

Series: Hard Conversations	Reference: <i>Acts 15:30-31</i>	Title: Unity By The Spirit	Date: 01.19.2019
Website Writeup: Today we look at how the Church can find unity even where it seems impossible through counsel of Word, Spirit, and the hard work of solid Christians.			

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Memory Verse for this Series

Galatians 2:20 - ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This series is designed to help you as a Christian to have discerning effective conversations in love with those who think differently from you. We're addressing 5 affirmations to learn how to have hard conversations in love, bringing thoughtful perspective to challenging topics. Not compromising in our beliefs, convictions & values as Bible-believing Christians, but communicating well.

We've asked, **are we reflecting or overcoming division?** Remembering Jesus prayed for our Unity, recognizing that THOUGHT is the defining factor of UNITY with Jesus, and His Body, the Church. Our first affirmation was, **God has all truth, but we don't have a perfect understanding of it.** We shouldn't be afraid of having strong convictions, beliefs & values, but must couple that with the humbling knowledge, we can be wrong in the murky waters of personal opinion especially in the area of hot topics.

We said, **being loving is as important as being right.** We love truthfully & truthfully love. Love without truth lies, truth without love kills. This week is our third affirmation, **the Spirit can create unity where it once seemed impossible.**

Turn to p756 in your church Bible to Acts 15. Verses 30 & 31 state, ³⁰ *So the men were sent off & went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together & delivered the letter.* ³¹ *The people read it & were glad for its encouraging message.* These two verses are the end result of a sharp disagreement in the early church about what it meant to become a Christian - it began in Antioch & extended to Jerusalem.

Let's look at the first two verses of Acts 15 to find out what it was about. It says, *Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch & were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* ² *This brought Paul & Barnabas into sharp dispute & debate with them. So Paul & Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles & elders about this question.*

Paul loved Jesus completely enough to vehemently guard the integrity of the Gospel message because it was a matter of life & death. This is an example of mature argument in the church when it involves the integrity of the Gospel. When Truth is compromised to the point of leading people away from Christ, it's important for those with right knowledge to counter strongly in love, which they did.

This account, when viewed within its place in the Book of Acts as a whole, forms the culmination of the struggle by the early church to understand itself. The early church had both Jewish & Gentile which were pagan background believers coming to Christ. Acts records this extensively. Christianity at its core is Jewish. Our message embodies the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah.

Yet we know from Old & New Testament alike, God had always intended for Israel to be a missionary force bringing all people groups into relationship with Him. There was a time before the coming of the Messiah when you'd be baptized a Jew in order to become a member of God's people - so this argument from the Jewish side is understandable. Sadly, many Jewish background believers couldn't see that God had always intended Israel to be a witness of His Grace to Gentile nations. They were too immersed in their religious culture. Faith to them wasn't an issue of God's atoning grace, it was about becoming Jewish. They were too enmeshed to see God's call to faith by grace.

As a result, the culture of the Judaism from which Christianity arose was a legalistic religious practice which sought to earn God's favor by observing ceremonies & keeping laws, since they'd missed God's grace depicted in those practices. All those practices were to reveal the fact that Israel couldn't measure up to God's perfect law & needed God's grace. That sin deserved death, they needed salvation & the fact that only God could accomplish that for them - foreshadowing His grace in Jesus' atoning sacrifice.

Judaism held to an exclusive nationalistic outlook which regarded Israel alone as 'the people of God'. It required non-Jews, desiring to be identified with God, to submit to circumcision & to practice the whole Mosaic law through the offering of prescribed sacrifices. Again, to be fair, before the arrival of Jesus, that would've been a fair assumption - and it's hard for people to give up tradition. But when Jesus came, things changed. God's moral law & the need for repentance remained, but Christ fulfilled all civic & ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law & made those sacrifices unnecessary.

The earliest Jewish Christians in Jerusalem seemed to have held at least some of these views even after recognizing Jesus as the Messiah. Their insistence that Gentile Believers be circumcised & submit to the whole Mosaic law required them to become Jews nationally, socially & religiously in order to become Christians. This is the very issue Paul & Barnabas & others took umbrage with, and rightly so. So they make the trip to Jerusalem to argue this, and sway the Apostles & Elders to understanding & unity on the essence of the Gospel as salvation by grace through faith in Jesus alone. Paul & his companions were astute, reading culture in the light of Scripture & understanding when it was undermining the Gospel message.

As they journeyed to Jerusalem, they're told stories about how Gentiles were finding faith & salvation in Jesus alone which made everyone glad. As they arrive, they're accepted by this Church leadership Council. But it says in v5, *5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up & said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised & required to keep the law of Moses."* Pharisees were experts in the law - we can understand why they'd feel this way, although they'd not recognized it wasn't commiserate with the Gospel.

So they all discuss the issue, and Peter, one of the Apostles present in Jerusalem, convinced, stands up in agreement with Paul & his buddies. He's recalling his vision in Acts 10 which taught him that ceremonial requirements should not be placed on Gentiles. After that vision he met with Cornelius, a Gentile, who became a Christian, and at the time Peter said, *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism 35 but accepts from every nation the one who fears him & does what is right (vv34-35).*

So, in vv10-11 of Acts 15 Peter concludes *10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*

James then stands up quoting the prophets Amos & Isaiah from the Old Testament to further this point. Everyone falls silent, listening to this reasonable argument. All agree & decide to send people back to Antioch & address this false teaching through an official letter.

We have that letter in Acts 15:23-29 which outlines their conclusions. The only thing they added were a few prohibitions suggested by James in the way of spiritual advice at the end of it where they say, *28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit & to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals & from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*

So Gentiles were released from all the Jewish ceremonial & civic law! But you may've missed it...these added requirements would seem counter to what they'd just concluded - that there were to be no added requirements to become a Christian. However, these certain prohibitions were against specific pagan religious practices which would traditionally appeal to gentile Christians & would've led them astray & shipwrecked their faith - just as these Jewish requirements of the Mosaic law would have done. All these simple prohibitions were intended to deal with conditions limited to a particular time & place, tied to pagan practices of the day. Yet one of them is supra-cultural, and timeless, which is to abstain from sexual immorality - because as we saw last week, our sexual activity is a spiritual issue deeply linked to our reflection of God.

This is a remarkable passage. In reading the rest of Acts 15, as well as the book of Galatians, we understand the depth of the conflict between Jews & Gentiles in the New

Testament. Paul addresses this issue quite extensively in almost all his writings to some degree or another, because it was that important.

If they'd not addressed this & said, "Well, it doesn't really matter, let 'em do it," we would've lost the essence of the Gospel. There would be no freedom or salvation in it. Judaism would've continued in Christian disguise, as if Jesus never made payment for our sin. It would've fallen in line with all other world religions trying to attain favor with God by way of good works. But thanks to Paul & his friends, Christianity stands alone among all spiritual/religious philosophies! A message of Grace - that we can't attain relationship with God in any other way than through Jesus' death & resurrection. Salvation by grace is through faith alone (Eph 2)...and there is no other name by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

What you don't see in Acts 15 is that this issue caused a major personal clash between Peter & Paul. But if we read around our memory verse for this series, we see that this circumstance is referenced by Paul in Galatians 2 & Peter was one of the faulty parties.

Turn with me to p795 in your church Bibles. Paul says, in Galatians 2:11-21, ¹¹ *When Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.* ¹² *For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back & separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.* ¹³ *The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

This is the issue the Jerusalem Council addresses in Acts 15. It seems Peter had a 'fear of man' problem, in that he was just going with the crowd instead of standing on Scriptural conviction. This happened to the extent that even Barnabas was swayed, although it seems he came around quickly. It continues...

¹⁴ *When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile & not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"*

¹⁵ *"We who are Jews by birth & not sinful Gentiles* ¹⁶ *know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ & not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.*

¹⁷ *"But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!* ¹⁸ *If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.*

¹⁹ *"For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. [See here how the Law reveals our need for salvation]* ²⁰ *I have been crucified with Christ & I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of*

God, who loved me & gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

This was an important & sincere theological conflict. It struck at the heart of two groups' identities & had implications for what the church understood the gospel to be. The stakes were high. One side claims the authority of Moses in giving the great revelation of Yahweh to the people of Israel. The other side claims the gospel has reworked the church's relationship to Moses without denying his importance. It seemed they'd not be able to get beyond this.

After much debate, we get these wonderful words in the letter to Antioch from the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit & to us..."* The question figures into nearly all Paul's letters. And yet, in this moment, we're told that the Holy Spirit worked in a way no one had expected, and the outcome was great *joy*.

Similarly, our calling in this cultural moment involves faith. The unity of the church is in question. It feels as though it's stressed to the point of snapping. In this series we've addressed difficult topics which have the ability to divide & destroy unity. In certain issues, if we allow ourselves to be guided only by culture & experience, disregarding Scriptures leading, we'll find ourselves yet again at an Acts 15 moment.

Let's remember, this argument presented to the Jerusalem Council was answered with three things...**Scripture, the leading of the Holy Spirit & mature believers willingness to engage.** Faithful believers thinking rightly - willing to confront in love. All issues will be addressed this way in time, and we need only trust God in process. It means we strive to love truthfully & truthfully love, as Paul & his companions did. Love without truth lies, truth without love kills - they knew that.

Jesus prayed for our unity. Unity can demonstrate the nature of God, call others to faith & lead to great joy in seeing the work of the Holy Spirit leading us to live-giving thought. Sadly, we often feel unity isn't possible because the other side's so wrong!

Remember the deciding factor is Scriptural authority, the leading of the Spirit & faithful Believers willing to challenge wrong influences. Someone lost this argument. The Pharisees had to give up their wrong opinions & augment their thinking to the Gospel as defined by Scripture & the Spirit of God. Peter, the Rock, had to make adjustments in how he interacted with others. Barnabas was also brought back to center. Sometimes people in the church draw wrong conclusions on what the Christian life is, and must be brought back to center. Like Paul, the mature Christian's more concerned with the state of a soul & the integrity of the Gospel, then they are with the affinities & feelings of individuals, because these discussions concern life & death for everyone involved. **So, let's remember as we face hard conversations with others...**

First, you very well may be right. We long for unity - sometimes it happens, sometimes not. There are times when someone's conscience requires them to break fellowship & separate from others. A sad reality, and if it happens, we must pray for grace & healing.

There have been times when people have broken fellowship with the local church over certain issues & had to leave for the sake of their own integrity. That's understandable. But does it mean that person's totally lost? No. I believe what I said a few weeks back - everyone's on a journey & they may need to indulge errancy for a time in order to see how their thinking doesn't work & come to conviction on truth.

Second, we may very well be wrong - the Pharisees at that time were. Peter was at least wrong in how he was treating Gentiles when Jewish Christians were present. This is why we walk in humility & stand on the great cloud of witnesses & not just on our own understanding. We trust in what the Church over the centuries has concluded, since Christians long past have been through these arguments already & have come to unity in difficult conversations after much Scriptural study & direction from the Holy Spirit.

So, even though certain Christian convictions don't always sit well with us, we do trust that the Church has faced these issues before. It's amazing how things which at one point seemed like insurmountable barriers can be resolved over time. Real faith is trusting God in the moments we don't see a way forward. If we can find the faith to pray for a sick person, maybe we can find the faith to pray for unity with someone who disagrees with us.

Third, act with patience in conviction. It's helpful to ask this question: "What difference does this disagreement make in our practical day-to-day relationship & ministry?" Even if we can't see a way forward, we can delay separation long enough to give the Spirit time to do His work.

Being right & loving are equally important & we don't pursue correctness out of pride - but we do speak with scriptural conviction. We temper our words & attitudes with grace, mercy, kindness, love & patience. Recognizing people change over time. The Holy Spirit convicts, not us. And often that takes the knocks & bumps of life to happen in a person - we recognize people change slowly. We act with wisdom, discernment & forbearance, having patience as people grow in process. However, we never sweep under the rug the need to speak truth well.

GK Chesterton wrote: *"Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions."* Christians are people of conviction, because conviction on God's truthful message is a matter of the soul & everlasting life to all humankind. The Spirit can create unity where it once seemed impossible through conviction of Word & Spirit among believers, but it does take the devotion to God first working in fellowship between us.