray that you would give him a companion in his life again, that he blesses children, that you would remember also the work here in Edinburgh, Bethany and what they seek to do in reaching out with the gospel and with practical care to those who are homeless and those who are in need.

Remember as then as we pray for one another and as we worship together for the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.