

Sermon for Presbytery November 20th 2018, St. Andrew's Amherstburg

Scripture Reading - 20th November 2018

Acts 15: 22-31; 36-40 (NET Bible)

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

²³ They sent this letter with them:

From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings! ²⁴ Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said, ²⁵ we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you these things themselves in person. ²⁸ For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules: ²⁹ that you abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell.

³⁰ So when they were dismissed, they went down to Antioch, and after gathering the entire group together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they read it aloud, the people rejoiced at its encouragement.

³⁶ After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's return and visit the brothers in every town where we proclaimed the word of the Lord to see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to bring John called Mark along with them too, ³⁸ but Paul insisted that they should not take along this one who had left them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. ³⁹ They had a sharp disagreement, so that they parted company. Barnabas took along Mark and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and set out, commended to the grace of the Lord by the brothers and sisters.

Reflections from Acts for Presbytery (by Tim Reddish)

Here at St Andrew's, to complement our morning sermons following Mark's gospel, our mid-week Bible Study this Fall has been a whirlwind tour of the book of Acts. This evening, I thought I would simply share some personal observations from Acts, as it reflects the evolution of the early church over a period of 30 years following the ascension of Christ. This seems relevant for the church in any age. I want to focus particularly on issues pertaining to *leadership*, and in the process, I ask that we reflect on how this might speak to our congregations, to us as a Presbytery and, indeed, to the Presbyterian Church in Canada as a whole.

Initially, the apostles were, seemingly, fixated on replacing Judas Iscariot with Matthias, because of the symbolism of having 12 people corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel.¹ This reflects how they saw themselves as being in continuity with Judaism, as well as forming a new community of God. The *Jewishness* of the early church in Jerusalem was demonstrated in their routine worship in the *Temple*, as well as in the cultural hospitality of meeting and eating in homes. Yet, things changed. In Acts 12 we read that James – the brother of John - was killed, but no mention is made of the apostles replacing him. In fact, James – the brother of Jesus – evidently becomes the head of the Church in Jerusalem,² even though he did *not* meet the original criteria for apostleship - as someone who had been a witness of Jesus’ activities from his baptism to his resurrection.³

Nevertheless, the authority of *Jerusalem* still was deemed important. For example, Peter and John had to authenticate Philip’s successful ministry in Samaria.⁴ Later, Peter had to defend his actions with Cornelius to the church in Jerusalem.⁵ It was Jerusalem who sent Barnabas to Antioch to discover precisely what was going on there, for they had heard stories of an emerging Christian community.⁶ And as we heard in our Scripture reading this evening, it was Jerusalem who decided how to integrate non-Jews into the life of the Church. I will come back to that in a moment.

Relatively early in the life of the Jerusalem church, the apostles realised that they would be swamped in administrative and pastoral duties if they didn’t do something about. It was addressing the practical concerns of the distribution of aid to Aramaic- and Greek-speaking Jewish widows that caused them to introduce deacons. It’s not that the apostles belittled such tasks, they were an important sign of the reality of the continuing kingdom of God, but if they were not careful, such responsibilities would overwhelm their primary need to *teach* the rapidly growing church. So, the apostles told them to choose *from amongst themselves* seven who are well-attested, *full of the Spirit and of wisdom*, who could be put in charge of this necessary task.⁷ The people wisely chose a selection of leaders with Aramaic and Greek names to ensure that the accusation of favouritism could not be made against the church. These people included Philip and Stephen - the first Christian martyr. Clearly Philip’s status as a deacon did not preclude him from later becoming a pioneering evangelist to Samaria.⁸ He, like Barnabas, was freed to use his giftedness in wider the service of the kingdom of God. The leadership structures of the church had to therefore adapt to the growing practical needs of their communities *and*, as we will see, the church’s theology also had to change in light of the new things God was doing amongst them.

The way Luke tells the story, Jesus commissioned his followers just prior to his ascension with the following: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my

¹ Acts 1:12-26.

² Acts 12:17; 15:13, 19; 21:18.

³ Acts 1:26.

⁴ Acts 8:14-17.

⁵ Acts 11:1-18.

⁶ Acts 11:22-26.

⁷ Acts 6:3.

⁸ Acts 9:4-10.

witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth.”⁹ And the rest of the book narrates how that was fulfilled - ending with Paul “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ in Rome with complete boldness and without restriction.”¹⁰ Luke implies that the persecutions the church experienced in Jerusalem - following the death of Stephen - was the impetus for the spreading of the gospel. Prior to that enforced dispersion, the early church seemingly had *no* plan or strategy to fulfill Christ’s commission to them! Even so, it was the Holy Spirit that was evidently - and shockingly - at work in the life of Cornelius, Paul, and others – and that is why the Book is often called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit!”

After the remarkable success of Barnabas’ and Paul’s first missionary journey – incidentally, one that was commissioned by the church in Antioch, not Jerusalem - trouble emerged as conservative¹¹ Jews from Judea wanted Gentile to formally convert to Judaism, through the act of circumcision, and to keep the strict dietary laws. As you know, there was a *major* disagreement; Paul and Barnabas firmly opposed that very Jewish requirement. Resolving the issue required a meeting of the church in Jerusalem. What would the church leadership do?

They first gathered a *diverse* group of church leaders and had a vigorous debate, listening and *discussing* all sides of the argument. They went through a process of *discernment*, by identifying the true heart of the matter, whether that be theological or ethical. James also sought wisdom from the Old Testament Scriptures. Curiously, he quotes an obscure text from a minor prophet, Amos,¹² and cleverly adapts it to their present situation and reminds everyone that God’s intention was always to include the Gentiles. While their understanding God’s past activity was important, the use of Scripture could not – and should not – be the means of denying that God’s Spirit was doing a new thing before their very eyes. They certainly did not want to hinder *God’s* work, even if it challenged all their deeply-held religious traditions. The way Luke tells it, it was James who made the final decision!¹³ He did not want to create obstacles that made it difficult for Gentiles to come to God, yet he had some practical, ethical concerns because of his desire for unity, and for table fellowship between Jews and non-Jews. He therefore proclaimed a *compromise* for the sake of *community*. And afterwards, the Jerusalem Council disseminated the decision through authorised representatives, including Silas, and a formal letter. It was prudent to do *both*. Had this wise decision not be made, we might not be here today.¹⁴ This does not mean the implementation of this decision was easy; we see that later in Acts and in Paul’s letters.¹⁵

My final observation concerning leadership in Acts is that the idealised portrayal of unity in the early chapters gets slowly eroded, perhaps especially following this Council in Jerusalem, in that Paul and

⁹ Acts 1:8.

¹⁰ Acts 28:31.

¹¹ Acts 15:5 points out that these were Christians from the *Pharisaical* tradition; Paul was from the same tradition, Acts 23:6.

¹² Amos 9:11-12. Moreover, James uses the Greek LXX OT, not the Hebrew text – a curiosity given this was Jerusalem! One might have thought that quoting Moses would have been a much better appeal to scriptural authority, such as God’s call and promise to Abraham - to bless the “*all* peoples of the world” through him (Gen 12:1-3).

¹³ Acts 15:19.

¹⁴ The Church could have become a sect of Judaism, and Gentiles may have abandoned its’ message in droves.

¹⁵ See Acts 21:17-26. See also the ethical tensions in many of Paul’s letters, for example see Gal 2.

Barnabas separate. The true reason for that disagreement is ambiguous; Luke indicates that it is over the inclusion of John-Mark on their next missionary journey,¹⁶ but Paul's own account says it was differences in opinion over the implementation of that Council decision.¹⁷ The two descriptions of their dispute *cannot* be harmonised. Christian leaders can disagree, even those who are "full of the Holy Spirit," as Luke describes them both in Acts.¹⁸ There is no account of this dispute ever being resolved, and while some¹⁹ see this as a means of two powerful missionaries going in different geographical directions and thus further spreading the kingdom of God, I think that is putting a remarkable "spin" on this public display of disunity. I suggest we should be honest and say it was a tragedy. It is, perhaps, better to claim God's kingdom will advance, in spite of our human failings!

What might this brief overview of leadership and decision-making within Acts say to us today?

First, how might Brad Watson's resignation from LSA be seen in the light of the dispute between Paul and Barnabas? What might we learn from this experience as churches, as a Presbytery, and in the PCC for the future? I leave that as an open question.

Second, are we being overwhelmed by the practical needs within Presbytery and therefore need to authorise specific individuals to deal with certain practical issues in the life of the church? We do that already by formally recognising the giftedness in others, like Mark, Jason, and Barb. Perhaps we need to rethink our *local* practices as to who can be interim moderators or administer Holy Communion. If the Holy Spirit gives gifts for Christ's Church, let us empower people to use their gifts for the wellbeing of this Presbytery.

Third, the Holy Spirit is Christ's gift *to the Church*, in part, to make critical decisions. The authority to make decisions does not lie in a specific biblical text, but in the life-giving Spirit. Yes, we should seek guidance from Scripture, but we also need to recognise the *new things* God's Spirit is doing today. And incorporating that into the living traditions of the church requires courageous decision making as we move forward, whether that is in Session, here in Presbytery, or at General Assembly. In that process, let us "own" those decisions, and their consequences, while striving for unity.

Finally, James could have insisted in maintaining continuity with Jewish traditions and I think we can all see, with the benefit of hindsight, that would have been very detrimental to the life of the Church. Let us beware of being too bound to our own traditions, good though many of them are in themselves, and inhibit the work of God in *our* day. In the letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile churches, James wrote: "For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules," and he then gives a minimal list that was a *compromise* for the sake of the communal life of the church. And then he adds, "If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell."²⁰ Amen. Let us Pray.

¹⁶ Acts: 15:37-39.

¹⁷ Gal 2:13.

¹⁸ Acts 11:14; 13:9.

¹⁹ Including, probably, Luke himself!

²⁰ Acts 15:28-29.