



No Small Dissension and Debate

Acts 15

Tony Chute, Interim Pastor

Overview: The surprising success of the Gentile mission brings to light a central question regarding the gospel—is it necessary to observe Jewish customs in order to be fully Christian? Answering this question rightly requires the apostles and elders to gather together in Jerusalem. Despite the strong contention of the Pharisees, and after much debate, the leadership affirms salvation by grace alone for all who believe. Their conclusion was based on the work of God and the Word of God, yet they also instructed Gentiles to refrain from using their liberty if others might take offense. The apostles and elders thus set the standard for conviction and cooperation in the church, where truth and love are properly balanced.

01. Conviction and cooperation in the church begins with differentiating between dogma, doctrine and adiaphora.

02. Conviction and cooperation in the church requires listening to opposing views and considering the impact on others.

03. Conviction and cooperation in the church results in the gospel advancing and fellowship increasing.

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1. From what basis did the Pharisees argue that it was necessary for Gentile Christians to observe the laws of Moses? How did the apostles and elders reach a different conclusion? Hypothetically speaking, what would the outcome of missions have been if this issue were decided differently?

2. Why is it important to differentiate between dogma, doctrine, and adiaphora? What can happen when people treat matters of doctrine or adiaphora as if they were matters of dogma? What can happen when people treat matters of dogma as if they were matters of adiaphora?

3. Notice how the apostles and elders state their case using the work of God and the Word of God. Why are both important in the larger context of Acts? How did the visible work of the Spirit among the Gentiles and the vision that Peter had in Acts 10 help them to understand God's will rightly? Why is it still important for our experiences to be subordinate to the Word of God?

4. The split between Paul and Silas in verses 36-41 is also instructive for conviction and cooperation. What rationale might Paul and Barnabas have had for their decision to exclude or include Mark on their missionary journey? Does the text inform us as to which of the two, Paul or Barnabas, was correct in his conclusion? Could their separation have been prevented without one of them deciding to compromise?

For Further Reading: John Stott, *Christ in Conflict: Lessons from Jesus and His Controversies* (IVP, revised edition, 2013).

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