

“Sometimes You Wanted the Wrong Thing”

Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 15: 1-11, 19; Galatians 3:23–29

How do we react when failing to get what we want...?

Disagreements, controversies, and compromise have been part of the Church from its earliest days. Acts 5 tells of disharmony among the widows when it came to food distribution in the burgeoning Jerusalem community of believers. Acts 15 takes us into another controversy, which threatened to tear the Jesus movement apart before it even got started.

To grasp Acts, we have to try to put ourselves in the shoes of those first Christians, nearly all of whom were Jewish. They had lived their entire lives immersed in the rituals, traditions, and laws of God’s people. They avoided pork, circumcised their male children, didn’t work on Saturdays, and much more. And Jesus had done the same. He had been a righteous Jew, which meant a Jew who kept God’s Law.

So, wouldn’t it seem only right that Jesus’ followers also keep the Law? Surely, if it was right and proper for Jesus, it was right and proper for all of his disciples. So, surely, Gentiles coming into the movement should also keep the Law. Again . . . if it was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for all his disciples.

But was that right? Must all incoming Gentile men be circumcised before being accepted as disciples by the burgeoning Christian communities? Must all the Gentiles seeking baptism forgo pork and keep the Sabbath? Sit with these questions for a bit and you will begin to grasp just how foundational these questions were to the future of the movement.

And so, two sides took shape. One, led by Pharisees who had embraced Jesus, argued that keeping the Law of Moses was essential in this young Jesus movement. The other, led by Paul and Barnabas, evangelists who had been working with Gentiles, argued that God had demonstrated through his work among the Gentiles themselves, that the time of Law-keeping as a marker of God’s people had passed.

A conference was held in Jerusalem to settle the issue. And, in the end, the community reached a compromise: the incoming Gentiles would not have to be circumcised or otherwise keep the Law. But they were asked to refrain from actions particularly noxious to their Jewish brothers and sisters, namely “things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (15:20).

These disciples of Jesus, Jewish and Gentile alike, now found their identity as persons and as a people in Jesus Christ. At roughly the same time as the Jerusalem conference, Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia, “But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian [the Law], for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Richard Hays reflects on these new clothes, this new identity in Christ:

Our identity is given to us fundamentally through our union with Christ. Paul saw this union as figured forth and enacted in baptism. In baptism we “put on” Christ; we enter into union with him in such a way that all other markers of status and identity fall away into insignificance (3:27–29). Centuries of the practice of infant baptism in the culture of christendom have obscured the dramatic symbolism that the early Christians saw in baptismal initiation. In baptism, the person being baptized confessed the lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation, disrobed to signify the putting off of an entire way of life, was immersed below the water as if undergoing burial (Rom 6:3–5), was raised to a new life, and was clothed in new garments symbolizing the transformation that had occurred. Baptism was a symbolic participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, and no one could undergo it without realizing that one life had ended and a new one had begun.



Paul saved his appeal to baptism for the climactic place in the argument of Gal 3:6–29 because it so powerfully embodied what he wanted to say to the Galatians: They were to find their identity in Jesus Christ alone...

Paul's passionate rejection of...ethnic/religious "identity politics" should lead us to reflect carefully on the ground of our own identity. To what extent is our sense of who we are grounded in the gospel of Christ, and to what extent is it determined by other factors? Such questions may lead us to uncomfortable conclusions. In our time there are many movements, even within the church, that seek to define an identity based on race, on national origin, on gender, or on sexual orientation. Such movements are the contemporary analogues of the "circumcision party" within the early church, against which Paul so passionately fought. Against all such determinations of identity, Paul reminds us that we are one with Christ through baptism...

Identity derived from faith is different from all others if and only if the death and resurrection of Jesus really are—as Paul proclaimed—the singular event through which God has chosen to redeem the world. Otherwise, the gospel is merely one more religious system that will serve human pride and ambition. The character of our faith is determined by that decisive event to which it looks.¹

So, did the "circumcision faction" want the wrong thing. Yes. Whether to circumcise or not was a binary choice -- yes or no. And Paul's theology carried the day. It would take time for all to accept it (read Galatians 1 and 2), and I'm sure there was some bitterness and disappointment. These early disciples were human. Perhaps some even left the movement. But we should pause to consider James's leadership during this controversy, even as we Methodists try to make our way through controversies that threaten to tear the United Methodist Church apart.

In his commentary on the Acts 15 controversy, Robert Wall, offered some reflections on division and compromise in the Church. Here they are in full.

If a more civil debate is welcomed, the relevant question is, What are the "rules of engagement" to guide participants toward a formative end? The following observations may be helpful in this regard.

(1) The congregation should acknowledge that open disagreement between earnest believers is formative of Christian theological understanding. Constructive disagreements are finally not between believers over issues of power and personality but about God over issues of theological formation. Sometimes the most important pastoral task is to help members of the congregation distinguish between the motives that prompt their disagreement. Purposeful debate of the sort that should be encouraged is aimed at settling issues about who God is and how God acts in our midst. Disagreeable believers who debate issues out of pride, peevishness, or personal ambition allow their disagreements to destroy congregations and make reconciliation, which is God's work, impossible.

(2) Present disagreements between believers typically have a long prehistory. For instance, the strife in Antioch that prompted the convening of the Jerusalem Council began much earlier with the conversion and Spirit baptism of the uncircumcised Gentile, Cornelius. Then Paul's mission beyond Palestine and the congregations he founded there press the theological boundaries of the accord subsequently reached between Peter and the elders of the Jewish church. Reading the story of the Jerusalem Council in its narrative context reminds the reader that conflict resolution should include the "long view" of a particular issue, where its entire prehistory informs its present debate. To do so relativizes and contextualizes our disagreements by bringing other voices from different venues to the same table; the result often diminishes their animosity.

(3) The primary evidence offered is personal testimony, and personal testimony is largely shaped by one's experiences of God. First Peter (15:7–11) and then Barnabas and Paul (15:12) testify to the entire assembly what God has done through them; their audience keeps silent and listens carefully to their

¹ Hays, R. B. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Galatians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 11, pp. 274–275). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

stories (15:12–13). Open and formative debate between earnest believers within a congregational setting is largely narrative in shape, existential in substance, and practical in aim. Public testimony is never a monologue intended to draw attention to the speaker. Rather, personal testimony is illustrative of a community's witness and serves to shape its identity and future direction.

(4) The primary authorization offered is scriptural. While public testimony of personal experience is decisive, it cannot settle debates between believers. God's will is made known finally by God's word. According to Acts, the teacher's faithful interpretation of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit are intertwined. When James writes down his exhortation for the believers of Antioch and asserts that it agrees with what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit" (15:28), he recalls his reading of Scripture as the authoritative commentary on the personal testimony just heard. The congregation discerns the Spirit's direction when its teachers use Scripture to both warrant and explain their experience of God.

(5) James's interpretation of Scripture envisages something of a compromise solution that accepts the personal testimony of the missionaries to the Gentiles on the one hand and seeks to maintain the church's Jewish heritage on the other. It is often necessary for decision makers to forge careful compromises between two competing positions to preserve Christian unity, whenever each person or party makes a valuable contribution. It must be said that James does not bring both sides of the issue together as a political accommodation in which both sides make grudging concessions and wind up equally unhappy; he offers a theological affirmation of each as a critical part of a more robust whole. This result is characteristic of good theology: to propose constructive solutions that enable the church to go forward.

(6) The verdict that James renders is not only a compromise but it is also a corrective. That is, James not only recognizes that God has acted through both Peter and Paul to call Gentiles into the covenant community but he also realizes the dangers of allowing uncircumcised Gentiles into a community whose heritage is Jewish. Good theology facilitates new ways of thinking about God when new situations require it; however, good theology is ever alert to the danger of discarding the non-negotiable "old" for the "new." While James says "no" to the Pharisaic believers, he also sounds the cautionary note to the missionaries to guard against facile cultural compromise that renders "Moses" irrelevant. Yes, Paul should continue to evangelize uncircumcised Gentiles, but he should search them out in places where Jewish traditions have helped to shape their religious sensibilities.

(7) While the community's leaders are convened as the "official" council to receive "this question" (15:2) or hear that protest (15:5) between believers, they communicate their decisions and offer appropriate exhortations and other resources to the entire church (15:22–29). Even disagreements between two individuals may spread to the entire congregation; therefore, their settlements should be communicated in all civility to everyone affected to guide future decisions.

(8) Present disagreements between believers typically have a long posthistory. Paul's bumpy relations with the Jewish church are not settled by the Jerusalem Council. Controversies continue to swirl around his mission as he extends the reach of the word of God in new settings. An ongoing review of James's decisive exhortation is required in order to update God's will for the present community of believers (see 21:25). Perhaps this is the final exam whether or not the community has properly discerned God's will: Does the settlement of a momentary disagreement between believers result in an understanding of God that influences the future of the entire congregation in positive ways?²

Though the Christian community made it through the Law-keeping controversy, the history of the Church is replete with controversies that ripped the Church apart. As we make our way through our present-day disagreements, may we prayerfully and thoughtfully seek God's guidance as we strive to be faithful disciples, growing ever stronger and more ready to proclaim the Good News to a world desperately in need of it.

² Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 210–212