

# Acts Series Part 42

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[ 0 : 00 ] I have a startling revelation for you this evening. We don't always agree. I think you'll agree with me that that isn't particularly startling at all.

We don't always agree. And within the fellowship of the church, there are different opinions held on many matters.

Some are relatively trivial, and really there is no difficulty in different opinions being held. And other matters on which we disagree are more significant.

One of the reasons, probably not the only reason, but one of the reasons we have different denominations, different names to the many different churches, even in the city, is because there are matters on which we disagree.

But even within a congregation, or in our case, within a denomination, the Free Church of Scotland, there can be matters on which we disagree.

[ 1 : 14 ] Currently, we are involved in trying to deal, biblically, with a difference of opinion that exists within the church on the matter of public worship.

What we are engaged in right now as we gather to worship God together. And the difference of opinion that there is within the church is whether it would be right or appropriate or permissible to use musical instruments in public worship and or to sing hymns.

Now, for many out with our church, these may seem very bizarre questions to be posing. They're not an issue at all. Well, that's fair enough. But for us, they are.

And they need to be resolved. On the matter to hand, some would be of the opinion that, yes, these are things that we are able to do.

We can, with biblical approval, make use of musical instruments or sing hymns. Some are of that opinion. While others are of the contrary opinion.

[ 2 : 27 ] Perhaps the majority are of the contrary opinion. Though I don't know the numbers or haven't been doing the sums myself. What to do in such circumstances when there is a difference of opinion, a dispute, if you wish.

How should we respond? I think there are lessons that we can learn from the chapter that we've read, from Acts chapter 15. Now, this morning, those of you who were able to be with us this morning will remember that we were considering this passage and considering the doctrinal, a very fundamental doctrinal dispute that arose in the New Testament church between those who are described as the party of the Pharisees who were insisting that Gentiles, in order to be saved, not only had to believe in Jesus, but had to be circumcised also.

So theirs was a gospel plus. Yes, by all means believe in Jesus, but you also have to be circumcised. You also have to keep the Jewish ceremonial law in order to be saved, on the one hand, and those who were defending an unadulterated gospel where the sinner is justified, is saved by faith and by faith alone.

This morning, we focused exclusively on the heart of the matter, namely the arguments presented by Peter and James, especially those two men, to demonstrate that salvation was indeed by faith alone.

But there is also much to be learned by the manner in which the difference of opinion, the dispute, if you wish, was dealt with. And that's our concern this evening.

[ 4 : 14 ] We're not going to be considering the speeches. We did that this morning. But we are going to be thinking about the manner in which the church confronted a dispute. Now, in doing that, I would hope that there are principles and lessons that can be learned that can be applied to all manner of disputes or differences of opinion within the church.

Not only the one that is occupying our attention as a church at the moment, as the free church. The principles, of course, can be applied to other differences of opinion or disputes.

And I hope that it could be helpful in that regard. Perhaps for some who say, well, I'm not really interested in this matter of instruments or hymns. It's not an issue for me. That's fine. But, as I say, there are lessons here that go beyond that one example of the kind of dispute or difference of opinion there could be.

So we want to identify, then, these lessons. But there's one further word I would want to say by way of clarification. And I think an important clarification.

So listen well to what I'm going to say now. I am not, for a moment, suggesting that the dispute or difference of opinion that is occupying our attention as a denomination on this matter of public worship is in the same league as the dispute dealt with in Acts chapter 15.

[ 5 : 43 ] Not for a moment. Am I suggesting that? And I wouldn't want that to be understood. As a denomination, we do enjoy, and we should be thankful to God for this, we enjoy great unity in the main things.

We do have many problems. There are many things that we should reflect on and improve, and perhaps, not even perhaps, but we should indeed repent of as a church.

But of the many problems we may have, a dispute in respect of a fundamental doctrine is not one of them. And I repeat, for that, we should be profoundly grateful to God.

There are many brothers and sisters in the faith who would be very pleased to be in such a situation. So that, really just to clarify, to now move on, to identify lessons that we can find in this matter of resolving disputes, or differences of opinion, be they great or be they small.

what I'm going to do, and I will do this briefly, I promise you, and I say that because what I'm going to say could perhaps concern you, what I'm going to present is a ten-point plan for conflict resolution.

[ 7 : 13 ] We can call it the Acts 15 model. And when I say a ten-point plan, it's not surprising if some of you are already beginning to wonder how long I'm going to have you here.

But I will deal with these matters very briefly. The points, really, many of them, perhaps all of them, but certainly many of them, are very simple.

Some might say they're just common sense. But that's not to minimize their importance because so often the troubles and the problems that we have in many areas of life are precisely because we don't apply common sense.

So let's identify these ten points that can help us in resolving disputes applied very particularly to disputes within the church.

Some of the principles, some of the lessons, possibly could be applied in other areas as well. First thing that I think we should recognize, you might say once I explain what it is, well that's not really a way of resolving a dispute, but I still think it's valid to have as the first point and it is this, that we should expect disputes.

[ 8 : 26 ] We should expect differences of opinion. When we turn to the passage in question, the context is familiar to us. The Gentile mission, spearheaded by the church at Antioch, has been, I think we could say, an unqualified success.

Yes, there has been opposition, indeed violent opposition, from those on the outside, particularly Jews in the different cities that Paul and Barnabas were visiting, but the results are spectacular. There is great growth. New churches are established. Indeed, in one missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas have planted more churches than we, perhaps to our shame, as a denomination have managed to plant in several decades.

So, things are going well. There is great success. gospel work is being blessed in a very special way. But now, a problem presents itself.

Indeed, it's a problem that is actually provoked by the growth. And it is a problem from the inside. Not from the outside, but from the inside.

[ 9 : 37 ] And often, those are the problems that are most difficult to resolve. Now, the point in recognizing that this has happened in the church there in the New Testament is simply to make this point that we ought not to be surprised by disputes and by problems.

And especially in the context of progress in kingdom work. Maybe sometimes we are free of many problems because we're not doing anything. And of course, it's when we do things that problems present themselves.

in our inactivity were maybe spared problems. But that's not something to be thankful for. Doing the work of the gospel and when that work is blessed and there is progress, it will generate differences of opinion and disputes.

This should not surprise us. There will be clashes between people holding differing and often conscientiously held positions.

So, the first thing to say is we should expect differences of opinion. We should expect disputes and it should not discourage us. Indeed, if we as a church at the moment are engaged in a debate, if there are differences of opinion, that is not something to be discouraged about.

[10:57] That is to be expected. It would be a strange thing if everybody thought exactly the same. So that's the first point. The second point is this, that disputes, when they do appear, must be recognized and tackled.

Notice Paul and Barnabas in verse 2. The men from Judea have come and they're preaching this different gospel. What do Paul and Barnabas do?

Well, they confront the problem. They don't consider that it is an option for them to remain quiet for the sake of peace. You know, sometimes we can be so fearful of conflict, so fearful of upsetting people or of offending people, so fearful of rocking the boat in any way that we prefer to say nothing.

And sometimes we even congratulate ourselves for being so peaceful and so peace-loving, but really what we're guilty of is cowardice. If there is a dispute, then we should be willing to recognize the dispute and, where necessary, confront the difference of opinion.

Silence on our part is often not gracious silence, but rather guilty as silence. Well, not so with Paul and Barnabas. They confronted the dispute and in confronting the dispute, they provoked, we're told in the passage, a sharp dispute and debate with them.

[12:29] In actual fact, the dispute was already there, but in confronting it, it comes out into the open, it becomes more public. And that is the way Luke describes this confrontation.

A sharp dispute and debate is generated. This is not a bad thing. It was not a bad thing that it occurred in Antioch.

It was good. It didn't look very nice. It probably didn't sound very nice. There are no doubt those who were maybe horrified by the unseemliness of it all and were horrified that these believers were in a sharp dispute and were disagreeing with each other and they found it very unpleasant, I imagine.

But it was a good thing. It was good. The worst thing that could have been done would have been to say nothing for the sake of a supposed peace. So that's the second thing that we can learn.

that it is necessary for disputes, for differences of opinion to be recognized, for us to be aware of them, and to tackle them.

[13:38] Now the manner we'll tackle them will be a function of the nature of the dispute. It will be a function of how grave the issue is and so on and so forth and we can't go into all those details.

But the basic principle I think holds to recognize and to tackle a difference of opinion. The third thing I want to suggest as we continue looking at the passage is that there are occasions where help must be sought.

We read in verse 2, this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Appointed, evidently, by the church at Antioch. You see, at the local level on this occasion they could not find a resolution. They were not able to come to an agreement.

They debated it vigorously, aggressively it would seem, but there was no solution. Nobody would budge. Both sides held firmly to their position and were persuaded that they were right.

[14:49] So what do they do? Well, they seek help. They say, well, we can't solve the problem here. We need help. We need the help of others. We need the help of the wider church. We need the collective wisdom of all the congregations across the world, really.

Of course, at that time in a fairly limited geographic range, help needed to be sought and secured in order to solve the problem that had arisen.

Now, the manner in which this was done, we're told, there were representatives from Antioch and we can presume from other congregations who were sent to Jerusalem.

Not that the church in Jerusalem had some kind of prerogative for solving the problem, but that was the suitable location for the apostles and elders in representation of the congregations to gather and together to consider the dispute that had arisen.

I think it's also worth noting that as these leaders were sent in representation of the congregations, the congregations were evidently very involved.

[16:04] We are told that they were appointed, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, that, as I've already suggested, implies participation in the part of the congregation.

And then we're told in verse 3, the church sent them on their way. The church sent them on their way. So these are those who, they're not going to Jerusalem. They're not going to be involved in the assembly, in the council.

Their opinions, it would seem, aren't going to be heard, but they're involved. They're involved in sending Paul and Barnabas and indeed others to represent them in Jerusalem.

And though it's not stated, when we're told there that the church sent them on their way, the language is very similar to the language that we have in chapter 13 when Paul and Barnabas were sent as missionaries.

And they were sent on their way and they were told explicitly that much prayer was made on their behalf. And though we're not told that here, it seems entirely reasonable to imagine, to conclude, to presume perhaps that the church were involved in this way.

[17:09] They recognized those who were being sent as representing them. They trusted that they would represent them well and they supported them and prayed for them as they made their way to Jerusalem.

But the basic point that we're making here is that help was required. Really, this chapter, chapter 15, we're not going to go into all the gory details of it, but really is what we would use as our basis, our model for our own Presbyterian system of government where, at the local congregational level, there are matters that we can resolve and we should resolve, but then there are other matters, be they problems or be they simply matters that need to be considered that we see as being more appropriately dealt with by the wider church at a presbytery or at a general assembly.

That is precisely what we're going to be doing in November when there will be a plenary assembly of all the ministers and an equivalent number of elders representing Bonacord and all the other congregations to discuss the matter.

And this model, if you wish, is really one that we find here in Acts, chapter 15. So help must be sought.

We shouldn't be surprised by problems. We should confront them when they do arise and where necessary help should be sought. But then there's a fourth thing that I want you to notice and it's in verse 3 and it's perhaps a smaller point, but I think there's merit in noting it.

[18:44] That is that in the midst of a dispute or in the midst of a difference of opinion or in the midst of an as-yet unresolved problem, paralysis is not allowed.

We cannot allow ourselves to be paralyzed by a problem that has presented itself. We notice that Paul and Barnabas and the others unnamed believers who accompanied them to Jerusalem, notice what they do even as they make their way to the general assembly, if we want to describe it in that way.

In verse 3, the church sent them on their way and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

Even as they travel to this meeting, no doubt concerned about the outcome, no doubt exercising in their minds maybe the arguments that they would employ as they met with others who thought differently, but even as they were engaged in all of this, they take the opportunity to visit the congregations on route and to encourage them and to strengthen them and to bring them good news and joy.

They're not paralyzed by what is going on. I think that's important because we are prone to be paralyzed. There's a problem, there's a difficulty, there's a dispute and everything's on hold until there's a resolution.

[20:15] That's not as it should be. There is work to be done, there is gospel work to be done for us as a congregation and we must get on with the work and trust that the Lord in due course will help us to bring a resolution or an agreement on something that is concerning us.

It may be that some here in the congregation, it's not something I've really had conversations with many about that are, I think, more important matters to talk about, but perhaps there are those who may be concerned and it's not wrong to be concerned about what decisions will be taken in November at the assembly and that's fine.

By all means, let us be concerned but let us not be paralyzed into inactivity by concerns that we may have or differences of opinion that there may be amongst us.

paralysis is not allowed. But a fifth point and it's really very connected to this previous one, we could summarize it in a rather trivial way but I'll explain what I mean by this in saying that we should keep smiling.

There in verse 3, the delegation who are heading to Jerusalem, they share good news with the believers in Phoenicia and Samaria and there we're told at the close of the verse that the news made all the brothers very glad.

[ 21 : 45 ] all the brothers, that includes presumably those who are en route to Jerusalem, they were all very glad. They were joyful, they were rejoicing. They weren't somber as they headed to Jerusalem.

They weren't downcast that, oh, this is going to be a terrible meeting and we're all going to fight and we're probably going to split and oh, it's going to be a terrible occasion. I wish I didn't have to go. I wish somebody else was going. No, they're rejoicing. They're rejoicing in the Lord. They're rejoicing in God's work. They're rejoicing in their salvation. They're rejoicing in that God continues to build His church in the midst of difficulties and problems.

And we too must be careful that problems that there might be do not rob us of our joy. Joy is our inheritance as Christians and we must not allow that joy to be snatched from us by problems that no doubt there will be and there always will be or differences of opinion that may exist.

So let us keep our joy. But then as we continue and the delegation from Antioch arrive in Jerusalem, perhaps other delegations from other congregations were not told, but they arrive in Jerusalem for the purpose to hand, for the counsel that there is to be.

[ 23 : 09 ] But it would seem before the formal meeting where these matters will be debated and decisions will be arrived at, there is a more informal opportunity for everybody to have their voice heard.

Then in verses 4 and 5, notice what happens when they arrive. We read, when they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses. And it's only in verse 6 that we read the apostles and elders met to consider this question.

So the suggestion would seem to be that what has gone on before verse 6 is a more informal opportunity. And everybody is given the opportunity to say what they think, however objectionable their opinions might be.

And I think there is a principle there that is one to be valued and to be recognized. There is little merit in stifling or attempting to stifle dissenting voices.

[ 24 : 20 ] All that that achieves is that the dissension festers and grows. There should be the opportunity to hear what people think, even when we disagree perhaps very strongly with what they're saying, even when they are very wrong in what they're saying.

That was the case of the party of the Pharisees. What they were saying was very objectionable. It attacked the very heart of the gospel. But they're not forbidden from saying what they have to say. They are given the opportunity to express their opinion and to argue their case. Thank God they fail to convince others. But the opportunity is there for them to speak.

I think there is a valid and healthy principle there. Now, no doubt, wisdom is required in this matter in determining how that is best done.

We certainly don't want to foster opportunities for people to speak in a way that isn't helpful. But the basic principle being that there's no merit in stifling people being able to give an opinion.

[ 25 : 32 ] We might think of the matter to hand in our own denomination. No doubt, gathered here this evening, there are different opinions. I would be very surprised were it not so. We will not be the ones entrusted with deciding on these matters.

Others will do it in representation of us. But there may be merit in giving opportunity for folk at a congregational meeting or fellowship to give their point of view.

And of course, in conversation, we're free to do so with each other. Everybody should be allowed to have their voice heard. That seems to be the model that is presented to us or the way in which it was done, certainly there in Jerusalem.

But then there does come the point when those who have specific responsibility must debate and decide. In this case, the elders and apostles debate the matter.

And that's the seventh point that we find. There in verses 6 and 7, we've already noticed verse 6. The apostles and elders met to consider this question. And we read, after much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them.

[ 26 : 41 ] Not all the believers are involved. Not even all the believers who were physically present in Jerusalem are involved. This is not a referendum. It's not a referendum that's required, but a debate conducted by those called to leadership by God and through the church.

Now, in the case of the council at Jerusalem, there was a unique element that isn't repeated today in that there were apostles directly called by God without the intervention of the church.

And they too, clearly, would be involved in these discussions. But for us, it is those leaders called by God, certainly, but through the church who represent the church in discussing and determining the matters brought before them.

And notice that the matter is dealt with thoroughly. We're told, after much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. There was much discussion. A great deal of time, presumably, was given to it. Again, all who had an opinion were given the opportunity to voice their opinion, to argue their case. And no doubt there were disagreements, and some would say something, and others would contradict them, and some would present one argument, and others would pick holes in the argument.

[ 27 : 55 ] We don't know, we're not told, but there was certainly much discussion that we are told. This was not some dictate from above. The apostles didn't simply say, well, this is the way it's going to be, and you have simply got to obey.

No, the apostles and elders discussed the matter, and together sought the mind of God. That, too, is something that must be done.

But in doing that, we then discover that God speaks through his servants. It was necessary for them to discuss. It was necessary for them to struggle, and to debate, and to argue.

But in that process, if you wish, God speaks through his servants. This morning, we were considering those servants of God who rose and addressed the assembly, and it was clear to all that as they spoke, it was God who was speaking through them.

As Peter, there in verse 7, Paul and Barnabas are then mentioned, and finally James. We're not going to consider what they said. We did that this morning.

[ 29 : 09 ] But God speaks through his servants. Indeed, there's an interesting thing said in the letter that is then drafted and distributed to the churches concerning this reality that God spoke through his servants, through the gathering there.

In verse 28, this is in the letter that is written that summarizes what happened. And what does it say there? It says, It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

Notice the interesting language. What the leaders in Jerusalem who are drafting or putting into writing the agreement that had been arrived at, what they're contending, what they're saying, is that God himself spoke through the assembly.

God himself made known his will to the assembly that were gathered. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Now, there's no suggestion that the Holy Spirit spoke in some mystical way.

There's no suggestion that this was done in any way other than through the speeches of Peter and James and Paul. But what the gathered assembly were sure of is that God was speaking through these men.

[ 30 : 29 ] there was that capacity to discern the voice of God. Many spoke. Some of those who spoke spoke nonsense. Some of those who spoke spoke things that were not coherent and were not in accordance with God's will.

But when those who spoke as God would have them speak, there was a recognition that God was speaking through them. I think that's important for us to stress.

As we would gather to discuss matters that maybe divide us or that we have different opinions on. Sometimes there's a despondent spirit that, well, this is something impossible to resolve. We'll never know what we should do. I think that is wrong. We should go and we should participate, those of us who have to participate in the specific assembly that we've been making reference to in November, those who are there, those who are praying for those who are there, we should do so in the confidence that God will speak.

Is he not a God who promises to reveal his will to his people? Should we not have that confidence that if we ask him to speak to us that he will? Should we not approach these differences of opinion that we might have in the confidence that God will show us the way ahead?

[ 31 : 48 ] I think we should have that confidence that the outcome of our debate will be an outcome that comes from God, that God will show us what we should do.

Certainly that is what occurred at the council in Jerusalem. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. I think we should be encouraged by this.

There's two final things that I want us to notice in matters or manner in which we should confront disputes, and the penultimate one is that here in Jerusalem, and there's a principle for us, is that a distinction is recognized between that which is fundamental and that which is secondary or even peripheral.

And we have that in the summing up of James in verses 19 and 20. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

We should not impose circumcision on them. Instead, we should write to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

[ 32 : 59 ] Now, this is a passage, or these are verses that have generated much discussion, and voluminous literature exists to give all kinds or all manner of explanations as to what is going on here.

And I'm not going to burden you with the different views that are held. I'm not even going to burden you with all I was planning to say. What I will say is this, that what we have here is a distinction being drawn wisely between that which is fundamental and that which is secondary.

That on which the church could not compromise, and that on which it could compromise. It could not compromise on the truth that salvation was by faith alone.

That was a non-negotiable. They could not compromise on that. They could not allow those who were seeking to impose circumcision to have their way, because that would have attacked what was fundamental to the gospel.

But what they could do is ask of the Gentiles, out of sensitivity and respect, to avoid certain things, some of which in and of themselves would not have been sinful for the Gentiles, but to avoid them in order to not unnecessarily offend their Jewish brethren.

[ 34 : 20 ] Now, much more time would be required to explain that, but I leave it there. There is this recognition that there are those matters on which there can be no compromise, but there are other matters on which compromise is not only possible, but advisable, as was the case here at the council in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. And finally, the final thing that is done in bringing this matter to a resolution, and I think it's also very opposite for us to notice, and it is this, that the decision reached is accepted and communicated to the churches, accepted by those who are present and communicated to those who were represented by those gathered there.

here. Notice in verse 22, then the apostles and elders with the whole church, the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to communicate the decision by means of a letter and backed up by verbal testimony of those who are carrying the letter.

But what is clear is that those who participated in this council, even those who had held a different opinion accepted the decision of the council.

They recognized that God had spoken through the council and they submitted to that. Perhaps some were unhappy with the outcome. It wasn't what they wished for themselves, but they accepted the decision.

[ 36 : 01 ] And I think there there is a very clear word of advice for us too, that we may have our own opinions, but when the church gathers in a manner that represents our convictions concerning how decisions such as these should be dealt with, then when a decision is arrived at, if and when that

decision doesn't run entirely counter to our conscience, then we are duty bound to accept the decision's reach.

Certainly that would seem to have been the attitude that was taken by those who were present at this council. But the other thing, it's a practical matter, but an important one, that the assembly, the general assembly, if you wish, were very concerned to communicate clearly and precisely and quickly the decisions to the church at large.

This, of course, would avoid the opportunity for dissenting voices to generate opposition in taking advantage of ignorance or of a lack of communication.

So they're very careful to make sure that everybody discovers what the agreements are and to make them publicly and clearly known. What is the result?

And with this we close. Well, we're told the result of this serious effort to resolve a dispute that had enveloped or that had afflicted the church.

[ 37 : 31 ] And what is the result of this serious, God-honoring resolution? that was sought? Well, we find there in verse 31. The people read it.

In this case, it's the congregation at Antioch. The people read it. They read the letter, were glad for its encouraging message. They didn't say, oh, why are you placing these rules that we don't really want to obey?

No, they were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets from the Jerusalem church, said much to encourage and strengthen the brethren. And after spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

The church was encouraged. The church was strengthened. A greater unity was fostered between Antioch and Jerusalem than there had been before. In that sense, the dispute had been a profitable thing.

The outcome was that they were more united than before. And we might say, and we must say, that in God's providence, that presumably was one of the purposes why God allowed this dispute, that the final outcome would be greater harmony and greater unity and greater common purpose in the work of the gospel.

[ 38 : 43 ] And as we consider that, surely it is right for us to take that for ourselves and cry out to God and seek God's blessing and seek that God would grant to us that this would be the outcome of our own local difficulties, if you wish.

That as we would confront differences of opinion, as we do so seeking God's face, as we do so seeking to do so in a God-honoring manner, the outcome would be encouragement and strengthening and greater unity that together we might further the cause of the gospel.

God grant that it be so. Let us pray.