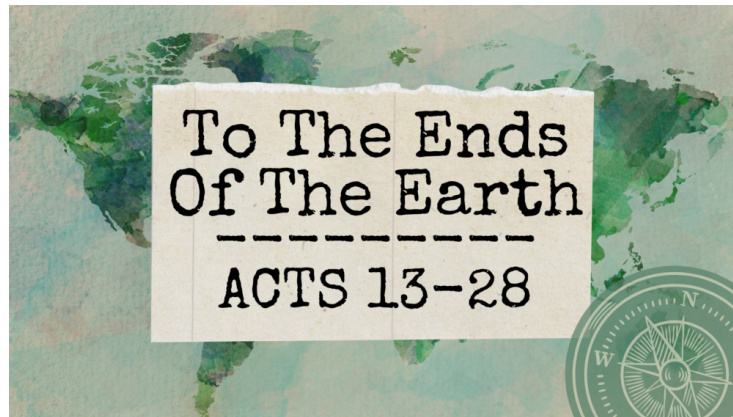


Do We Have An Open Door Policy?



Acts 15:1-21

Some of you will remember about twenty-one years ago in the year 2000, you, as a church, gave me a sabbatical to go to Florida with my son, Kory, who was training to be a professional motocross racer. While he was training, I got to study the book of Romans, intensively, for about six weeks. I enjoyed that time so very much. Every other weekend, I would fly home because I did not want to be gone from you guys that long. I would drive from Ocala Florida to Orlando, catch the last flight to Nashville, and get home around 2:30 in the morning. Then I would get to come and preach, and then drive back to Nashville and catch the first flight back to Orlando. I remember one of those Saturday night trips from Orlando to Nashville flying out on a Southwest flight. I don't know if you have flown on Southwest much, but back in the day they had a special seating arrangement where there were two seats that faced forward and two seats

that faced backwards. In that seating configuration, instead of looking at the back of somebody's head, you were literally looking at the people across from you for the entire flight. I sat down and it wasn't long until I realized that the people sitting beside me and the people across from me were also pastors. They had come from various parts of the United States to attend a conference in Florida that RC Sproul was hosting, and he had invited John MacArthur to come. They were going to debate baptism, believer's baptism by immersion versus infant baptism by sprinkling. So get this picture. I'm on the outside row seat and I pick up quickly that a couple of the guys across from me are Church of Christ preachers. There was also a Baptist preacher and a Presbyterian preacher. I just could not help myself...I did not say a word about who I was. We flew about two hours and I got to listen (be a fly on the wall, so to speak) to these guys talk about the debate between John MacArthur and RC Sproul. I heard both sides of that debate, and it was as if I had been there just from getting to hear those guys analyze and talk about the debate. As we were starting to land in Nashville, I just had to say, "I just have to let you know how much I have enjoyed myself on this flight," and I told them why I was there. As I was getting off the plane, I thought is that not the sovereignty of God? God put a group of preachers on a plane where we got to look at each other, and one of those preachers got to listen to some guys talk about a debate of a very controversial subject to many people in the Church, and that is the validity and the mode of baptism, who should be baptized, and who should not be baptized.

That is the blessing we are going to get this morning. We are going to actually listen to a debate, because there is going to be a debate in Acts chapter 15. It is not going to be a debate about baptism, or the mode of baptism, or whether you are a believer or an infant. It is going to be about a doctrine that was very vital to the New Testament Church.

Though we will probably only get through verse 7 in this lesson, we are going to read all 21 verses because I want you to see the context.

Scripture

"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." 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. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, 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. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

"After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old."

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

The Door of Faith

Before we dive into this, we are just going to walk through it. I want to make sure that we understand the context. Sometimes we are at a disadvantage when we meet every first day of the week and preach a different sermon, because we might forget that what we say today is based on what was said last week from the previous story. Last week, Kory ended his sermon by telling us from chapter 14:27 that after this first missionary trip, Paul and Barnabas come back home and tell all of the things that God had done through them, and then Luke records this, "and how He [God] had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." Get this picture. Luke is not just writing objectively about facts. He is taking the facts that happened on this mission trip, but under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit, he has a purpose in writing, and he has just told us something we cannot forget as we get ready to move into this story. Here is what Luke wants us to know, and this is the middle story of the book of Acts, almost all of the attention of the book is on this story. The story is that God has opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

In Acts chapter 15, we are going to see that there is a group of people in the church who are going to try to shut that door. How would you like to be a part of a group of people and think you are doing right, you are defending God, but in defending God and what you believe about Him, you

are actually trying to close a door that He has opened? Have you ever tried to close a door someone else has opened? If we are honest, sometimes there are doors that are open and we want them to be shut because we like who has already passed through the doors, and there might be some people or some things that we really don't want passing through. So there are times when we say "shut the door." We are going to learn about a group of people who are trying to shut a door that does not need to be shut. If we are not careful, we are going to look at this and read about things that will not bother us because we don't have a problem with this. So, we have to ask ourselves, why would Luke record this? I think he records this because the Holy Spirit wants us to be prepared, to make sure we are a church that has an open door policy. That is my question to you. Do we, as a church, have an open door policy (that open door being the door of faith)? And at all cost, are we willing to do what the first church did, and that is to defend this policy of belief that God has opened a door of faith? It does not matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, the only way you can come into the Kingdom, the only way you can come into the Church, the only way you can come into a right relationship with God is through faith. When it comes to the Church, we do not have a closed door policy. We have an open door policy, but we have to make sure the door that is opened is the door of faith.

Jewish Group's Closed Door Policy

Acts 14 closes with this great encouragement, the church is excited. Remember, it is primarily a Jewish church. The Jews in Antioch are tickled to death because they sent Paul and Barnabas out, God did amazing things through them, and He opened the door to the Gentiles. Then chapter 15 opens with Luke telling us that some men from Judea came down to Antioch and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

- **Jewish Attitude of Superiority**

I want to make sure you catch what Luke is doing. Most of us who are Christians understand that the Jewish people during this time period thought they were God's covenant people. They thought they had the

covenant with God where He was their God and they were His people, set apart to be a peculiar people. That covenant with God led them to believe, in attitude, that in many regards they were just a little better than the Gentile people around them. As a matter of fact, they viewed Gentile people as being unclean. Some orthodox Jewish people believed that God created Gentiles to fuel the fire of Gehenna. Can you imagine that? Some Jewish people believed that if they touched where a Gentile had touched (a doorknob, the soil, etc.) it would cause them to be unclean. They had these elaborate cleansing ceremonies they would go through before they would eat their meals or enter into the presence of God because they had been around 'dirty' people.

When Luke talks about men coming *down* from Judea, and in the next verse, sending some people to go *up* to Jerusalem, I don't think these two statements are only geographical in nature. In other words, they are not just talking about an elevation change, an altitude change. It's talking about attitude. Every time a Jewish person left the temple, every time they left Jerusalem, it did not matter where they went they were going *down*. The highest spot on the earth was Jerusalem, where God's house was. To be in Jerusalem was to be close to God, so you could not get any higher than that. That is why when you are reading the Bible they always go *up* to Jerusalem, and when they leave they go *down*. It is not just geographical; it's an attitude that was birthed in them. So now, Luke is trying to tell us there is a group of people who are leaving Judea, but as they are leaving they are going down. This is hard for us to believe, but we are dealing with some Jewish people who just believe the Gentile people they are going to be with are not quite on the same level they are on.

- **Belief of Gentile Inferiority**

I want to make note of this. Three times in these verses, the church is not going to be identified as disciples, Christians, The Way, or believers; we are going to be called brothers. Luke has a plan here. He is trying to get us to see that yes, we are disciples, yes, we are believers, yes, we are The Way, but we are brothers. We are family. We are of the same blood. Unfortunately, not everybody in the biblical world believed that way. There was a problem in the church. One part of the church felt like they were

'real' blood brothers but the group of Gentiles coming into the church was not blood brothers, so for them to come into the church they had to become like them, Jewish, in order to be saved. I know we struggle with that. We cannot imagine that. Well, you might be able to a little bit. If you are a family where you were raised with your blood siblings and then something happened in your family where there were some stepsiblings, have you seen that be divisive from time to time? Yes. That is what is going on, spiritually, here.

Now, I know we do not like to say these kind of things, but we have to see this context. We have a group of people leaving the mother church, going down to this church that has been birthed, and they are teaching that unless you are circumcised, and not just any old way, but circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. I don't think there are any of us who believe or have ever believed that you had to be circumcised to be saved. Why would the Jewish people think this? It was because they had a procedure that if you were a Gentile who was going to convert and become a Jew, you had to be circumcised. You could not just be circumcised, you had to renounce your identity as a Gentile and bring yourself under the customs and the Law of Moses. In other words, you could not come into the family and retain your identity. You had to be fully Jewish, and the only way you could be Jewish is to go through these rituals.

Watch this. You have a group of people who have come down from Judea, and they are teaching the church, teaching the brothers who think they are saved, that they are not really saved because they have not been circumcised yet. You think that is not going on today, but, in principle, it is. When we get into this text later on, this debate is going to be about is salvation. It is going to be about whether a person is justified by grace through faith alone, or whether there is something that man has to do. What I am suggesting is that if each one of us could go sit in a different church today and listen to a message that was being preached from a pulpit, I promise you the same message is not being preached in all those churches. There are some brothers and sisters in churches who do not accept that a person is justified by faith alone through grace alone but that

something must be added, and it is an act or a work that you do to show your faith in order for you to be made right with God. So please know that this passage applies to us. It will be teaching us what our response should be to a church or to another person when you say, "I am saved," and they respond with, "Then when did you get baptized?" and you say, "I haven't yet." You think you are saved, but they do not believe you are saved because you have not done the thing that they think you need to do in order to be saved. While we may not have this particular problem the church in Acts 15 does, the same principle applies, even to churches today.

Policy Causes Dissension and Debate

I do not get this next statement in verse 2. Luke says there was "...no small dissension and debate with them." Luke says Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension, had no small debate. We do not speak that way in Kentucky. We would say *Paul got mad! Paul lost it! He had a fit!* Maybe if you were on the other side of the tracks, you would say he had no small dissension and they had no small debate. What Luke is trying to say is they had a really, really big division and a really, really big fight! Now, I want to say this. There are some things in the church, in the entire family, that are worth fighting for, but then there are some things we should not fight for. What the Bible is trying to tell us is what are those things worth fighting for, and what are those things not worth fighting for? There are some things we can disagree over and it is ok, but there are some things that we cannot allow to be taught in this church because it's wrong. There are some things that some people teach in the church that is wrong, but it is ok to be wrong in that because it is not going to affect your relationship with God. But on this one in Acts, it was big.

I got tickled when Kiki was a child. She came home from a friend's Vacation Bible School and she said, "Daddy, you are not going to believe what they were singing! They were singing 'baptized and saved, baptized and saved, baptized and saved.'" With a little grin on her face, she said, "Daddy, while they were singing 'baptized and saved,' I was singing 'saved and baptized, saved and baptized, saved and baptized.'" You get it!

I want to make sure we are clear here. Luke uses the word, brothers. It is family! Sometimes family feuds are the worst because we are supposed to have the same parents. Even in our physical families, we have the same parents and yet sometimes kids will be so different spiritually. That was happening in the church.

- **Paul's Anger**

Now, if you want to see how mad Paul is about this subject, you need to read the book of Galatians. This missionary trip that Paul has been on goes into the region of southern Galatia, and these people are the recipient of Paul's letter to the Galatians. If you look at his letter to the Galatian people, there is a good possibility that when they leave Antioch and go to Jerusalem to discuss this with the church at Jerusalem, Paul had already made up his mind that he knows what the truth is and he is already writing this letter to the church at Galatia to warn them about the people who are going to come along and try to add works of the law to the plan of salvation. As a matter of fact, in that letter to Galatians, Paul will call out Peter as being a hypocrite. He will say how this even influenced Barnabas, who was with him. There is a possibility that Peter and Paul were in Antioch at the same time and this teaching was having a detrimental effect. So Paul writes and asks the church at Galatia this question: Did you receive the Spirit by the hearing of faith or keeping of the law? Of course, you know what the answer is. You do not receive the Spirit by keeping the law; you receive the Spirit at the moment of faith.

Now, this is an issue over circumcision, and we all know what circumcision is. In Galatians chapter 5, Paul is so angry with the people who are teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation that he says, "I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" Can you imagine me going on TV and saying, "I wish somebody would drown in the water!" if they were teaching a false view of baptism? You would be mad at me. Yet Paul, who authored most of the New Testament, got angry when it came to the doctrine of salvation. He let it divide him from a group of people and he debated them. Can you imagine this debate in Antioch with a group of people who have come from Judea?

Return to Jerusalem Seeking Counsel of the Apostles and Elders

So now, the church at Antioch get together and they decide to send Paul and Barnabas with a group of people from their church back to Jerusalem in Judea to see what the apostles and elders think about this. If you read the book of Galatians, and I am correct in the chronologic order here, when Paul and Barnabas leave Antioch they take Titus with them. Titus was a Greek who had come to faith and he was not circumcised. So he was going to give testimony that he knew he was in a right relationship with God, yet he had not been circumcised. Paul was going to use Titus to counter the argument if the Jerusalem church was in error about the plan of salvation. We learn that from the book of Galatians.

So, Paul and Barnabas leave the Antioch church, going to the mother church, the church at Jerusalem, and it is about a thirty to forty day journey and they pass through different areas. When they pass through these areas, they talk about what God has been doing among Gentiles. They are telling everybody they know about the plan of salvation and about this open door of faith for Gentiles. Gentiles can now come into the family by faith.

I want you to see this. The church at Antioch is sending them back to Jerusalem because they want to know what the leaders of the church of Jerusalem believe, so they call out the apostles and the elders. An apostle was that person who walked with Jesus, saw Jesus, and saw Him die, saw Him buried, and saw Him raised again. He personally taught them and then sent them out. You know that one of the apostles hanged himself, and he got replaced. Then Paul gets called to be an apostle, and the New Testament names some other people who had this apostolic ministry. So the early Church trusted those men who walked with Jesus to know just a little bit more than they do. Now, we have elders brought along. Kory mentioned last week that, biblically, the word elder, bishop, and pastor all refer to the same office, the same people. Elder refers to the man, the maturity of the man. Bishop/overseer refers to what his position is. He oversees the church. That word, pastor, describes how he does that. He

does that as a shepherd among God's sheep. Some churches call their spiritual leaders elders, some call them pastors, and some call them bishop. I want us to understand that it is one and the same person. Some of you that come from a tradition where you called your leader an elder wonder why Hardin doesn't have elders. Well, we do have elders, which Kory mentioned last week. We just call them pastors.

Now, when Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, he said one of the characteristics of an elder was you had to be able to teach. It was one of the primary responsibilities. You have to be able to teach God's Word, God's truth. Paul writes to Titus that not only does that elder, pastor, or bishop have to be able to teach God's Word, he has to be able to rebuke those who contradict it. It is one thing to be able to teach God's Word, but it's another thing to come alongside and show a group of people where someone is wrong about what they are teaching.

Welcomed by the Church, the Apostles, and Elders

As Paul, Barnabas, and this group of men get back to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and the elders, verse 4 says, "...they were welcomed by the church." Don't get this picture that they just go to a leadership meeting in a church. They are greeted by the church. "They are welcomed by the church..." (Then Luke adds that the leaders were there) "...the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them." All they seem to want to talk about is what God has done with them, what God is doing through them.

- **Pharisees in the Church Disagree with Paul**

Now, verse 5 says, "But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses." I want to be honest with you. I struggle with this verse. If you are like me, I think you struggle with this verse. Here is a group of people in the church who come from the party of the Pharisees, the set apart ones, the ones who dedicated themselves to keeping all six hundred and thirteen laws of Moses because they believed if they kept all six hundred and thirteen laws they would usher in the Messianic Kingdom. According to this verse, some of those people got

saved and they are now part of the church because they are believers. But here is what they believed...it is necessary to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses. I struggle with that. I struggle with how you could be a real believer when you have added something to the plan of salvation. But Luke tells us this is from within the church. See, when Paul and Barnabas were on that missionary trip, those Jews who were attacking them in those Gentile cities were not part of the church. They were not believers. What we are dealing with here now are believers who have not let go of what they used to believe.

Let's just pause here for a second...and maybe give these guys a little break. Can you imagine being a Jewish person being raised your whole life believing you were God's chosen people, looking for the coming Messiah, and then the Messiah (Jesus) comes, though you did not recognize Him at first? Now, you recognize Him but the people following Him are telling you that none of that stuff you did before matters now. It does not make you right with God. Some of you surely understand this. I see it all the time. Many of you come from a church that does not teach salvation by grace through faith. You did not come from a Baptist church, but you are still hanging on to some of those things daddy taught you, grandma taught you, or that church taught you. We do not just lay those things down! That is what we are seeing here. We are not seeing a perfect church because there are no perfect churches, but we are learning how to deal with being a church that is not perfect.

There are some things in the church that are ok to disagree on. You do not have to believe my views of Romans chapter 7. If you want to be wrong, just be wrong. ☺ You do not have to hold my view of eschatology. You should, but you do not have to! ☺ But when it comes to salvation and this door of faith that God has opened, as a church we cannot allow anyone to close it! Let me tell you what happens. I hope I am wise enough to say this...but sometimes, if we are that church or those people who are only around people who have been raised the way we have been raised, and believe the way we believe, we do not really know what we really believe because we have just accepted it. When a church becomes multinational, we do not all have the same stock, we did not all come from the same

upbringing, and sometimes this brings out some thoughts you have that you believe is ok but are really contrary to the Word of God.

Doctrinal Error Problem

Here is a group of people in the church who really believe it was necessary to be circumcised. Now, please don't go here...don't say, "Well, Bro Ricky, they are not talking about salvation here, they are talking about sanctification." No, this is a salvation issue that started this whole thing. This group of people, who Luke says is in the church, thinks their circumcision and them keeping the law is part of their salvation. They believe it to the point that they are willing to debate. They are willing to stand up to a group of elders, a group of pastors. They are willing to stand up to Paul who is telling the story and they are going... *Whoa, whoa, whoa Paul, hold it! You left something out! You cannot tell these Gentiles they got saved by faith. You also have to tell them it is necessary for them to do this, this, and this!* While we may not deal with circumcision, we still deal with the same thing. The reason is because this passage is about whether you believe we are saved because of what God did for us in Christ on that cross or whether you believe we are saved by what God did for us on that cross *plus* what you now have to do for Him as a believer. There is just one door God has opened, and that is a door of faith.

- **Looking for the Truth**

The salvation of Gentiles is now bringing to light what is true in the church at Jerusalem, and that is they have a doctrinal error problem, and this is the mother church. So here is what begins to happen. The next verse says, "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter." It is not as obvious here, but it becomes obvious in later verses that it is not a private elder-apostle meeting. We will see later in this passage where Luke says there was a multitude. Yes, the apostles and the elders are going to address this question, but do not see them meeting behind closed doors and then coming out and telling the church what they have decided. This is the whole church meeting together, but the apostles and the elders are leading the meeting. Why? It is because the early church believed in authority, spiritual authority. The early church actually

believed that God, Himself, had called out certain people among them, not because they were better, but because it was God's plan. Those men were to be set aside to be apostles, set aside to be elders, and to oversee and lead the church. The church respected those men. From personal experience, let me just say that you are going to struggle at Hardin if you do not respect the pastors of this church. I do not believe that to come to Hardin you have to believe everything the pastors of this church believe, but there are a core set of beliefs that the church trusts the spiritual leaders to know, and it comes from God.

Congregational Church

That is what we are seeing here in Acts. We are seeing a church that was birthed through this mission movement. Remember what Kory has been teaching us: The purpose of missions is for churches. We do not go on missions just so people can be saved. We do not go on a mission trip to come back and talk about how many people got saved. We go on a mission trip to share the gospel so people can be saved so they can form churches, and so that from that church more people can come to know Christ and more churches can be birthed. That is God's plan—churches all over the world proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ.

Here is a young church looking to the mother church for truth. You have the great Apostle Paul taking his seat among other apostles and elders in this church so that they can speak with one voice. I want you to see the church gathered. Please hear me. It is primarily based on this passage of Scripture that as Baptist churches we believe the pastors/elders/bishops do not rule the church in the sense that we make all the decisions. The power of decisions is in the congregations, so we are a congregational church. You will not ask us to vote on everything that we, as pastors, do, but yes, there are times when we must vote as a congregation. Times like many years ago when we, as a church, decided that we could not continue to baptize people who we believed were biblically baptized. That belief did not come out of someone moving in here from somewhere else. It came from a young kid who was raised in a Blood River Baptist Associational church. He had his granddaddy teach him that only Baptist had baptism. But as he began to teach through the Bible, he began to realize that was just not

right. Baptism is not a denominational thing. Baptism identifies that you believe your faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what saved you. The whole church agreed, and we changed our policy.

That is what we are seeing here in Acts. You will see the emphasis on the apostles and the elders, but then you will see Luke weaving this picture of the whole church being gathered together. That is the wisdom of God, not you blindly following your pastors. Yes, when following your pastors you are following God, and we are being who God wants us to be and that is the body of Christ.

In this meeting of the leaders and the body, verse 7 says there was much debate! It is ok for us to have different viewpoints. The church needs to be a place where those viewpoints can be expressed without fear, but those people expressing those views have to be open to the fact that they may be wrong. But ultimately, we expect guys like Peter, James, Paul, and Barnabas, when the time is right, to say what they say, and then together we make a decision.

Get this picture. Imagine we get invited to be in a debate and John MacArthur will be there, RC Sproul will be there, John Piper will be there, wouldn't you want to be there? Next week, there will be no Piper, no Sproul, and no MacArthur. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James, will be there, and because of what they did, the door of faith stayed open. It did not get closed, and because of that, you and me are in a right relationship with Christ. That responsibility is now on our shoulders as a church of Jesus Christ. I just want to ask you, do you believe we have an open door of faith policy? If you do, I am going to ask you to help me keep it open because there is only one way a man can be made right with God, and that is through faith in what Jesus Christ did on the cross.