

ACTS 15 SERMON Tregear 8.11.20 – Stick to the truth and stick together

What a week we've had. I don't know if you've been following the US elections but it's been a rollercoaster hasn't it? One thing that has been highlighted is that there are strong divisions between people in America. Whoever is President has an enormous job to unify the country, to show a way forward to a divided country. Which really ties into our story today. There was an issue that could have really split the early church and they learnt that they needed to stick to the truth and to stick together

Last week in Acts chapter 14 we saw Luke describing the opposition of people outside of the church. But what about when there are disagreements inside the church?

In Acts 15, Luke shifts his attention from what to expect in our interactions with those in the community, to what to expect in here, in the church family. He highlights two really important things that we can reasonably expect to happen *in the church* as we try to live together for Jesus.

1. Sometimes We Will Get it Wrong and we need to stick to the truth

Sometimes we will get it wrong. I know this sounds a bit obvious, but that doesn't mean it isn't important. As a gathering of people who are following Jesus, we will get things wrong. At Tregear we're committed to teaching and doing what it says on the Bible, but we will get it wrong. That means we need to keep checking what we believe and what we are doing against the Bible, and we also need to be ready to hold our hands up and say "Yes, we messed that one up. We got it wrong." That's one of the main points of Acts 15.

Things were going really well in Antioch as we saw a couple of weeks ago. Until some new people turned up and threatened to wreck everything! In 15:1, Luke tells us that "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.'" In other words, they said that handing control of your life to Jesus wasn't

enough - according to these guys, if you wanted to become a Christian, you had to become a Jew first. In other words, they had got it wrong. In fact, they had got it disastrously wrong. And if anyone ever says to you “to become a Christian you need to trust Jesus *and..*”. then they've got it wrong too.

Down through history, people have filled in the Jesus plus blank in all kinds of ways. People have wrongly said, To be a Christian requires trust in Jesus plus... being circumcised, being part of the one true church, taking the Lord's Supper in the right way, handing over all your money to the church, speaking in tongues, being baptised in the right way by the right person at the right time - the list goes on and on. But what matters is that we get the fact that as soon as we add anything to trusting Jesus, we've got it wrong! And we are very prone to getting it wrong. We need to be aware of that. And ready for it. The Reformers said that we need to be 'always reforming' - why? Because we are so good at getting it wrong!

So when these men arrived, Paul and Barnabas took it very seriously, because they knew that this would kill the church. It was that simple. We pick the story up at 15:2-4 -

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

But that wasn't the end of their problems. In verse 5, they run into another set of theological problems. This time, some Pharisees who had become Christians started to insist that when Gentiles become Christians by trusting Jesus alone, then they needed to start obeying the Jewish law if they wanted to grow.

But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, “**The Gentile converts** must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses.”

Do you see the difference? The group who travelled to Antioch got it wrong about how we *become* Christians, which was a terrible mistake. The Christian Pharisees in Jerusalem got it right about how we *become* Christians, but wrong about how we *grow as Christians*, which wasn't great either.

From verse 6 through to verse 35, Luke tells how the leaders in Jerusalem, plus Paul, Barnabas and a few others managed to sort this mess out. For the sake of time, let me summarise it for you. They said 3 basic things: (1) We become Christians simply by entrusting ourselves to Jesus (2) The Old Testament law was designed to show us we need to be rescued, we can't save ourselves. It has done that job, so there is no need for Gentiles like us to keep the law as if we were Old Testament Jews (3) Gentiles should avoid doing things (listed in 15:29) which would have made it really difficult for Christians who were also practising Jews to be with them in church. It's a brilliant solution, because on the one hand it protects the truth of the gospel, but does so in a way that also makes sure that there's not a division or a wedge isn't driven between Gentile Christians and their Jewish brothers and sisters. It meant they could keep meeting together. And that's why it's so good for us to read this.

We will get it wrong. So when we get it wrong, what are we supposed to do? We're supposed to make sure that *we are sticking to the truth, and we are to make sure we are sticking together*. Remembering that won't stop us getting it wrong, but it will stop us from going too far off track!

Here in our church family, we do need to repeatedly ask ourselves two simple questions:

(1) **Have I lost my grip on the truth of the gospel?** Because it's really easy to do - that's why being in church week by week, and being part of a home group, and talking about living for Jesus over morning tea and through the week really matters - we need to help each other stay on track.

(2) **Have I stopped putting other people first?**

If we have? There's only one thing to do - we need to repent. That is, we need to say sorry specifically to God, and to the people whom we have hurt, or ignored, or mistreated, and ask for God's strength to start being godly again.

Someone has said that the life of the church, of our church, should be dripping with repentance? We're messed up people, who will hurt each other, and who will need to repent! We shouldn't be able to get out for morning tea without tripping over people who are repenting for stupid and hurtful words and actions and bad attitudes! That's the kind of thing that should be perfectly normal in our church - because we get it wrong, and we find it really hard to put other people first. Let's be realistic!

Forgiveness – aware of this in the past few weeks. There are people who have felt hurt because of others actions or words. If you have been hurt by others, can you forgive them? Our natural reaction is to keep the hurt, hold the anger against them. But we are crippling ourselves. God is able to give us the strength to forgive the one who has wronged us.

If there is anything which is a barrier between you and someone else in this church ask God to give you the strength to forgive them or it might be that you need to repent and you need to ask forgiveness of someone else. Don't wait. And do it out of love, for Jesus and for them.

We're taking the Lords Supper in a few moments. We remember Jesus's life and especially his death on the cross. We make a mockery of it if we are not willing to forgive others or seek forgiveness for what we've done.

And then tucked away at the end of chapter 15, there's one more thing we need to look at before we stop. Paul and Barnabas disagree. And that too is pretty normal.

2. Sometimes We Will Disagree but we need to stick together

Paul and Barnabas are a great team together. They work together amazingly well. Barnabas is warm, and kind, and generous, and a gifted evangelist. Paul, as well as being a gifted evangelist, has an incredibly sharp mind, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Bible and is a superb debater. Together, they were making a huge impact. They

were probably the greatest ministry team there has ever been. Until we get to 15:36. Here's what happens:

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

It's an interesting one. Young John Mark, for whatever reason, hadn't been able to cope on the journey in chapters 13 and 14, he had left and returned home. Now they were planning a follow-up visit, Barnabas raised the thorny issue of bringing Mark along. And that's what caused the split. The text uses a rare word meaning 'an intense disagreement based on strong convictions' to describe what happens. Luke doesn't say who is to blame and the Greek word doesn't have the idea that one side is to blame. Did they have a blazing row, or yell at each other – Luke doesn't say, though they might have. His point is that they parted because Paul was convinced that Mark was a liability and would be a drain on their effectiveness. Barnabas was convinced that young Mark wasn't a complete disaster area, he just needed some encouragement, and training, and a second chance.

So who was right when Paul and Barnabas argued? Luke doesn't say. I reckon they both were. Paul didn't have anything against Mark - it's just he knew having to 'baby' him would limit the other things they could do. And he was probably right. Barnabas saw the potential in Mark, and was more than willing to devote the time and energy needed to mentor him. And he was probably right too, as the fact that he went on to write one of the four gospels shows. Incidentally, Paul saw that too - in his last letter, 2 Timothy, he asks Timothy to send John Mark to him, "for he is extremely useful to me!"

So why does Luke include this strange and inconclusive incident? It's here to show us that sometimes, we do disagree. Sometimes we have to do one thing or the other, and

there is no third way, no workable compromise. Sometimes, we have to agree to disagree. Sometimes, we even fall out. Of course, at times it is down to sheer stubbornness, or the fact that one party is behaving in ungodly and indefensible ways. But sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's because we live in a flawed world, and the right thing to do isn't clear cut. Sometimes it's because we have to make judgement calls, and in all good conscience, we come to opposite conclusions on principle. But if it happens, let's remember - this is normal. This is what we should expect.

Here in Tregear, we will get it wrong. At times we will even disagree. We should expect it. We shouldn't panic. But we should make sure that we hold onto the truth of the gospel on the one hand, and do everything we can to stick together on the other.

Conclusion

So where do these chapters in Acts leave us? They leave us with a very clear expectation that life in our church family will have its ups and downs. Our life will be like that because sometimes people love the message of Jesus, and sometimes they hate it. It will be like that because we are flawed people and sometimes we get it wrong. We can very easily get the wrong idea about how to become Christians, and how to grow as Christians, so we need to work hard to stay on track and to get back on track when we mess it up. And normal life in any Christian community will be a little bit bumpy from time to time because sometimes we will disagree. And we'll have to agree to disagree. This is normal church life.

We stick to the truth and we stick together, even when it's hard.

Isn't it great that the Bible is so honest? Isn't it great that God is so straight with us? The fact that God knows what we are like, and knows what other people are like takes such pressure off us. There is no pressure to succeed in God's church. There is no pressure to pretend. There is no pressure to paper over the cracks and act as if everything is always wonderful. The church is a place where we can be honest. I really believe that Tregear is a place where we can be honest. Where we can be vulnerable. Where we can be real. Why? Because the only qualification for being part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, is that we are forgiven sinners. And that makes all the

difference in the world! I don't know about you - but that's the kind of church that I want to be part of! It makes me want to thank God that instead of telling us to live for him on our own, he has given us one another.