

May 24, 2018

## **First in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership** **New Testament Reading Acts 15:1-14 (from *The Message*)**

It wasn't long before some Jews showed up from Judea insisting that everyone be circumcised: "If you're not circumcised in the Mosaic fashion, you can't be saved." Paul and Barnabas were up on their feet at once in fierce protest. The church decided to resolve the matter by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few others to put it before the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem.

After they were sent off and, on their way, they told everyone they met as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria about the breakthrough to the non-Jewish outsiders. Everyone who heard the news cheered—it was terrific news!

When they got to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were graciously received by the whole church, including the apostles and leaders. They reported on their recent journey and how God had used them to open things up to the outsiders. Some Pharisees stood up to say their piece. They had become believers but continued to hold to the hard party line of the Pharisees. "You have to circumcise the pagan converts," they said. "You must make them keep the Law of Moses."

The apostles and leaders called a special meeting to consider the matter. The arguments went on and on, back and forth, getting more and more heated. Then Peter took the floor: "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him.

"So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? So what are we arguing about?"

There was dead silence. No one said a word. With the room quiet, Barnabas and Paul reported matter-of-factly on the miracles and wonders God had done among the other nations through their ministry. The silence deepened; you could hear a pin drop. James broke the silence. "Friends, listen. Simeon has told us the story of how God at the very outset made sure that racial outsiders were included.

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Here we have the first Presbytery meeting. Plus, we know they were Presbyterians because as soon as the matter was allegedly settled it was debated still, again, and again, and again.

From the very beginning the church was engaged in "no small amount of debate" between the Petrines and the Paulines. The Petrines read their Bibles literally. The law was the law. One did not pick and choose which commandments to follow and which not to follow. Paul however was faced with a problem as the pastor of the small congregation in Antioch. His church was full of Greek speaking members, new members. They had to go to work on Saturday. Their bosses were not Jews who understood the sabbath observance. If they insisted on a Sabbath

they would be out of a job. Not to mention circumcision. Wow. I not sure I would sign up for confirmation class with that to look forward to! Timothy made the penultimate sacrifice for peace, unity and purity of the church. Frankly, Paul hasn't got a scripturally compelling argument here. He relies on the Holy Spirit coming into folks and that is enough to jettison the Biblical law? Really? Looking further into Acts we see that this Presbytery decision did not settle the matter. Far from it. They just came to a compromise to hold the church together long enough for their own position to prevail. James was hardcore Biblicist all the way. Peter seems to be somewhere between James and Paul. He forgoes the circumcision knife, but not the kosher dietary knife and fork. Still, he backslides now and again. Some others were more extreme than Paul rejecting any connection to Judaism and resistance to any moral prescription. Paul corrects them in a couple of letters. Barnabas was later rejected by Paul to go with him on his congregational visits because of his Petrine position on biblical observance. Later, we see that Silas is sent with Paul to control his message out among the congregations. The Petrines of Jerusalem church regularly sent pairs of overseers out to the churches to correct the thinking of these Greek speaking converts. Paul did his best to come around right on their heels to shore up his assertion that Christ was God incarnate and to encourage the believers to resist these false teachers. Most of the mean things Paul is spouting in his letters are toward these Petrine Christians and their insistence that all the Jewish law, the Biblical directives, be observed.

This Presbytery is now engaged in the search for its next Presbytery leader as I will be exiting the stage here in October. We see here that Paul's work is not so different from visiting a congregation just after they have heard from ECO or EPC or PCA or Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, or of Mexico, or of Ghana. His work is not so different from discussing what the Reformed thresholds are for an entrance exam for an incoming pastor, or final assessment for a candidate. Also, not so different from an engagement with the closet Unitarian ready to jettison ordination vows and essential doctrine altogether.

In coming weeks as the Presbytery Committee searches for the next Presbytery leader, we will explore the work of Paul, the first Presbytery leader. Presbytery leaders are right here in the Bible. Stated Clerks are here too. Someone was keeping the minutes of the first Presbytery meeting we see here in Acts 15. Paul traveled from church to church to encourage the faithful and to reinforce their adherence to his understanding of the gospel. Here is Paul exercising judgment over who should and who should not lead a church community as its pastor. Here is Paul rich in relationship and committed to restraining sin. Here is Paul the first Presbytery leader.



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