

Title: The Power to Agree

Text: Acts 15:23-29

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In a moment we are going to read without doubt the most important letter recorded in the New Testament. It is one of the shortest letters and is buried in the middle of Acts. It does not have its own 'name' like Paul's letter to the Corinthians. But this name-less letter is so vital, so important and critical that if it was never written and then delivered, it is likely we would not be sitting here this Sunday morning.

So let's read it now. Reading from Acts 15:23:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.
(Acts 15:23b-29)

Short and to the point, and not a little strange.

To understand why this letter is so important we need to fill in some of the back story.

Last week we recounted Paul's first missionary journey that took him from Antioch in Syria, through Cyprus and up on the Asian continent where he and Barnabas travelled the region of Galatia preaching the gospel. Jews as well as Gentiles were responding to Paul's preaching and were deciding to follow Jesus. What had started as a trickle was now a flood of Gentile, or non-Jewish Christian believers.

Three years after setting out, Paul and Barnabas return to their home church of Antioch in Syria. And there they are horrified to discover the church they left was not the church they returned to.

When they left the church at Antioch was a diverse and cosmopolitan group of believers – rich and poor; young and old; African, European, Asian and Palestinian; Jew and Gentile. Despite their diversity, the believers at Antioch were united by their common commitment to Christ.

When they returned to Antioch they discovered a church still diverse, but also now divided along religious lines. In Paul and Barnabas's absence some agitators from the Jerusalem church had come teaching a different message. This is what Luke says:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.
(Acts 15:1-2a)

Luke is being polite. Paul was livid. He was seriously annoyed. He was red hot with righteous anger.

Some Jewish Christians had come up from Jerusalem and were teaching the hundreds of Gentile or non-Jewish Christians that they were not saved unless they converted to Judaism as well as Christianity.

The mark of conversion for Christianity was and is baptism.

The mark of conversion for Judaism, for males at least, is circumcision.

These agitators were teaching that to be a Christian you needed to become a Jew first. They were the so-called circumcision party. For them, the rite of baptism needed to be immediately preceded by, or followed with the rite of circumcision.

Is it just me, or does that sound like a hard-sell.

Let's see – no anaesthesia, blunt instrument and no sterilizing equipment? Hmm.

So now what was once a thriving, diverse Christian community was divided between the circumcised and the uncircumcised- Jews and Gentiles. They no longer ate together, shared fellowship together, celebrated communion together. Paul and Barnabas came back to a house divided.

Paul did not pull punches; he called the agitators 'mutilators of the flesh'. He knew that the very heart of Christian faith was at stake:

Was Christianity simply a reform movement within Judaism, albeit a radical one?

Or was Christianity a new move of God altogether, a faith consistent with Judaism, but not limited by it?

These and other questions had to be resolved and so the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas 250 miles south to Jerusalem in order that the leaders there might resolve the matter. It was showdown time.

So in Jerusalem the leaders gather. The room is hushed as Paul and Barnabas recount all God has done in converting Jew and Gentile alike. But then there is an interjection as members of the circumcision part get up and say:

The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.

(Acts 15:5b)

The debate begins. Arguments and counter-arguments are put and discussion continues for hours until one after the other Peter, then Barnabas and finally Paul put the case refuting the need for circumcision.

Peter reminds those gathered that the Holy Spirit fell on Gentile believers, just as the Spirit had fallen on Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost.

Paul and Barnabas remind them of the miraculous signs and wonder God has done through them in ministering to the Gentiles.

While Luke does not record the details of Paul's speech, his argument against circumcision is put directly in his letter to the Galatians. In an impassioned, sometimes angry response to those who would require that Gentile believers be circumcised he says this:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision has any value. The only things that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:6)

After Peter, Barnabas and Paul finish their speeches the Council remember that the Old Testament prophets predicted that one day God would include Gentiles amongst his people, and that this day had now come. And so they should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who were turning to God in their droves.

The Council determined in favour of Peter, Paul and Barnabas and against the circumcision party.

A letter was drafted and some messengers selected to deliver it to the church at Antioch. Luke tells us:

The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. (Acts 15:30-31)

'Encouraged' may well be an understatement. No need for circumcision? Praise the Lord! I reckon there were a lot of relieved men in that room as the letter was read out.

Let's pause for a moment. What was the evidence that convinced the Council and Jerusalem to not require circumcision for Gentile believers?

Peter reminded them that the Holy Spirit baptized Gentiles as well as Jews.

Paul and Barnabas reminded them of the signs and wonders and miracles performed by God for the Gentiles.

And finally the Bible itself reminded them that God would one day include the Gentiles in his salvation plan.

In the end it was reason, experience and scripture that convinced them. But all of this was sealed by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the letter, this wonderful phrase is used:

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements. (Acts 15:28)

'Good to us and the Holy Spirit.'

In the midst of a dispute that threatened to tear the Christian community apart and to derail the mission to the Gentiles the Power of the Holy Spirit enabled a diverse, passionate group of believers to come to a point of agreement.

And what the Holy Spirit did then, the Holy Spirit can do today; that is bring agreement and unity to the church.

So what can we learn from all of this? There are four things I would like to mention.

First, Disunity is Death.

Paul returned to a church divided in Antioch. He knew that the radical community that was at the heart of the gospel was under deadly threat. Jesus himself had said that:

If a house is divided against itself, then that house cannot stand. (Mark 3:25)

Later, Paul would write that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God who is Father and Lord of all. The unity of the church is to reflect the unity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as God is a community of love so too the church - God's body on earth - is to be a community of love.

The unity of Christian believers is fundamental to the mission of the church. Jesus' final prayer in John's gospel is for us, for you and me. Listen to what Jesus asks for us:

I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

(John 17:20-24)

Jesus prays for complete unity in us, that there would be no division, so that others might see through us the God we tell them about.

One balmy day in the South Pacific, a ship spied smoke coming from one of three huts on an uncharted island. Upon arriving at the shore they were met by a shipwreck survivor. He said, "I'm so glad you're here! I've been alone on this island for more than five years!"

The captain replied, "If you're all alone on the island why do I see THREE huts."

The survivor said, "Oh. We'll, I live in one, and go to church in another."

"What about the THIRD hut?" asked the captain.

"That's where I USED to go to church."

The number one scandal in the church is our disunity. And rather than getting better, it seems to be getting worse.

For the first three hundred years the church engaged in many fierce debates about really important things like the divinity of Jesus and the nature of the Trinity. Through it all it maintained its unity.

In fact there were various controversies for the first thousand years of the church, but apart from a few small exceptions, the church was joined together by a common faith.

Then in the 11th century there was the so-called Great Schism and the Eastern Church, which today includes the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches amongst others, split with the Western Church of which we are a part. The division included a long and involved argument about the Holy Spirit, but was as much about ethnic hostility, politics, money and power as anything else.

Then in 1517 a Roman Catholic monk nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg protesting the excesses and errors of the church and so began the Protestant Reformation that divided the Western church. Martin Luther began the protest and we are still protesting 500 years later, as one split led to another split, led to another split, to the point that today it is estimated there are over 33,000 Protestant denominations across the world.

Every year 300 new denominations are added as yet another church divides from another.

Jesus pleaded with the Father, 'May they be brought to complete unity so that the world might know you sent me.'

Jesus must weep. And so should we.

Disunity is death. A house divided against itself will not stand.

In the book, *Fellowship of the Ring*, the camaraderie of a diverse group, banded together by a common cause is described. Called "the fellowship of the ring," their quest is to destroy the power of the Dark Lord lodged in his ring.

Though they differ in nearly every way—racially, physically, temperamentally—they are united in their opposition of the Dark Lord.

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At one stage a heated conflict breaks out among the friends. Axes are drawn. Bows are bent. Harsh words are spoken. Disaster nearly strikes.

When peace at last prevails, a wise counselor observes, "Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him."

When Satan sees a church divided he rubs his hands in glee. Rather than fighting him, we fight each other.

Disunity is Death.

Next, Unity is not Uniformity

The most radical mark of the early church was its diversity. We know the church was made up of rich and poor, slave and free, women and men, young and old, Jew and Gentile and every different ethnicity in the Roman world. They ate together, prayed together, laughed and cried together – lived and died together. This was in a day and age when you kept with your own people, for they were the only ones you could trust in a brutal world.

In its diversity the church was unified by its common faith in Jesus crucified and risen.

At the foot of the cross they all discovered level ground – that each of them were sinners saved by grace.

And it was in the church they learned how to love as Jesus loved. You see it is much easier to love those who are like you, or who are from your family or tribe, or share the same customs.

It is much harder to love those who are different.

Jesus does not want a homogenous church where everyone looks the same, talks the same, even thinks the same.

He wants a unified church that shares a common faith, at the same time celebrating the richness of its diversity.

You have heard me say on numerous occasions that here at Newlife, we are one, big, happy and sometimes dysfunctional family.

One of the many things I love about our church is its diversity.

We have people here who were born this year right up to people who have just turned 97, and everything in between.

At last count, we have 34 different birth nationalities in our church.

Our diversity is one of our God-given strengths. We should guard it with our lives!

I don't want to be in a church where everyone looks like me, talks like me, thinks like me. Boring!

I want to be stretched and challenged and changed by people who love me, and yet who are different to me.

Unity is not Uniformity.

Phillip Yancey spoke with an Indian Pastor about the power of Unity in Diversity. The Pastor said this:

Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That's the real miracle.
(Indian Pastor)

Freedom is Responsibility

The letter written to the church in Antioch asks the believers there to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. Now, there is much debate about what this all means.

Are these some ethical requirements that should be met?

Are these the only requirements of the Law of Moses that need to be kept by Christian believers?

From my reading and research I think it is something else altogether.

All of the practices listed in the letter from the Jerusalem Council were central to pagan worship.

Pagan worship, including blood sacrifice and temple prostitution, was rife in the first century Roman Empire, and many of the new Gentile Christians would have engaged in these practices it before their conversion.

Christian repentance involves a turning away from the sin of the past and a turning towards the God who creates a new future for us. So the Gentile Christians are encouraged to renounce their pagan past and embrace their Christian future.

But there is more here. You see, other teaching in the New Testament affirms that eating food sacrificed is not harmful – that it is not wrong.

Eating food sacrificed to idols is not harmful, but nor is it necessarily helpful – particularly to Jewish Christians watching.

In the church at Antioch there would have been Jewish Christians who diligently kept all the kosher food laws of the Old Testament.

And there would have been Gentile Christians who knew nothing of such laws, and were used to eating whatever.

So when Abraham of Antioch, who had been raised a Jew but who was now a Christian, saw his Christian brother Julius tucking into a pork roll, Jewish Abraham may be thinking 'How could he?!'

Abraham would be even more offended if he thought that the pork in the roll came from a pig sacrificed in one of the pagan temples.

The Council at Jerusalem were saying to Brother Julius, it's Ok for you to eat your pork roll. Really.

But if the pork you are eating came from a pig sacrificed on one of the pagan altars - that would not be helpful. That would threaten the community you have with your brother Abraham. It would be unnecessarily offensive and inconsiderate.

The request in the letter - and it is a request, not a command, is asking the Gentile believers to exercise their Freedom in Christ responsibly. Paul put it this way in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

(Ephesians 4:2-3)

Paul tells us where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty – there is incredible freedom.

But with freedom comes responsibility to act in such way that will help our brothers and sisters, not harm them.

Let me give a very practical example.

The Uniting Church has no regulation that bans the practice of alcohol consumption. We believe Christians have the freedom to make their own choice as to whether they drink or not.

But our church, like every other Uniting Church in Queensland bans the consumption of alcohol on our property. Why? That seems inconsistent?

A very special part of the Uniting Church is the Uniting Aboriginals and Islander Christian Congress. Some time ago our aboriginal brothers and sisters said to the rest of the church that because of the devastation that alcohol has wreaked in aboriginal communities it would not be helpful for them to see alcohol on any church premises. So even though we are free to drink alcohol in moderation, the church across the state decided to limit that freedom for the sake of fellow brothers and sisters.

Freedom is Responsibility.

Before we move on to my last point, I want to do something a little different. I want to lead us in a time of prayer that both confesses our disunity and proclaims the faith that unifies us. So I invite you to stand...

Grace is Amazing

Read the New Testament from Matthew through to Revelation and you will discover that the unifying theme is the grace of God.

Grace, simply defined, is the unearned and unmerited favour of God.

Grace is demonstrated in the fact that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us in order that we might be liberated from the curse of sin and the power of death.

Christ did not die for us after we got our act together, after we impressed God with our religious devotion or when we had rid ourselves of the worst of our sin.

Christ died for us when we were still wallowing in our mistakes, or living in the delusion of pride that says we do not need God.

We cannot earn grace. Grace is a gift.

We cannot add to grace. Grace is always enough.

So when Paul returned to Antioch and discovered that well-meaning religious people were trying to add to grace the additional requirement of circumcision he knew that more was at stake than the discomfort of some Gentile men.

What was at stake was the very heart of the gospel itself.

You see the gospel in its purest form will always be scandalous to us – perhaps too good to be true.

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God can't love us enough to die for us, can he?

God's love can't be a free gift, can it?

But we cannot earn God's grace with our good works or religious devotion.

We can only respond to grace. And so we respond to God's offering of his son for us with the offering of our lives in return.

So, I do not read my Bible in some deluded attempt to impress God.

I read my Bible because God's grace has already impressed me and I want to bathe myself in that grace.

Grace will always be enough. Grace is God's first and last word to us.

Grace will always be amazing.

In second book of CS Lewis' Narnia series, Prince Caspian, Lucy enters Narnia again, and she hasn't seen Aslan, this lion figure who is symbolic of Christ. She has not seen him in a long, long time, and so they have a wonderful reunion.

Lucy says to Aslan, "Aslan, you're bigger now."

Aslan says, "Lucy, that's because you are older. You see, Lucy, every year that you grow, you will find me bigger."

Every year that I grow in faith, I find God's grace even more amazing.

Every year that I pastor this church, I discover that in the end, God's grace is all we need.

Last Sunday night at 12two we had a great time reflecting on God's grace, and as we concluded the service a number of people responded to God's free gift by offering him their lives. For at least two of those people this was the first time they had responded to God in this way. And all heaven rejoices!

Here at Newlife God's grace will always be the message we preach because in the end only God's grace can change lives and transform our world!

Paul, the defender and evangelist of grace, tells us in his letter to the church at Ephesus:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.
(Ephesians 2:8)

As a church we will always come back to grace. It is in God's grace that we stand.

God's grace should always amaze us, dazzle us, inspire awe in us.

And so the final word is, as it will always be, God's grace is amazing!