“Many Voices”
Theological Diversity
While united in our conviction that belief in Jesus Christ as Lord is the central and essential tenet of our faith, we will be receptive and loving to people with different theological convictions about the non-essentials.
Acts 15:6-11, 12-20, 30-31
World Communion Sunday
October 5, 2025
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Acts 15:6-11

6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. 8 And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, 9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11 On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

12 The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles.

Introduction

Acts 15 describes what is known as the Jerusalem council, prompted by an issue of how to handle theological diversity now that Gentiles were being included in the church, those who hadn't grown up keeping the Mosaic law. Should they? Won't it be disruptive if they don't? After Peter makes his case, Paul and Barnabas talk about all the signs and wonders they have seen God doing through them among the Gentiles. Now James, Jesus' brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church, will render the verdict.

Acts 15:12-20, 30-31

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "My brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. 15 This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,
16 'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,
17 so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the gentiles over whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things
18 known from long ago.'

19 "Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

30 So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.
31 When they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

World Communion Sunday

Today we reach the final of our five core values, Theological Diversity. It is fitting that are talking about it on World Communion Sunday, itself a celebration of the breadth of the worldwide Christian communion. Christians worshiping today are very diverse in our worship practices and theological beliefs. We have differences about whether baptism should be offered to infants or only believers; whether Christ is physically or spiritually present in communion; whether a woman should be in the pulpit preaching God's Word, to name just a few.

But at our core, we have a central tenet that we all believe: Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God, and we profess him as our Savior and Lord. It was 1933 when the Rev. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, conceived of the idea of a worldwide communion Sunday. It was established as a special Sunday across the Presbyterian

Church in 1936, and in 1940, it was adopted by the forerunner of the National Council of Churches, and so other denominations such as Methodists, Congregationalists and Northern Baptists began to celebrate it as well. The idea is that we acknowledge the oneness of all Christians, regardless of denomination, culture, or language. We focus on global missions, which Presbyterians do through the Peace and Global Witness Offering.

Enshrined within the foundations of our Presbyterian polity are these sentences: "There are truths and forms with respect to which **men of good character may differ**. And in all of these, we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." The PC(USA) describes itself as a big tent, inclusive of members and churches who hold different beliefs on certain issues; in short, theological diversity.

The Holy Spirit Comes to Gentiles

God is a God who loves diversity. We see this in the swarms of creatures he created, as well as all the shapes, sizes, and colors of human beings. He had a special relationship with the people of Israel, giving them his presence and his holy word. But he had told Abraham even when he first established that relationship that he was blessing him so he could be a blessing to others, that one day all nations would be blessed through him. He repeated that promise through his prophets. On Pentecost Sunday, Peter remembers the words of the prophet Joel and connects them with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit they had just experienced.

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

The Holy Spirit had come, birthing a church that would be comprised of representatives from all peoples of earth. People would be drawn to Christ from different cultures, different backgrounds, some with no foundational faith at all. At the end of chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas return from their first missionary journey to give a report that all kinds of people were responding to the good news of Jesus. Scores of Gentiles were coming to the faith. How thrilling that praise report must have been. But then, In the middle of all this enthusiasm and excitement, some people came down from Jerusalem to say, something's wrong here.

The something wrong was this: They said a person—particularly a Gentile—cannot be saved unless he is circumcised and upholds all of the Law of Moses. In other words, Gentiles need to become Jews before they can become Christians.

Acts 15 is a critical moment for the church. All the wonderful things the Spirit had been doing could have been squashed perhaps by people who were trying to be faithful and hold on to traditions that mattered to them. Or perhaps they were people who were trying to hang on to control, or to something that made sense in a changing world where people were experiencing

God in ways they didn't understand. Others held firm to the belief that the Holy Spirit was moving and it was not their job to quench the Spirit.

But this caused no small dissension and debate among them, which was becoming dangerous and disruptive. It needed to be resolved, and there needed to be a process for that resolution, and an authoritative pronouncement given ***so that the church's mission would not be stopped.*** And so, they go to Jerusalem where a council is convened and a process like a trial, is begun. Who is on trial? Paul and Barnabas? Gentiles? God? Let's see what happened.

First, the council listened to the testimony of Peter, Paul and Barnabas. Peter and Paul had both had direct revelations from God, who had revealed to them they were called to go to the Gentiles, that ***God was making no distinction between them and Jewish believers***. There was also the testimony of the Gentile believers themselves. It was clear that the Holy Spirit had come upon them and was working in their lives. No one could dispute that.

James heard these personal experiences, but then "read" them through the lens of Scripture. James finds support for what is happening in Amos 9:11-12, where God says he will restore David's fallen tent in such a way that it includes all peoples over whom God has established his name. God is doing what God said he would do and, has the right to do. God is God, after all.

So James renders his verdict. He says Gentiles do not need to become Jews to be saved by Jesus. Circumcision would be a meaningless initiation ritual into a covenant that faithful Jews had already demonstrated they cannot keep. It had become a yoke around their necks. This is the very reason God had sent Jesus in the first place. So we shouldn't place the same yoke around these Gentiles' necks. This wouldn't make sense.

But he does propose a compromise. He names four things Gentile converts should abstain from, all associated with the practices of pagan worship: idolatry, sexual immorality which here probably refers to temple prostitution, and two food practices that were common in pagan worship settings. He says, "Keep yourself pure from those things." But that's it. No circumcision, no initiation rites, no Bible content exams, only belief in Jesus.

And so, the unity of the church and its mission were preserved, and so the church continued to expand. They continued to proclaim what Jesus had done to all people, who only needed to believe the good news and respond with their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ, because as the unique Son of God, he had done something that only he could do.

Nicene Creed

But 275 years later, that central truth itself was challenged. In the early 300s, the church was struggling with the question of how best to talk about the Father God, Jesus the Son, the Holy Spirit, and how they are related. How do we balance the seemingly conflicting truths that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God, yet there is only one God?

Arius, a pastor from Alexandria, Egypt, thought it *didn't* work. Out of the desire to protect the holiness of God the Father, Arius argued that God could not have become an unholy human; therefore, Christ is not God incarnate. Arius demoted Jesus Christ to a created being, though still a divine being. Meanwhile, across town, a pastor in training, Athanasius, was teaching that God the Father and Christ the Son were equally divine. He argued that if Jesus is "like" but not of the same substance as the Father, then he cannot be Lord and Savior.

Constantine, the Roman emperor and a fairly new convert to Christianity, was worried about the political fallout of the growing division. In 325 AD, he summoned 300 bishops to Nicaea for a meeting. After much debate, they affirmed the divinity of Christ, stating that Christ was:

> ***eternally begotten of the Father,***
> ***God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,***
> ***begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.***

They affirmed that Christ is "of the same substance" as the Father, and coeternal with him. This was a critical understanding for all to have, a necessary shared belief. An essential, we might call it. So let's be clear, that while we talk about theological diversity as a core value, it is diversity around certain issues, which, though important, are not salvific. They are non-essentials, we might say. In other words, if a fellow Christian does not think I should be in the pulpit, that is not a critical belief in terms of one's salvation. Believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who died and rose again to save sinners, is. It is at the heart of our individual professions of faith, and it is at the heart of our corporate profession, which we make every Sunday, using the words of the Apostles' Creed, or today, the Nicene Creed.

As we celebrate the 1700th anniversary of that creed, we note that it is the only ecumenical creed used by Protestants, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Eastern Orthodox. The Creed gives us the opportunity to acknowledge our common belief, in the midst of our theological diversity.

Steps for Resolving Church Conflict

SPC has defined our value of theological diversity this way: "While united in our conviction that belief in Jesus Christ as Lord is the central and essential tenet of our faith, we will be receptive and loving to people with different theological convictions about the non-essentials."

But we do acknowledge that there are times disagreements about the non-essentials can trip us up. Some may leave or join a church because they have a different list about what is essential and what is non-essential, and they seek out people who have the same list. And I get it, because it's hard to hear interpretations that you think are just wrong. It is one thing to come together once a year for Christian unity services with AME folks and Baptist folks and Anglican folks. It is much harder to worship every Sunday with those with whom we disagree.

Perhaps James gives us a path to follow as we work through issues about which we disagree. Consider these rules of engagement:

1. We acknowledge that open disagreements between earnest believers can lead to spiritual growth, presuming they are handled with care.
2. This means we need to examine ourselves to be clear about our motivations. There are other processes to deal with church issues related to sin, power and personality.
3. Part of our consideration is personal testimony and experience. Peter and Paul could point to how God had been working in their lives and in the Gentile converts. Can we testify about how we have seen God at work as we attempt to address an issue?
4. Then, we appeal to God's word to both test and validate our experiences. Is our position supported by Scripture? In line with the truth of the gospel?
5. Consider opportunities to find compromise and common ground. James chose not to overburden Gentile converts, but there were places he encouraged them to be sensitive to the church's Jewish heritage. Engaging in these practices associated with pagan worship would be offensive to your Jewish brethren, so be considerate of them.
6. Make sure the essence, the gospel, is never compromised. Throughout this debate, the implications of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and their necessity for salvation were never compromised. Because this is the heart of what it means to be Christian.
7. Be open to the Spirit working in new ways. Jesus said, you can't put new wine in old wineskins. There are times our boxes into which we try to fit what God can and can't do must be busted wide open. So don't quench the Spirit!
8. Take every opportunity to build others up. The church at Antioch rejoiced when they received James' letter, because it was such a gracious validation of their experience, and recognition that they were full brothers and sisters in the faith.
9. Finally, expect that we will continue to confront issues in our culture and within our church about which we will disagree, that require us to listen to each other, to give personal testimony, to consult God's Word, and discern God's will.

Mutual Forbearance

At the September Presbytery meeting, we adopted a covenant of mutual forbearance, prompted by some changes in our Book of Order about which we did not all agree. The first two affirmations read:

> We affirm that Jesus Christ is our Savior, and we acknowledge him as Lord of all and head of the church. We affirm that Jesus is the center of our lives, our churches, and our presbytery. Our unity is in Christ.
>
> We affirm one another's sincerity in submitting our conscience to the Lord (F-3.0101), and we affirm our commitment to mutual forbearance (F-3.0105). We recognize that we read scripture differently and may arrive at different interpretations on issues of gender and sexuality. We are committed to ministry flourishing and church vitality even for those with whom we disagree. Our theological diversity is part of our witness.

I wonder, could that be said of SPC? Is our theological diversity a part of our witness, a demonstration of how we might disagree well and continue to work alongside one another?

We sometimes have to tackle difficult, complicated things. But there is something simple and unifying at the core. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." And in Philippians 3:8 "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Paul was saying, I'm going to keep my eyes on Jesus. Jesus has to be at the center, holding everything together, for he is the only center that will hold. For there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. So let's keep our eyes fixed on him. Amen.