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Acts 15 (read vv.1-7a; 36-39a) “United We Move Forward”

Intro. We are in the early stages of our *Together We Build* campaign. I like the title of our campaign, for we can build only as we work *together*. No individual or small group can accomplish the goal of expanding our facilities. The task is just too big.

The need for expansion is becoming more obvious. Now is the time to move forward with our building project. And now is not the time for strife and division. Now is the time for unity. But building projects provide opportunity for strife & division. There can be disagreements over exactly what to build, who is to build it, how much we should spend, and how to pay for it. So this morning I want to preach a message on the subject of Christian unity. We really need to stay united, especially during our building program.

We have seen from our Scripture reading in Acts 15 that even the early church had problems with strife & division. One group was insisting that Jewish circumcision was so necessary for Gentile believers that they even made it a requirement for salvation (vv. 1 & 5). Others, like Paul & Peter, insisted that salvation is by grace through faith, as we see from vv.9 & 11. The Jewish legalists also wanted to require Gentiles to live by the Mosaic Law. They wanted them to keep the Sabbath, and even follow Jewish dietary laws. So we read in v.2 that there was “no small dissension and dispute” among them. Then when the leaders of the early church got together, we read in v.7 that “there had been much dispute” among them.

Picture in your mind what it could have been like. One group of people in the church was taking one position on the issue, raising their voice with passion. Many others were taking the opposite position, and they may have been just as passionate and loud in their arguments. Tempers may have flared just a bit. You’ve witnessed something similar to that. In fact, you may have been right in the middle of it before!

Now Jesus had warned in Mt. 12:25 that a “house divided against itself will not stand.” Even so, the division in the first part of chapter 15 could have caused a major split between Jewish and Gentile churches. It could have caused the church to become nothing more than a small Jewish sect instead of a worldwide missionary movement. Satan would like nothing more than to divide believers and churches. And he has done a pretty good job. The Church of our Lord has been divided into many different denominations. Even among those who call themselves Baptists, there are over 50 different Baptist groups in America. Denominations and churches experience strife and splits all the time.

Now folks, division in a church is contrary to the very nature of God, who is One. He is not divided. Furthermore, division is a bad witness. The world looks at us and they see we are divided just like the rest of society. Division and strife is usually contrary to the principle of love. Division and strife create stress and bad feelings between people. No wonder Jesus prayed that His Church would be one, united in Him (John 17:21-23). So when disagreement & disunity arises in a church, we need to deal with it quickly and seek the biblical solution. And the biblical solution is found in our text. There are several principles of church unity that I want to share with you from our text.

Now when we have disagreements and strife, the first thing we should do is this:

I. APPEAL TO PROPER AUTHORITY

You and another person may get into an argument over who is right regarding the use of English grammar. One says, "She gave the money to Sallie and I." The other says, "No, you should have said, 'She gave the money to Sallie and me.'" One way to settle the disagreement is to pull out an English grammar book. That is appealing to an authority.

Even so, when a dispute arises, we should seek to resolve the dispute by appealing to an authoritative source. That's what the early church did. Of course, God is the true authority for the church. Christ is the head of the church. Thus, we are to seek His guidance and seek His will for our church and our individual lives.

Now the early church sought to discern the will of God by several means. I will follow the order of the text, which is not necessarily the order we should follow. First:

A. God Leads through Godly Leaders and His Church – I have already pointed out the fact that a sharp disagreement arose in the early church. And evidently neither side was able to persuade the other, so they had to appeal to a higher authority to settle the question. So in v.2 we see that they decided to confer with the apostles and elders at the Jerusalem church. Of course, the apostles had more authority than any preachers today, but the principle of consulting with godly leaders to settle disputes still applies today.

Even so when you have a disagreement with something that is going on in the church, you should take the matter to the leaders of the church. Talk to the leader of the organization if it has something to do with that organization. Or you may talk to a deacon or a member of the pastoral staff. The wrong way to handle the situation is to just go around to other church members and murmur and complain. You are not to attack other members or leaders who disagree with you. Just take the matter to the leadership. God has a way of working through the leaders of the church.

This is why it is important that a church have godly leaders; leaders who have the mind of Christ and the wisdom of the Lord. We need leaders who know the Word of God.

But as we can note in v.22, the final decision and authority came from the whole church, although leaders of the church had analyzed and discussed the issue at great length. This is consistent with our Baptist principle of congregational rule. Leaders are to lead, but they are not to be lords over God's heritage (I Pet. 5:1-4).

B. God Leads through His Deeds – God has revealed Himself through His works. So beginning in v.7 Peter referred to God's work in giving salvation to Cornelius and his family, even though they were Gentiles. And what was interesting was that they had not even made an oral confession of faith when the Holy Spirit came upon them. You see God, who reads the hearts of men, saw their faith within them, and immediately granted them the Spirit. And Peter's argument was difficult to answer, as it was an appeal to the acknowledged action of God. So without a confession of faith, baptism, circumcision, or the keeping of the Law, Cornelius was saved & indwelt by the Holy Spirit. So God had already settled the issue as to whether or not Gentiles needed to be circumcised.

So Peter was saying that God had already spoken on this issue. To insist that Gentiles be circumcised & keep the law was arguing with God. So he said in v.10, "Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples?"

Paul and Barnabas also had seen God endorse their work among the Gentiles by “signs and wonders,” showing that He approved of their ministry as well as of Peter’s at Caesarea.

Now we can apply this to us today. If the church has taken a course of action that is consistent with God’s will, you can often see evidence of God’s blessing upon the church. We should see people saved and Christians growing in their faith. We should see the Spirit working among us. But if the church is going in a direction that is contrary to God’s will, God will often withhold His blessing. Peace will be replaced with strife. Few people will get saved. Few lives will be transformed.

God also can reveal His will through open & closed doors, or through His providential control of circumstances. We need to pay attention to how God is working. We were hoping to expand our facilities 5 years ago or more, but additional land did not come available until 2 or 3 years ago. Perhaps the timing was just not right back then. Now things are lining up. Let’s pray that God will continue to open doors of progress if it is His will that we build.

Next, let’s move on to one of the most important sources of authority in the Church and it is this:

C. God Leads through His Word – Unlike Peter & Paul, James did not have personal experience in working with the Gentiles, for he ministered in Jerusalem among the Jews. But he did know the Word of God. So in vv.15-18 we see that James quoted from the Word of God to make the point that it has always been God’s intention to save people from all nations, and not just from the Jews. And the passage that James quoted from said nothing about the Gentiles becoming Jews before they could be part of God’s people. So we see here that they turned to the Word of God to help discern the mind of God on these issues and disputes.

Even so a lot of disputes among Christians would be settled if we all held to the authority of the Word of God, and honestly sought to interpret it correctly. But notice that James quoted Scripture to emphasize the broadness and inclusiveness of the work of God. We need to be careful that our appeal to biblical authority does not result in an extreme narrowing of the Christian faith & fellowship!

Now at times God’s Word will not address specific issues that can divide Christians. It’s not going to tell us if we should put carpet or vinyl tile in the entryway of the new building. The Word of God will provide principles to help guide our decisions, but it will not get too specific on many issues. Other than applying principles, we must at times rely on the other means of guidance that we are talking about today.

D. God Leads through His Holy Spirit – In v.28 they concluded that “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.” In this verse they made a bold claim for the guidance of the Holy Spirit for this action in this controversial issue. But such guidance Christ had promised in Jn. 16:13.

Even so we need to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in settling disputes among believers. After all, Paul said in Rom. 8:14, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” But I’m afraid that too many decisions are made without seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We do have a problem here, and that is the subjective nature of many of these sources of authority. The decision of the leadership is objective for the congregation, but subjective for the leaders themselves. The workings of God are objective, but subject to subjective interpretation. Likewise, the Word of God is objective, but subject to subjective interpretation in the less clear

passages. Finally, the leading of the Holy Spirit is subjective or inward. So except for the clear teaching of God's Word, we really need to see if at least 2 or 3 of these sources of authority point in the same direction. When they do, that should settle the issue. In Acts 15 all 4 did! So other than the clear teachings of Scripture, we cannot rely on just 1 source of authority. The leaders or the whole church may be wrong. The leading of the Spirit is too subjective, especially when that leading is sensed by only 1 person or a few.

Now once we appeal to authority we must be willing to submit to authority. Otherwise appealing to authority is just an attempt to get our own way endorsed. But when many people submit to the same authority, they can work together in unity and accomplish great things.

A study was once conducted to see how members of the various sections of eleven major symphony orchestras perceived each other. Most members of one section viewed members of the other sections in less than complementary terms. And different sections tended to have different personalities. With such widely divergent personalities and perceptions, how could an orchestra ever come together to make such wonderful music? The answer is simple: regardless of how those musicians view each other, they subordinate their feelings and biases to the leadership of the conductor. Under his guidance, they play beautiful music.

So it is with each of us as members of the Lord's church. Each of us has our own individual personality and we certainly have widely varying perceptions of the other members of our congregations. Yet, when we place ourselves under the leadership of the one great Conductor, we can come together to make beautiful music under His direction. Are you listening to the great Conductor? Are you submitting to His authority?¹

So as God leads the church through His Word, through His deeds, through His Spirit, through His leaders, or through a vote of the church, let us submit to His authority. When God has spoken, the disagreement and strife needs to end. The issue has been settled. Let's move on and stay focused on the mission of the church.

Now there is one more point about appealing to authority that is found in this text of Scripture, and I believe it is important to bring this out:

E. Tradition Is Not Our Authority - Those who were pressing Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses were driven more by tradition than anything else. It was very difficult for many Jewish Christians to break away from their ancient traditions. But that they must, for their traditions had been superseded by the New Covenant in Christ. Tradition alone is not a valid authority. Tradition is fine, but we must put tradition to the test of the Word of God. In Matthew 15 the Pharisees ask Jesus why His disciples transgressed the tradition of the elders. And Jesus replied in v.3, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?" He gave one example of how their tradition contradicted the Word of God. And Col. 2:8 says, "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, ... and not according to Christ." We must be willing to acknowledge that some of our beliefs may be more rooted in religious tradition than in the Word of God.

At times a church will get into a fuss and some people will say, "We've never done it that way before!" Have you ever heard that statement? So does that make something wrong? What are such people doing? They are appealing to tradition, which is not a valid authority.

¹ Adopted by Jim Davis for Verse a Week Club, Pulpit Helps, p. 8.

II. UNITY MUST NOT BE ACHIEVED THROUGH COMPROMISE OF ESSENTIALS

Unity is important, but it is not all-important. There are some things that cannot be compromised for the sake of unity. Martin Luther once warned: “It is better to be divided by truth than to be united by error.”

Now consider with me some examples where unity must not be achieved through compromise:

A. In the Issue of Salvation (v.1, 5 contrasted with vv.8-11, 24) – The Pharisees among them so insisted on circumcision that they made it a requirement of salvation. But that would violate a core belief regarding how we are saved. So they could not concede this point to the legalists among them just to avoid conflict in the church. Instead they sharply rebuked them in v.24 because they were teaching false doctrine about salvation, and it could not be tolerated.

Even so, we cannot compromise the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. We cannot fellowship with other so-called Christians who teach a different way of salvation.

B. In the Issue of Christian Freedom – The apostle Paul refused to compromise on the fundamental issue of freedom from a legalistic approach to Christianity. He said in Gal. 5:1, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” And right here in our text, look at the consensus of the early church as stated in v.19, “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.” As we can see from v.24, they are talking about troubling Gentile believers by insisting that they conform to Jewish law.

Oh, if Church rulers had always been as open-eyed as these leaders in Jerusalem, and had been content if people were joined to God and parted from the world, what torrents of blood, what frowning walls of division, what scandals and partings of brethren would have been spared! Our Baptist forefathers fought and even died for religious liberty. We believe that each person should be free to follow the dictates of conscience, and free to follow one’s understanding of the Word of God. We should not be bound by Popes, or Councils, or religious traditions. We do not believe in denominational control, but each congregation should be free to follow their best understanding of the will of God. Freedom is a fundamental principle that cannot be compromised to achieved unity.

Now even though we are free from legalistic religious traditions, and free from being bound by the personal convictions of others, we are not free to sin against the clear moral teachings of God’s Word. Paul said in Gal. 5:13, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh...” Freedom from the Law did not mean freedom to do as you please. So finally, unity must not be achieved through compromise:

C. In Basic Moral Requirements – Notice in v.29 that they insisted that Gentile believers “abstain from ... sexual immorality.” Immorality was rampant in Gentile society. The vast majority of Gentiles that came from pagan background had immorality in their past, including polygamy, & even homosexuality. Sex apart from marriage was practiced without shame or remorse. In fact, sexual immorality was an integral part of pagan religion! But Gentile believers could not be allowed to continue their immoral practices because it violates a basic moral principle. The Gentiles had to understand the gravity of sexual impurity. They had to understand the Christian freedom did not include a freedom to sin.

So a church must not overlook unrepentant sin just to keep from stirring things up. God is love, but He is also a God of righteousness and holiness. And sin destroys. So when it comes to things that are clearly sinful, as confirmed by the New Testament, we must take a stand on such issues without compromise.

But having said that, our text shows us a third principle of church unity. We should:

III. YIELD IN NON-ESSENTIALS FOR THE SAKE OF UNITY

The decision of the council may be called a compromise, but it was one dictated by the desire for unity, and had nothing unworthy in it. If the Jewish Christians made what was to them the immense concession of waiving the necessity of circumcision, the Gentile section might surely make the small one of abstinence from certain things that were considered especially objectionable by most Jews. Paul was a good example here. Where no compromise of principle was involved, he was the most conciliatory of men (cf. Acts 16:3; 21:26; I Cor. 9:19ff); and in his epistles he himself urges that those Christians who are strong in faith should voluntarily restrict their liberty in matters of food and the like, so as not to offend weaker consciences. For example, Paul said in Rom. 14:15, "If your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died." We should be willing to yield our rights and liberties if failing to do so would bring harm to another believer. We must always allow love to guide our actions (Cf. 15:1, 3; 1 Cor. 8:13). When we do, we will be willing to sacrifice our preferences and desires. And if we will live according to the principle of love, we will go a long way toward unity and good relationships. Furthermore, Paul said in Rom. 14:19, "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." Peace and unity should be preserved in the Church, and every believer should be willing to refrain from doing anything that might destroy peace & unity among Christians. The fellowship of the body of believers is more important than you asserting your right to freedom in non-essential things. So there are times when we should compromise on non-essentials, and when disagreement is over personal conviction rather than the clear teachings of God's Word.

In v.29 they listed 4 practices that the Gentile Christians should abstain from. I have already talked about 1 of them. Jewish believers were being asked to make major concessions, and now Gentile believers should be willing to make some concessions as well. The rules were not necessary for salvation, for that had already been decided that salvation was by grace through faith. But the purpose of the requirements was to ease tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church. An additional result would be a more favorable attitude on the part of unbelieving Jews toward the Christian movement. Thus, it was a matter of preserving a positive Christian witness. Plus, even in the Gentile lands the churches had at least some Jewish believers who may have had trouble getting used to the idea of complete freedom from the ceremonial law.

Now I'm not going to take the time to go into detail regarding the requirements listed in v.29. Simply put, they were practices that were especially abhorrent to Jewish believers. Gentile believers should be considerate of their Jewish brethren and abstain from such things out of love, and for the sake of Christian unity.

Even so, we should abstain from certain practices or courses of action that we know will bring strife and division within the church. There may be a group that feels the church should take a certain course of action, and if you put it to a vote, you may even get a majority vote of approval. But if a significant number of people are opposed, and pushing forward would cause

strife & division, then we should abstain from that course of action if it has nothing to do with the real mission of the church.

Now notice what happened when the church followed these principles of unity. The church once again became united. The dissenters either agreed with the proposed solution, or they at least kept quiet so the church could be united and move forward. The unity of the early church is expressed in v.25, where it says they were “assembled with one accord.” Actually, the original Greek says that they became (aorist participle) of one accord. Furthermore, not only were the Christian in Jerusalem brought to unity, but they expressed unity with the Gentile Christians in other lands. In v.23 the Jewish believers of Judea addressed Gentiles believers as “brethren who are of the Gentiles.” This was amazing, considering Jews were accustomed to calling Gentiles “dogs.”

Furthermore, we read in v.31, “When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.” The Gentile believer rejoiced in the freedom they were granted, and the whole church was rejoicing in the unity that had been preserved in the early church. Then the missionary expansion of the church was able to continue. The second missionary journey began shortly after the church was united once again, and thousands of additional souls were saved from several different nations, and many more churches were planted. When the church is united we can move forward. But when the church is divided, it is as if we are walking on a treadmill. We are working hard, but not making any real progress.

Conclusion: So let’s resolve to stay united. Let’s resolve to follow these principles of church unity, especially while we move through our building program. When we have disagreements, let’s appeal to proper authority. And while we cannot compromise our core beliefs, let’s be willing to compromise and yield on non-essentials for the sake of unity. And if we will work together, pray together, and trust God together, we will move forward as a church, and accomplish great things for God’s glory. Let’s do it!

Sources: Steve Felker (sermon tape of 10/27/85); F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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