

Good News for Everyone!

Acts 15:1-21

Our Journey through Acts with Luke's unfolding story of how Jesus built His Church has hit the religious buffers: well you say, not much has changed! A Church which harps on about Apostolic Succession (in essence the Spirit of Control in human form) instead of Apostolic Instruction, and Denominational purity (being a good Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or Methodist before or often instead of simply being a Christian) instead of Christ-likeness, is a Church that has hit the religious buffers and is going no where fast. The moment 'isms become more important than Christ let the alarm bell ring! Grace is amazing but it is also levelling: it leaves you and me nowhere to go in terms of spiritual pride. Today's Church needs to read again this story of Acts 15 and release their hold on Christ's Church if we are once again to be at heart of renewing our Nation: so let's see how they did it and apply the principles to St Andrews.

After the conversion of both Cornelius and the Antiochene Greeks the Jerusalem leaders had been able to reassure themselves that God was in it. But how would they now react to the even more audacious policy of Paul? The Gentile Mission was gaining momentum. The trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent. Now the Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the general concept of believing Gentiles, for many OT passages prophesied their inclusion. But now a particular question was forming in their minds: what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles? So far it had been assumed that they would be absorbed into Israel by circumcision and that by observing the law they would be acknowledged as bonafide members of the covenant people of God. Something quite different was now happening

however: but something which disturbed and even alarmed many.

Gentile converts were being welcomed into fellowship by baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews (shock horror)! They were retaining their own identity and integrity as members of other Nations. Now it was one thing for the leaders to give their approval to the conversion of Gentiles: but could they approve of conversion-without-circumcision, of faith in Jesus without works of the law, and of commitment to the Messiah without inclusion in Judaism? Was their vision big enough to see the Gospel of Christ not as a reform movement within Judaism but as Good News for the whole World, and the Church of Christ not as a Jewish sect but as the International Family of God? These were the revolutionary questions some were daring to ask. And we need to ask these same hard questions if the Church in the UK is to be rescued from the religious rut it has dug for itself and once again become the living loving Body of Christ Jesus always intended: a Church who like a stick of Rock has the Gospel of Grace right through its core.

1. The Jew/Gentile Church/Unchurched Syndrome

In Church.....Out of Church

Being Church: Jesus 24/7.

Come to Worship.....Be Worshippers

A heart transplant

Old made new.....New Creation

Real Repentance crucial

New Start to Life.....New Life to Start

Born Again!

The problem is the Religious Spirit/ the Holy Spirit no one is in a privileged position / it's only by Grace we stand!

Let the Judgemental Spirit, which still has a hold die: such has no place in St Andrews and the Church Jesus is building.

2. Heaping Burdens on the New Converts

Must wear a collar and tie.....heart!
Must come every week.....not justified by Church but faith!
Must do a job.....gifting is what is important.
Read v 9-11. No difference. We could not carry it!
St Andrews must be a place where people realise that relationship comes before ritual and where grace alone holds sway.

3. Plugging into the Flow of God (read v12)

God will do what He will do: look for signs of his moving and cooperate with Him!
If God seems far away guess who's moved!
Fruit comes from good roots! I Love Great fruit (Grapefruit!).

4. Restoration is God's Business and He does all things well.

v16-18 (quotes Amos 9:11f prophecy) Better than before.
Reformation happens in the 16th century: let it happen again in our day Lord

From here and this first Ecumenical Church Council in Luke's unfolding story of How Jesus Built His Church, the emphasis shifts: it's a real watershed and an absolutely crucial transition:

From Peter to Paul.

From Jerusalem to Asia to Europe & Rome.

Two issues are supreme in how the Church acted and lived out its life for this moment onwards: Salvation and Unity.

Salvation: an issue of Christian Truth

The Judaizers were arguing that circumcision was necessary for salvation. There was, therefore, a danger of the church breaking up into competing theological factions, with different apostles teaching different gospels, and the churches unity destroyed. The danger was real enough. The Judaizers claimed the authority of James and contradicted Paul. Peter was led astray and opposed by Paul. The three apostles appeared to be at loggerheads, with James and Paul on opposite sides and Peter oscillating between them. The situation was critical. So Luke was at great pains to describe in the Council Peter spoke first, then Paul, then James; how the scriptures and experience coincided; and how the apostles (Peter, Paul & James), the elders and the whole church reached a unanimous decision (v22,28). Thus the unity of the gospel preserved the unity of the Church. In spite of its rich diversity of formulation and emphasis in the NT, there is only one apostolic gospel. We must resist modern theologians who set the NT writers at variance with each other, and who talk about Pauline, Petrine and Johannine positions as if they were incompatible gospels. Even Paul and James, who were reconciled at the Council, can be reconciled in their NT letters too. They tault the same way of salvation.

Moreover, the gospel of Christ's apostles is the gospel of God's free grace, of His undeserved love for sinners in the death of his Son in our place. Further, it is the gospel of God's sufficient grace. It cannot be regarded either as a supplement to something else (e.g. Judaism) or as needing to be supplemented by something else (e.g. circumcision), without being undermined. Yet this was exactly the Judaizers mistake. To them faith in Jesus was not enough; circumcision and the law needed to be added. Today people

try to add works of a different kind, philanthropy perhaps or religious observances, or a particular ceremony or experience. In each case it is a 'Jesus plus' gospel, which is derogatory to the adequacy of His work. We need to echo Peter: 'We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they' (11). We and they, Jews and Gentiles, are saved in the same way, through the one and only apostolic gospel of God's Grace.

Unity & Relationship: an issue of Christian love

It was one thing to secure the gospel from corruption; it was another to preserve the church from fragmentation. Paul was resolutely unwilling to compromise 'the truth of the gospel'. He resisted the Judaizers, rebuked Peter publicly, and wrote a passionate appeal to the Galatians. At the same time, he was extremely anxious to maintain Jewish-Gentile solidarity in the one Body of Christ. So how could he unite the church without compromising the gospel, or defend the integrity of the gospel without sacrificing the unity of the church? His answer reveals the greatness of his mind and heart. Once the theological principle was firmly established, that salvation was by grace alone, and that circumcision was not required but neutral, he was prepared to adjust his practical policies. He made two notable concessions, both for the same conciliatory reason. First, he accepted the four cultural abstentions proposed by the Jewish leaders to Gentile converts, because Moses was widely read and preached, and this Gentile restraint would ease Jewish consciences and facilitate Jewish-Gentile social intercourse. Secondly, he circumcised Timothy out of consideration for the Jews who would be offended if he remained uncircumcised.

We may say, then, that the Jerusalem Council secured a double victory - a victory of truth in confirming the gospel of grace, and a victory of love in preserving the fellowship

by sensitive concessions to conscientious Jewish scruples.
As Luther put it, Paul was strong in faith and soft in love.

What an epitaph or reputation that would be for St
Andrews: strong in faith and soft in love. Such is the
Missionary Church that Jesus is building, such is a Church
that will once again touch the heart of this community and
city, for such a Church will have earned the right to grab
people attention and speak into their lives. Let us become
such a Church for Christ's glory alone.

Pastor David
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