

Summerlink Week 5, August 4 2021 – Acts 15:1–35

When God's People were in Danger of Misunderstanding God and his Concern

Interview

Introduction

- A Watershed Moment
- How will the gospel penetrate other cultures?
- Antioch, a 'bridge' church

Group Discussion

1. What is your impression of the tone and feel of the conversations and communications in Acts 15:1-35?
2. From the following passages, how might the visitors from Jerusalem have regarded it as necessary for male Gentile converts to undergo circumcision (Acts 15:1,5)? Genesis 17:10-14, Exodus 12:43-49, Leviticus 12:2-3. Put in your own language why circumcision was so significant.
3. Optional: Paul's dispute with Peter (Cephas) recorded in Galatians 2:11-14 likely occurred before the Jerusalem Council. What are the red flags in those verses regarding requiring Gentile adherence to Jewish ceremonial law?

Talk

- Two ground rules to prevent Church mis-steps regarding God's concern for all nations:

1. Keep clarifying gospel freedom

- A heavy demand: v1 (cf. v5) 'circumcision is a divine necessity!'
- A defining question: *'Is the gospel a reform movement within Judaism, or is it good news for the whole world. Is the Church of Christ just a sect within Judaism, or is it the international family of God?'* (John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.241)
- Gospel clarity:
 - Burdens lifted off by Christ...(v9,11)
 - Circumcision fulfilled (v7-9 cf. Deut 10:12-22, 30:6, Col 2:8-14)

- ...so don't put any burdens back on! (v10b, 19, 28)

"Thus those who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they cling not only to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ..." (Richard Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, p.198)

2. Keep strengthening gospel community

- Absolutely nothing will be required of you...except...(v28-29)
- ...the burden of love
 - Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13.8)
For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Galatians 5.6)
 - Avoiding the stumbling blocks to a functional 'marriage'
- ...which produces Gospel-centred relationship to culture

"Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free...to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in I Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures...If the apostolic church had failed to take the steps described in Acts 10-15, its spread among the nations would have stopped dead, and the power of God would have been withdrawn from its inner life." (Richard Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, p.198-9)

Group Discussion and Prayer

1. What do you make of Lovelace's last comments regarding this watershed moment? *"If the apostolic church had failed to take the steps described in Acts 10-15, its spread among the nations would have stopped dead, and the power of God would have been withdrawn from its inner life."*
2. Discuss some things that might make it difficult for a believer from another background or culture to have real fellowship with 'Christians like you'. Or, the reverse, where have you been sensitive to or troubled by Christian sub-cultural practices where conformity seems required for belonging?
3. Is there a particular verse/point from the talk that has spoken to you?
4. In the course of this evening, has the LORD put his finger on an area where you are holding onto or chasing after what Paul calls 'confidence in the flesh', reliance on things like descent, achievements,

social capital, and cultural traits, as a 'Spiritual life preserver'? Reflect on and pray through Philippians 3.4-9 for yourself.