

MINISTRY OF CHURCH AUTHORITY, PART 2

Acts 15:13-35 (NASB)

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In our last study we began to unfold Acts 15 as a guiding example of the ministry of church authority. Crucial to our understanding of what we should do is the truth that all church authority, from local church elders to district leadership to national officers, is pastoral. The idea that church authority can be expressed in coldly institutional ways is from the world, not the Lord. The only authority anyone in the church possesses is the authority of Jesus, and Jesus never does anything divorced from his grace, truth, love, redemption, and all of his perfections.

We pick up the account of the first general council of the church as they walked with the Lord through the question: Must Gentiles follow the Law of Moses in order to be saved? By this point Paul and Barnabas had given testimony to the conversion of non-Jews in their missionary work. Peter had shouldered the responsibility of a church leader to express what he considered to be the truth of the matter. The Pharisees who were urging the Law of Moses had been given a chance to speak. Long debate had occurred among the apostles and elders. We are told in verses 4, 12, and 22 that the entire church has been included in the process. And though the text does not mention it, surely many prayers had been offered individually, in small groups, and in the large group. That bring us to the ninth point in the ministry of church authority:

9. The one leading the church authority guides the process and brings it to a valid conclusion. Has everyone been heard? Has the necessary Bible study been done? Has there been a seeking of the Lord in prayer? And while there is not necessarily a congregational vote, has the will of the majority been expressed while preserving the rights of the minority? In the case of a local church and denomination, have the governing documents been followed? Without this kind of care with the process the outcome will always be in doubt, and the peace which everyone seeks will never come.

James gave the concluding judgment, but he did so as the fruit of a substantial process which included many others, starting in verse 13: **“After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, ‘Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,**

**“After these things I will return,
And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen,
And I will rebuild its ruins,
And I will restore it,
So that the rest 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 long ago.”**

Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from

fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (Acts 15:13-21).

We must understand that Roberts Rules of Order are a good basis for deliberation, but the normal function of church authority arises from Scripture and supersedes it. The time came for James not only to direct the process but also the outcome as the fruit of that careful process. We do not see a congregational vote here as the final word.

Why not? Because the basis of this judgment is a matter of truth, not opinion. We are never given the idea in the New Testament that matters of truth can be discovered by congregational votes. James clarifies this by giving one example of where Scripture answers the question which was before them. Verse 17 reads: **“So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, /And all the Gentiles who are called by My name.”** Not sure where I got this rule of pastoral ministry, but somewhere I learned that as the moderator of many congregational meetings, I should never give the church the opportunity to vote against the Bible, and neither should you. Jesus is the authority in his Church, and so the word of God is our unique way to understand what he wants us to do.

A recent bad example is a large, evangelical church outside of Nashville which just concluded a process of careful consideration over several years. They have announced that same-sex marriages are the right thing to do. This is not the testimony of the Bible. All examples of marriage in the Bible are between members of the opposite sex, and there are no examples of same-sex marriage. There are clear prohibitions of physical relations between members of the same sex, and clear instruction that human sexuality is designed by God to be expressed in marriage between a man and a woman. The church in Nashville no doubt had a valid process, yet they did not arrive at a true outcome because they shifted the basis of right action from Scripture to human opinion. Go thou and never do that!

As we read James’ judgment, we also learn that every adjudication must consider the impact on the mission of the church to make disciples everywhere. James explained in verse 19: **“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles...”** If we neglect this crucial matter we lose the point of the mission Christ gave his Church. In the process of deliberation we must ask: Will this decision encourage people to trust Christ or discourage them? All matters of practice and culture must submit to this analysis.

I remember a fateful elders meeting where a young elder described a vision for outreach which he was eager to lead. It entailed a significant culture shift for some things in the church and would not have been easy, but it was a sound plan. The other elders, all older, were silent until one spoke up and said: “Go do that somewhere else.” And that was the final word. That judgment did not affirm the priority of the mission of the church and provided no alternative plan other than the continuation of what had always been done, which was producing a slow decline.

A further consideration for every adjudication is the impact on fellowship. James’ judgment denies the necessity of following Jewish law, but urges a wise appreciation for the sensibilities of others. Remember that Jewish believers in Christ were free to follow their long-ingrained religious practices so long as they did not conflict with following Christ. The four things James mentions mix ceremonial and moral law, and are not comprehensive by any means. They are suggestive of the kinds of things Gentile

believers need to consider to maintain fellowship with Christians of Jewish background.

We need to have the same concern in all of our decisions. We are commanded to **“preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”** at all times, and that means thinking carefully about how what we do impacts others. If we do not know, we should ask them.

10. Communication of the adjudication must be done carefully and well. Most of the time a fairly relaxed mode of communication works in the church. But when a matter of great intensity is being dealt with the level of communication must rise to meet it. Failure to do so actually creates an additional source of damage to the body of Christ separate from the issue itself.

James and the apostles knew that the way to salvation was among the most intense issues the church would ever face. They knew that all attempts at solving the issue by teaching and admonishment had failed. Observe the full context of their communication in verses 22-29: **“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them, ‘The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.’”**

The leaders went out of their way to clarify their role in the matter and express appreciation for how this matter was impacting others negatively. The Judaizers had done their work without the express approval of church leaders, and had created a tremendous anxiety in the Church, especially among the Gentile believers.

Keeping control of communication and the line of church authority is crucial. I have had elders break confidence on sensitive matters. I have gotten emails and phone calls from people in other states asking me questions about confidential deliberations of the elders. I have had elders vote for something and then leave the meeting and go around the church saying they did not agree with it. I have had elders attempting to conduct church business on their own authority. Think of an unlikely scenario where communication and the line of church authority could be compromised and it has already happened in someone’s church.

I never did discipline anybody over these sorts of failures. None of these were bad people. I would take the elders back to a set of teachings from Scripture and agreements we had made about how we were going to conduct business and communicate. I sometimes wrote what I came to call a Memo of Chastisement without naming names. And that was enough to re-establish a proper process in that case without formal discipline. On a few occasions I did say that I would pursue formal discipline if the behavior did not stop.

Some of these problems were caused by a need for vastly improved communication. We must have a good normal process for deliberating and communicating, but we must be vigilant for those matters which affect people more intensely. We must then raise the level of our communication to match the intensity. Some of the pressure to compromise a normal process on an elder board is created by not raising our game in the face of a challenging matter. We need to learn how to do better. There is an excellent secular book on this subject called *Crucial Conversations* by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler which I would recommend.

A matter which must be clarified in communicating an adjudication is the source. Exactly who is sending this information and how can we know that it has come to us without distortion? The early church spent time, money, and effort to do this right, as we have just read in verse 25: **“...It seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.”** This communication came from the official leaders of the church in written form, it was transmitted by two of the most well-known leaders, and it was confirmed by two additional eyewitnesses. This was very wise, and minimized another possible opportunity for dispute.

Finally, the communication must provide clear steps for the believers to take to accord themselves with it. Four specific steps were given, along with the principle that the goals are to promote the mission, preserve the fellowship, and avoid sin. For example, what do we communicate to those who have fallen in sin? Do they hear from us that the belief or behavior is sin? Do they know what would be required for them to walk the path of restoration? And do they know that we love them enough to walk that path with them?

A final word on the necessity of good communication in the expression of church authority is that we are always seeking to lead the church into understanding. Why exactly has authority been expressed in a certain way? Submission without understanding may have a certain virtue, but faith is activated by the knowledge of truth and wisdom. We should never merely say: “You need to do this because we are in charge.” That is what institutions do, but we are the family of God. Understanding is necessary for the faith principle to operate.

11. Although this next point comes late in the exposition, it is crucial to everything. Because God is guiding his church through the wise decisions of elders expressing church authority, the deliberative process can have only one outcome. We can read it in verses 29-29: **“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”**

We call this the Law of One Finding. When a valid process has been followed to a God-led conclusion, every leader must support that finding as the will of God. It is faithless and rebellious for anyone to express the view that although God’s plan for the guidance of his Church has been followed, they have a personal take on it and do not support the outcome.

I had a hot elder debate years ago which took hours at one meeting. In spite of the unanimous

decision, several members later developed regret that they had voted for the motion. I wanted to make sure that we had not missed anything, so we did the entire debate over again at the next meeting. Again the decision was unanimous. And then several elders went around the congregation and said that they did not agree with it.

The relevant question is: Do we believe that God is guiding his church through the oversight of elders or not? How many clear votes does it take to convince us that the Lord has given his guidance? Surely there must have been Pharisees at the Jerusalem council who disagreed personally with the outcome, or at least had doubts about it. Yet we do not hear from them, though unsaved Judaizers went into overdrive and began persecuting the church. The Law of One Finding is essential to the unity of the church. Insist on it.

12. Know that the godly expression of church authority is to the church what oxygen is to the human body. Look at the reaction of the early church in verses 30-31: **“So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”**

The oxygen does not come from the human factor! The oxygen flows through godly leaders from God himself. The humans are merely a means for God to deliver grace to his people. I urge you to embrace the challenge of being a delivery agent for the grace of God. This is the motive that will make you walk through the fire and swim the ocean for the body of Christ: God loves his people and wants to bless them. When we fail to lead well the people are deprived of oxygen.

13. Finally, we learn from the follow-up to the Jerusalem council that a bare adjudication is not all that is required. Ministry is required as well, as we see in the last verses of our passage: **“Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord”** (Acts 15:32-35).

One way to think of this is that the decision is a gem which cannot be displayed properly without the setting of pastoral ministry. Remarkable ministries were conducted following the Jerusalem council in support of the work that they had done.

Verse 33 tells us that it is always wise to come and go with the blessing of peace. This is true even if things are not fully resolved. They rarely are. Christ is the basis for our peace, not a particular adjudication, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians: **“For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity...”** (Ephesians 2:14-15a).

Finally, you can see that the early church had a plan for the long-term strengthening of the body in light of the adjudication. Paul and Barnabas stayed, teaching the truths which had been confirmed by the Council. The body of Christ needs to know that church authority is not like a drive-by shooting or a bomb dropped from an airplane. We are connected by the greatest sacrifice which the world has ever or will ever know, the cross of Christ. His blood binds us together in this life and the next. All of our

actions must be done to affirm this connection.

To those who hold official church authority, I implore you: Do not take your hands off the steering wheel! You are an instrument God has ordained to guide and bless his church.

And for all of us, since we are all under authority, may we receive the blessing God seeks to give by working constructively with our leaders in the spirit of harmony in Christ. The church cannot function without every one of us embracing the headship of Christ as it is mediated through fallible human beings.

What a blessing it is when we do this well! We preserve the peace, harmony, and joy Christ gives to his church. We release the power of the Holy Spirit to bring transformation. We remove impediments to the mission of the church. And we become the kind of church that we all want to attend. Isn't that worth the trouble?