

HE DIDN'T HAVE TO DO IT

Summer 2022, Acts 15:36-16:5

July 17, 20212

*As they [Paul, Silas and Timothy] traveled from town to town,
they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders
in Jerusalem for the people to obey.
So the churches were strengthened in the faith
and grew daily in numbers.*

Acts 16:4-5

Yes, sometimes believers disagree (God can still be glorified!)

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.

He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. ² The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Acts 15:36-6:5

1. Paul is ready for their mission to continue: evangelizing and overseeing
2. The "disagreement" is about personality rather than truth, so a separation can be peaceful (see Hebrews 10:24 for a positive aspect, but Acts 17:6 and 1 Corinthians 13:5 for the negative)
3. Timothy is circumcised in order to be able to minister to the Jewish community
4. The result of separation and circumcision (wrong!?) is stronger faith and more conversion

Lystra and Derbe were a very important visit

¹⁹ Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. ²⁰ But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

²¹ They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Acts 15

1. Timothy grew where Paul was left for dead, where Timothy know there would be "hardship"
2. Timothy was the result of a faithful mother (2 Timothy 1:3-7) and a strong church (Acts 14:23)
3. The problem: Timothy comes along after the "circumcision party" is shown to be wrong
4. The solution: Timothy sets aside his liberty (see Philippians 2:5-11) so serve the other

The Titus problem: chronology and theology

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. ² I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. ³ Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴ This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. ⁵ We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

Galatians 2

1. It is very difficult to know exactly where Galatians 2 fits in the timeline of Acts
2. Paul seems to be making Titus' refusal to be circumcised a "truth of the gospel" matter
3. Before Timothy was an example of love saying "yes", Titus was an example of truth saying "no"

Lessons to learn from Timothy

1) God started early in Timothy's life, long before Paul showed up in Lystra

³ I thank God, whom I serve, as my forefathers did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. ⁴ Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. ⁵ I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:3-7

2) God may call Titus to something totally different than he calls me (and it may cost me dearly!)

¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Galatians 2:19-21

Resources for further studies in Acts

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at <https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg>

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at

http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm. His "Gospel Missions" sermon is at <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols1-3/chs76.pdf>

Tim Keller has said much on the topic of mission. See "5 Practices" at <https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/> and <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/>

Kim Riddlebarger has an interesting article on Acts 15 at <https://www.kimriddlebarger.com/the-riddleblog/three-take-aways-from-the-jerusalem-council-acts-15>

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at <https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts>

His Acts series is at <https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts> His sermon on this text is at <https://bible.org/seriespage/22-great-debates-acts-161-10>

John Stott's *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce's work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker's commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

R. C. Ryle has a wonderful essay on Acts 15:36 at <https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract1.txt>

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)

5 Practices of a Missional Church

Tim Keller at <https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/>

In the West, for nearly a thousand years, the relationship of European Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as Christendom. The institutions of society “Christianized” people and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior.

British missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, went to India [in 1936]. When he returned to England, some thirty years later, he discovered that the Western church now found itself in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. While most traditional evangelical churches can win the temperamentally conventional and conservative to Christ, American author Michael Wolff notes that this market is shrinking. If evangelical churches settle the decline in numbers, with the remaining Christian body not becoming missional, they will decline and die. This has instituted an even greater need for “missional” churches, which adopt the following practices:

1. Speak in the vernacular

In Christendom, technical biblical terms are well known inside and outside of the church. In a missional church, however, these terms must be explained.

The missional church:

- avoids “tribal” language, stylized prayer language, and evangelical jargon that seeks to set a spiritual tone.
- avoids “we-they” language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs
- avoids sentimental, pompous, “inspirational” talk
- avoids talking as if non-believers were not present

2. Enter and retell the culture’s stories with the Gospel

In Christendom, it is possible to simply exhort Christianized people to do what they know they should. There is little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. Often, along with exhortation, there is a heavy reliance on guilt to motivate behavior change.

In a missional church, preaching and communication always assume skeptics are present and consequently engages their stories. To enter the culture’s stories mean showing sympathy towards and deeply acquainting with literature, music, theatre, and other arts expressing the existing hopes, dreams, heroic narratives and fears. To *retell the culture’s stories* is to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embrace-of-the-other without injustice.

3. Theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation

In a missional church, laypeople need theological education to “think Christianly” about everything and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know three things: (a) which cultural practices manifest common grace and are to be embraced, (b) which practices are antithetical to the Gospel and must be rejected, and (c) which practices can be adapted/revised.

Christians will have to use the Gospel to demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square towards those with whom we deeply differ. This tolerance should equal or exceed that which groups with opposing views show towards Christians. The charge of intolerance is perhaps the main “defeater” of the Gospel in the non-Christian West.

4. Create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive

In Christendom, “fellowship” is basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support, and accountability.

In a missional church, however, Christian community must go beyond that to embody a counterculture, showing the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.

- *In sex.* We avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life-patterns are different from ours.
- *In money.* We promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak.
- *In power.* We are committed to power sharing and relationship building among races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. A missional church must be deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice and deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion.

5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level

It is very important that we do not spend time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches. That criticism simply plays into the common "defeater" that Christians are all intolerant. While we align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate with, reach out to, and support the other congregations and churches in our area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.

