

“When Drinking, Politics, Cussing, and Circumcision Divide a Church” // Acts 15:1– 32 // SENT #17

Well, it’s summertime, which means a few things. **1. It’s hot.** **2.** A bunch of y’all start going on **vacation**; **3.** As it turns out, we **always end up having some of our best preaching (& teaching)** in the summer. I don’t plan it like that—*doesn’t make much sense*; it just seems to work out that way.

This **summer is shaping up** to be that way already. We’re going to do the **third and final segment** of our *SENT* series through the book of Acts, and it’s got some really great stuff in it. And I’ve got some friends who will be coming in at different points in the summer to help us out... I think this is going to be a great summer.

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Well... **in case you forgot** (or you’re joining us for the first time) the book of *Acts* tells the rather amazing story of how a group of ordinary people: blue-collar workers, tax collectors and a few women started the largest religious movement in history.

The story is really quite remarkable. *Never had a larger assignment been given to a less qualified group of people.* After Jesus had resurrected, he gathered his **ragtag group of disciples** together on the side of a mountain and said, “OK, your job is to spread this message and make disciples for me in every country in the world.”

And then he just floats off into heaven. You’ve got to think about what that was like.

Eventually one said, what... The whole world? Does he even know how big the world is?” Well, yeah... *Never had a larger assignment been given to a less qualified group of people.*

So how did they do it? Two things: 1. Jesus gave them his Holy Spirit, who guided and empowered them in the building his church.

- You get the sense in Acts that they are trying to keep up
- Acts 1:1 “*Jesus Continued.*”

So that was the first thing: **they had the Holy Spirit.** The second thing is they had a rock solid conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead—which sustained through every obstacle or opposition.

- **When they were confronted with questions they couldn’t answer, or got into arguments they couldn’t win...** they were like, ‘Yeah, but Jesus rose from dead?’ (Ever got into an argument with a really smart person you felt like you couldn’t win, even though you knew they were wrong? Peter got like that in Acts 4. And he says, “Look, I get that you’re smarter than me, and you have questions I don’t know how to answer... but here’s the thing: this guy we knew was dead, and now he’s alive.” No offense to your massive education and intellects, but *if I have to choose between your degrees and his return from the dead, I’m going with the return from the dead.*”
 - **If you believe Jesus was raised from the dead,** wouldn’t that change how you approach questions? I often ask people who have objections... “What if Jesus came back right now and said, ‘Hey, I’m not going to answer this question right now... there is an answer, but I’m not going to give it to you yet,’ would you suspend your doubts until he could explain it to you?” They usually say, “Well, yes,” so then I say, “The problem is not the questions; the problem is your lack of certainty about Jesus’ resurrection.”

- I believe there is more than sufficient proof that he rose from the dead—*faith is the unexplainable meeting the undeniable!*
- **When they faced obstacles they couldn't overcome...** when Rome had put their leaders into prison, when their families were being fed to the lions, or they had no money, they said, "Yeah, but Jesus rose from the dead. He's going to make this work!" ***Church, if we believe Jesus rose from the dead, what kind of confidence will it give us about our mission?***

So, Acts is the story of how this early community, filled with the Spirit, and sure of the resurrection, spread the gospel message over the entire planet.

And **along the way Luke**, the author, stops to tell you these stories about things that happened to the church so that we can learn from their example.

And that brings us to **Acts 15...**

Acts 15:1–32

The church encounters a problem that could have significantly derailed the church had they not handled it... a very subtle danger, but very important...

Now, **a lot of people don't preach on this text** because it's about a theological debate and those can be **BORING**. But this one is going to answer some really important questions, like:

- *What role should **politics** play in the church?*
- *How should we handle gray areas, like, "Is it ok to **drink alcohol?**" If marijuana is legalized...? And what do you do if **people in your small group disagree on that?***
- *And even, what should you do when a **new believer cusses in church?***
- (Some of you say, "This passage deals with all this?" Yep. I'll show you that at the end, but let's unpack the story 1st.)

[15:1] But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

- **A lot of the first Christians were Jews**, and Jews had been raised on Old Testament law, and one of the most important Jewish laws was that every male had to be circumcised. It was a God-given sign to separate the people of God from the world.
 - So, a lot of these new Jewish Christians were teaching, "If you are really going to be a child of God, you have to be circumcised."
- **What this meant was that the new members classes in the early church primarily consisted of women and children.**
 - The women all went to Starting Point, and the guys were out in the car, saying, "Honey, you go on ahead. I'm not so sure about all this."

[2] And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

- Keep in mind this was a ridiculously long trip for Paul and Barnabas... and it's right in the middle of Paul's ridiculously successful missionary and writing career.
 - He's out establishing churches and writing books that we still study 2K years later. For an author, that's successful, right? *My own wife...*
- In the midst of this, Paul walks back to Jerusalem, because whatever is being discussed is so important he's willing to come all the way back to Jerusalem to discuss it.

[6] The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. [7] And after there had been much debate, (that means, a lot of yelling) Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. [8] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving

them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, [9] and he made no distinction between us and them, *having cleansed their hearts by faith.*

[10] Now, therefore, why are you testing God by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

- **There were 613 Jewish laws.** Circumcision was just 1. **612 others...**
- Peter's like, "I **don't know about you guys**, but I never felt like I was keeping them all, **and I was born a Jew.**
 - First, I could **hardly keep 'em straight... How far was I allowed to walk** on the Sabbath again?
 - Were we allowed to eat **llama** meat? How about **turkey bacon?**
 - And what about **yoga pants?** Is that a forbidden fabric, or just in really poor taste for a guy?
- ...No matter how hard I tried to keep the law, I **never felt** like I was measuring up. **Thaddeus**, did you? How about you, **Bartholomew?**
- **Well, if we could barely keep** these laws, and we were born Jews, why would we project that burden onto the Gentiles?

[11] But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." **None of these things** could save us anyway. *Faith in the finished work of Christ saved us! Not what we did; but faith in what he had done.*

[12] And all the assembly fell silent, and (then) they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. [13] After they finished speaking, James (who is, you recall, the half-brother of Jesus—which, I've told you, is another of the primary reasons I believe Jesus actually did rise from the dead—James, Jesus' half-brother, was convinced. Think about it (and I'm not really trying to be funny): *How many of you have an older brother? What would it take to convince you that*

he was God? James) replied, "Brothers, listen to me.... It is my judgment, therefore, that **we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.**

- I would like to suggest we engrave that phrase into the cornerstone of this church: **We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.** Any obstacle we can eliminate, I think we should. Even preferences for things I really like; things I am comfortable with.
- **I think about it in my preaching.** I do not want to make it difficult for... **people unfamiliar with Christianity** to turn to God because I use a bunch of terms they don't understand or by being a church full of cliques nearly impossible to penetrate... nor do I want to make it difficult because we present this artificial façade of righteousness people feel like they have to live up to in order to be included...
 - Sometimes we project this sanitized, perfect life—families walking hand in hand... big Bibles, smile with a gleam in our teeth... hi brother. "I'm not like that. I don't belong." "My life is so messed up." I don't belong with these people.
 - At my home church we dressed up... **WOMAN WHO** wouldn't dress up...
- I do not want to make it difficult for... **guests drawn to our church** who have heard God is at work here ... but then they get here the facilities are a mess; the parking is bad; kids rooms are overcrowded... all because we don't have enough volunteers. **(Or we have small groups ridiculously hard to get into)**
- I do not want to make it difficult for people turning to God because I use **mock or speak condescendingly** about people on the outside which turned them off to begin with
- I do not want to make it difficult for... **African-Americans or people of other races that are turning to God** because we have no multi-cultural representation in our leadership and to be Christian means capitulating to white culture

- I do not want to make it difficult for... those **struggling with same-sex attraction** who are turning to God by stigmatizing that sin, or treating it as different than my own
 - (Lesbian girl's comment to me)
- I do not want to make it difficult for... for **Democrats** by mixing secondary political positions with the gospel message. Or Republicans.
- I don't want to make it difficult for **Duke fans** by rubbing it in their face that they got eliminated in the first round of the NCAA this year, or for **State fans** by pointing out they haven't had a good team since 1982.
- **You catch my drift?** We have a **message that is life or death**, and NO SECONDARY message, no matter how important, can get in our way.

²⁰ Instead we should write to them (the Gentiles), telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

- You read that and you say, "What?" Kind of seems like a random list: "don't have immoral sex and don't strangle animals."
 - **Sexual immorality:** In the pagan world, extramarital sex was commonly accepted as the norm... he was saying, "The moral laws of God don't change. So, heed that." You say, "**Why only mention that one?**" Lying, murder, stealing. He's not saying that stealing and murder were open season... it's just that this was the one that was commonly accepted.
 - Christian theologians for 2000 years have separated the moral commandments from the ceremonial and Jewish civic laws. The moral dimensions of the commandments are still in effect because God doesn't change—so they need to avoid sexual immorality.
 - **But what's with the "not eating meat from strangled animals and from blood, food polluted by idols..."** Those things were really **offensive** to Jews—it would cause

fellowship problems. That's why he references the law being read—all the Jews were raised this way. He's saying, "Don't make it difficult for your fellow Jewish Christians. They have cultural sensitivities. Be gracious toward them."

- Everyone listening was like, "Wait, 613 down to 2. Avoid sexual immorality and don't offend the Jews...? That's quite a reduction."

(By the way, I hear a lot of people say, "You conservative Christians don't take the Bible seriously. You just pick and choose what you want." They point to Leviticus... dietary laws. Fabric. "*Why do you obey the Bible on sex but not on kinds of fabric? You're inconsistent.*"

- No! We are under the authority of the Bible until that authority tells you part of it is no longer binding. *We aren't picking and choosing. In putting aside the dietary and ceremonial restrictions we're putting aside what the Bible tells us we should put aside.*¹
- The Bible tells us to continue to observe the moral dimensions of the law and put aside the ceremonial: the dietary, clothing restrictions.

[22] ...They sent Judas (not the one that betrayed Jesus, but another one) ... and Silas, leading men among the brothers, [23] with the following letter... "Greetings... (28) It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: [29] that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled (who strangles an animal), and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." (Imagine the excitement reading that letter!)

[30] So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. [31] And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And all the men went to Starting Point the very next week.

¹ Adapted from sermon by Tim Keller on this passage.

Andy Stanley talks about several drifts this text warns us to avoid... drifts the early church faced that we face as well. I'm going to use a few of his and add a few of my own. **Every church** and every Christian, faces these drifts.

1. The drift from a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders

- Every church tends to do this... **When we first started**, so focused on reaching those on the outside... but we get established... we got needs. It's so easy to start thinking about ourselves...
 - Hard for me... **I have my own preferences; and, I want to make you happy**, too. I like good job approval.
 - And you, the ones sitting here in front of me, **you're the ones who write** the letters to complain. *People who don't come don't complain. So it's easy for me to re-engineer the church to please you or me.*
- **But we ought not to make it hard for the Gentiles who are turning to God.** So we have to constantly be asking that question, "Does this make it hard for them?"
 - **It's sad to go into churches stuck in old traditions...** Group of people who have been there in the **same seats** since the Revolutionary War... **average age is 78.** If you're in your 40's you're in the youth group... I walk in and I think, "Wow, if the **1940's ever come back** into style, these people are going to be ready."
 - But they **won't change, even though they can see** are not reaching the next generation. And I think it's sad because they love their traditions more than they love their grandchildren.
- Handbells in closet. Made plans to sell them. Woman came up, "I heard you were going to sell the handbells." Yes, ma'am. "My mother, who has gone on to be with Jesus, donated the money for those handbells." **Why are you going to sell them?** (*I was tempted to lie, but thought, "Well, I might as well own it."*) We need to replace them with some new musical equipment. **What equipment?** Two electric guitars. I thought, "Lord, is this the end

of my pastorate?" Your mother who is with Jesus, don't you think she'd want us to use her gift to reach her grandchildren? "That makes sense."

- **If you've been here for a while...** raise your hand. They did this.
- This **church in to its own crossroads**, like this church in Acts. Our **Jerusalem council** too place on a Sunday night in January of 2002, and they made the same decision.
 - **We gave away the choir robes.** Sold the organ to a funeral home. We make fun... but they loved that stuff.
 - They did it **so you could be reached!** (Even if **none at your campus...** you have a campus that we birthed by the faith and selflessness of a group of people who don't even attend there! They didn't do it so we could be selfish with our preferences.)
 - **Not popular: "much debate."** During that season about 150 people left.
 - The **300 who stayed** said, "Whatever it takes."
 - They chose to **advance the mission** rather than preserve the tradition.
- They **didn't do it so we can be** selfish now.
 - We have to remake that **same decision** every year.

So, the drift from a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders; from advancing the mission to preserving the tradition.

2. The drift from grace to law

- The ones calling out for circumcision **were saved.** They believed they were saved by putting faith in Christ, but **after that they started** to drift back toward a rules-based relationship with God
- **That's what always happens...** We constantly drift from grace back to law. **Luther—hardwired.** Car severely out of alignment.
- Now, our list is different. Circumcision is prob not a big deal to us, but we have our own lists... Lists of things, where we say, "If you

do these things, these will make you right with God and show you are a good Christian.”

- They're **never bad things**... Are you *involved in ministry*? Doing a quiet time? Small group? How many people did you share Christ with? Do you adopt? Do you have a perfect family? Divorce? How much do you give?
- Good things... but these become the measure of our spiritual lives and the measure by which we evaluate others.
- Not only does this make us lose the gospel in our own lives, it makes it difficult for others to come to God.
 - **Illus. Ever been really lost?** Anyone who knows me knows I have a notoriously bad sense of direction. Most dangerous is when I go running in a new place. Don't know how to get back. Sometimes people who come in here are like that, and **when we present the essence of Christianity as a bunch of rules** to maintain, we make it hard.
 - **The gospel is that you are purified the moment you put faith in Christ**; not faith in what you are able to do but on what he's done.
 - **His last words on the cross were "it is finished," not "go fix yourself."**
 - That means **at any moment you can fully right with God, no matter how lost you are...** It is as finished for you, my friend, as it is for anyone.

3. *After you drift from grace to law, you'll see a* **The drift from a focus on internal transformation to one on external conformity.**

- The gospel's focus is transforming the heart.
 - Jesus said that the **essence of the law** was to love God and others, and everything else was an outworking of that. (Now, the **Bible helps us see** what love looks like: truth, purity, justice). But the **core is a heart of love**, and this heart is produced by faith in Christ.

- In places that lose the focus on the gospel, they **replace a focus on inward transformation** with an emphasis on outward conformity. **When that happens, a whole host of things become laws that determine whether you are spiritual.**
- In their day, it was circumcision. Let me give you a few common in our church backgrounds

Alcohol

- Growing up with teetotalers... good reasoning.
 - **Bible often speaks very negatively** of alcohol, warning of the dangers
 - NYT article: **1 out of 6 people** who drink have a serious alcohol problem; **1 in 10 kids** in United States grow up in homes with alcohol abuse.²
 - **100K** alcohol related deaths last year
 - I commend you for thinking this way! If it's really what it's all about... that's very conscientious and loving toward your fellow man!
- But... others say,
 - Well, **just because something is abused**, doesn't mean we should get rid of it totally: **Sex** is abused...do we get rid of it? **Words** are abused...get rid of talking? **Food** is abused...stop eating?
 - If you want to talk about things that kill... last year there were: **100k deaths** related to alcohol; **300k deaths** related to obesity. Nobody is **advocating getting** rid of desserts.
 - And **even though the Bible warns** that alcohol can be abused, we clearly see people in the NT drinking fermented beverages... including Jesus, and at one point Paul even prescribes it for Timothy.

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/june/why-i-gave-up-alcohol.html>

- Also **good arguments**. So, **rather than leave** this as an issue of conscience, some churches pick a side and make it law. **If you're going to be a member of our church, you must sign this covenant.**
- It seems to me we **ought to leave this a matter of conscience**, and we should try, in deference to each other, **not to offend**.
 - Some of you may hear this teaching on alcohol and say, "I'm looking forward to throwing this in the face of everyone in my SG as I break open a Heineken in front of them." That just shows how selfish, and all-about-me your attitude is.
 - They told the Gentiles, "Don't throw this stuff in the face of your fellow Jewish Christians."
- **This makes for some tense unity in our church...**
 - Me in my marriage...
 - Presbyterian will say hello to you in liquor store

Christian appearance and vocabulary

- Some of you grew up in churches where Christians dress in certain ways... No tattoos. That's fine. Let's not turn it into a new law.
- Profanity: Christians have a certain way they talk... Fine. You don't hear me using profanity. But I don't want to judge someone's heart, especially someone new... "Pastor, that was one hell of a sermon"

Politics

- I think the Bible needs to shape how we think about everything. We need to learn to think biblically about everything.
- But for a lot of people **certain positions become like religious "law,"** an external sign of whether you are right with God.
- And **maybe you're right** about those things. But I **don't want to make it hard** for the Gentiles... and make this **secondary thing a gateway** to the first thing
 - Let's have those discussions, but let's have them in the right way and never make them the main thing.

- **Simon the zealot** and Matthew the tax collector

Those 3 shifts destroy the foreword movement of the church

- *From a passion for outsiders to pacifying insiders*
- *From grace to law*
- *From a focus on internals to one on externals*

This was a moment. A moment of incredible but subtle danger. Could have ended the rapid expanse Christian movement.

- **Many churches go through this and don't make it.**
- I **don't want to make it hard** for the Gentiles in our community to turn to God...

The gospel is...

- *God* wants to know you. He wants a relationship with you. He made a way! He came to earth to pay the penalty for your sin.
- He wants to come into your life, forgive your sin, make you a new person.
- *No matter how lost, it is done.*
- *Gospel is not change and come, but come and he will change.*
- *Discouraged? No matter how lost.* You don't have to clean up to come to him. He'll start cleaning you up when he comes into your life!

Bullpen:

- ~~Don't judge someone's heart based on whether they conform to your political "law" or not.~~
 - ~~Now, just like they told these people... there are a few things we should agree on... moral issues, things like abortion... but still we must handle them in the right way, with grace and love.~~
- ~~Worship styles~~
- ~~Many of you judge others by whether they worship like you or not~~

What does that mean? It means we should follow our consciences and not judge each other based on this external standard. Godly people can choose either side of this

- I don't want someone to assume that to become a Christian means converting to a particular view of politics.
- I'm going to say, "Let's have those discussions, but have them later." And never make them the main thing.

Lamin Sanneh, an African professor at Yale, who was formerly a Muslim, says that when **Islam comes in**, it slowly suppresses and replaces the culture with its own Arabic culture. It Arabizes whatever culture it enters.

And at the end of Peter's sermon, James speaks up. He's making the final judgment. (Remember, this is Jesus' brother. What would your brother have to do to convince you he is God?

"Smoking send you to hell?" – "Nope, but it'll make you smell like you've been there!" To be consistent with the "Your body is a temple" argument, we would have to do away with Twinkies.

Could you walk away from alcohol for 30 days? If not, you're addicted. If that question makes you angry, then I just attacked your idol. Alcohol isn't the problem for the alcoholic...it's just a symptom of the heart.

For way too long the church has been more concerned with what's in folks fridge more than their heart.

"Well Jesus hung out at bars and clubs!" Yes, but Jesus saw conversions when he was there!

matter what else happened, his plans would succeed. (You see, the core of their message was not that Jesus was a cool, religious guru with some really innovative ideas about God that people really needed to hear. No, he had been God in the flesh... and his death was not an unfortunate accident, or even an inspiring act of martyrdom, but part of a sovereign plan of God to save the human race. Jesus had died, willingly, as a substitute for sin, and then risen from the dead to show he had successfully paid for sin.

If you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, what kind of confidence would that give you?

- How would this change your approach to questions about faith you can't answer?
 - I have those... if I really saw Jesus raised from the dead. I might say, "I still can't figure this out..."

- I ask people... The problem is not the questions; the problem is your lack of certainty about Jesus' resurrection. Is there sufficient proof for his resurrection? If so, then can't you accept that there may be things that may take you years to grasp, maybe not even until eternity?
- ~~Faith is the unexplainable meeting the undeniable!~~
- If you knew Jesus had raised from the dead, how would you feel about your future? "Failure." The resurrection promises victory.

I believe Jesus did rise from the dead. The evidence is nearly incontrovertible. That's the Christian's hope, and that's why every Sunday is Easter Sunday around here.

Old Testament law had all these regulations about life and diet and what kinds of clothes you could wear—613 laws to be exact, and one of them was that