

Acts 15

Over the years many people have set out all sorts of boundaries that define whether you are a Christian or not and even more so if you want to sign up to a particular denomination. Sometimes I think even St. Paul would have been cast out by some of these people over the centuries. Having said that, some boundaries are useful or you end up with such a wishy-washy definition of what it means to be a Christian that anyone is unless they actively declare themselves to be an atheist.

What are the non-negotiable bits of the gospel that cannot be changed or removed and what are the non-essential bits that are culturally determined that can be jettisoned in order to bring the Good News to others? These sorts of questions have always been relevant over the centuries as culture and circumstances change, and as the gospel has been preached out of one culture and language into another. In our context we have yet to find a way of effectively communicating the gospel to our neighbours who have almost no religious or spiritual background or knowledge, being 2nd and now 3rd generation non-church goers. The image they often have of the church is either poor - the church's history of being negative and 'anti' all sorts of things dominates, or they just see Christ as utterly irrelevant. We need new ways to show that God loves them.

Read Acts 15.1-5

- What were these 'brothers' teaching and why?
- Why do you think that Paul and Barnabas objected to this teaching so adamantly?
- What did the church decide to do and why?
- What did they do on the way to Jerusalem and why?
- When they got to Jerusalem how were they received and what next happened?

Read Acts 15.6-21

- How many people do you think contributed to this discussion and why was it not just a few apostles only?
- Very briefly Peter again tells the story of him preaching to Cornelius - what important point does he add?
- What do Paul and Barnabas add to the discussion and why is this important?
- What is James' contribution and what important role does he play?
- What are the 4 restrictions he asks for and why these 4?

Read Acts 15.22-29

- What do they decide to do and why is this so important?
- What important things does the letter say?
- What does the letter actually not say?

Read Acts 15.30-35

- What happens next?
- Why are Judas and Silas important here?
- How does this section end?

Read Acts 15.36-41

- What is good about this next section?
- But, what is sad?
- What good comes out of this whole episode?

Reflect on the way that barriers were broken down to open the gospel up to others. Are there obstacles we can remove to make it easier to hear the gospel?