

BIDWELL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
FIVEFORTYFIVE
OCTOBER 28, 2007
“CROSSING BOUNDARIES”
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Study Guide

Acts 15:1-21, The Message

1-2 *“It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: “If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved.” Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.*

3 *After they were sent off and on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!*

4-5 *When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers, but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. “You have to circumcise the pagan converts,” they said. “You must make them keep the Law of Moses.”*

6-9 *The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: “Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.*

10-11 *“So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?”*

12-13 *There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop.*

13-18 *James broke the silence. “Friends, listen. Simeon has told us the story of how God at the very outset made sure that racial outsiders were included. This is in perfect agreement with the words of the prophets:*

*After this, I'm coming back;
I'll rebuild David's ruined house;
I'll put all the pieces together again;
I'll make it look like new
So outsiders who seek will find,
so they'll have a place to come to,
All the pagan peoples
included in what I'm doing.*

“God said it and now he's doing it. It's no afterthought; he's always known he would do this.

19-21 *“So here is my decision: We're not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. We'll write them a letter and tell them, ‘Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians—blood, for instance.’ This is basic wisdom from Moses, preached and honored for centuries now in city after city as we have met and kept the Sabbath.”*

CONTEXT

The issue of salvation by grace alone was settled. (15:11) However, there was another issue effecting the unity of the church: Jews and Gentiles came from extremely different backgrounds. The Council decided that for them to enjoy fellowship together, the Gentiles would have to be careful not to offend Jewish sensitivity in a few key areas, but that they also would not have to follow the Jewish law, especially circumcision as a sign of the covenant.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When were you last in “sharp dispute” with someone over a theological issue? What are you like when you strongly disagree with others? Share any lessons you have learned.
2. Read verses 3-5. What did Paul and Barnabas do as they traveled toward Jerusalem? What was the response of the brothers? What was the Pharisees’ response to the ministry among the Gentiles? Why were they so adamant in refusing to recognize God’s working among the Gentiles?
3. Read verses 13-21. What did James do in the face of the clear testimony of God’s choosing for the Gentiles? What can we learn from him about resolving disputes between Christians and within the church? What was God’s hope for the Gentiles, and what was his purpose for them? What was James’s conclusion?
4. Although Christians are saved by grace alone, they are still commanded to develop Godly character, to live righteous lives and to do good works. Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and Titus 2:11-15. What is the relationship between grace and good works?
5. Where are you, or your Christian community, being called to take the message of Jesus beyond existing boundaries? Where do you need the community’s support and guidance in some decision or new direction?