

What Happens When God Does Something New?

Tradition vs. Truth

Acts 15:1-41

This study explores Acts 15:1-41, a pivotal chapter in the early church that highlights the tension between religious tradition and God's unfolding truth. By examining this passage, historical church developments, and insights from theologians, we will consider how to navigate change while staying faithful to the gospel.

I. Why This Study?

A. Objective:

1. To examine how Acts 15 demonstrates the church's process of discerning truth when faced with new challenges.
2. To understand the relationship between religious tradition and God's evolving work in history.
3. To apply biblical principles for navigating change in our faith communities today.

B. Relevance:

1. Acts 15 records the first major church council, where Jewish and Gentile believers debated whether Gentiles must follow Jewish customs to be saved.
2. This debate parallels modern church discussions on how to adapt to new cultural realities while staying true to biblical doctrine.
3. Understanding this passage helps us distinguish between human traditions and God's unchanging truth.

II. Context of Acts 15:1-41

A. The Jerusalem Council: A Defining Moment

1. Some Jewish believers argued that Gentiles must be _____ and follow the Law of _____ to be saved (v.1).
2. Paul and Barnabas strongly _____ this idea and were sent to Jerusalem to seek counsel from the apostles and elders (v.2).
3. The council gathered to determine whether salvation depended on adherence to _____ customs (v.6).

B. Historical Insight:

1. The early church was transitioning from a primarily Jewish movement to a global faith, creating _____ over cultural identity.
2. The inclusion of Gentiles without requiring circumcision was a radical departure from Jewish _____.
3. This event set a precedent for how the church would handle doctrinal disputes and cultural shifts.

C. Key Takeaway:

1. Just as the early church had to discern between tradition and truth, we must also be open to how God is moving in _____ while remaining rooted in biblical faith.

III. What Happens When God Does Something New?

A. Tradition vs. Truth in the Early Church

1. Peter reminded the council that God had already accepted Gentiles by giving them the _____ (v.8).
2. He emphasized that salvation comes by _____ through _____, not by works of the law (v.11).
3. James affirmed this with Scripture (Amos 9:11-12), showing that God's plan _____ included the Gentiles (v.15-18).

B. The Church's Decision: Faith Over Customs

1. The council ruled that Gentiles _____ required to follow Jewish customs but should abstain from practices that would hinder _____ with Jewish believers (v.19-21).
2. This decision upheld biblical truth (salvation by grace) while considering practical ways to maintain fellowship.

C. Historical Parallel: Church Traditions and Reform

1. Throughout history, the church has had to differentiate between _____ traditions and _____ truth (e.g., the Reformation, abolition of slavery, civil rights movement).
2. Like the early church, today's believers must discern when to uphold tradition and when to embrace God's new work.

IV. Our Church vs. The Church

A. Tension Between Local and Universal Church

1. The early Jewish Christians (local church) struggled with accepting Gentiles fully, while the apostles emphasized that the gospel was for _____ (universal church).
2. Today, churches must balance preserving their traditions with embracing new believers from _____ backgrounds.

B. Case Study: Paul and Barnabas' Disagreement (v.36-41)

1. Even after the council's decision, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp _____ over John Mark's role in ministry.
2. This shows that even faithful believers may _____ on how to apply God's truth.
3. The church must navigate change with wisdom, grace, and a commitment to unity.

V. The Role of the Church Today

A. Embracing God's New Work

1. Churches should be open to how God is moving today, especially in cross-cultural ministry, new methods of evangelism, and addressing social issues.
2. Like the early church, we must ensure that our traditions do not become _____ to the gospel.

B. Guarding the Gospel

1. While adapting to change, the church must remain firm in _____, just as the apostles upheld salvation by grace.
2. Not all change is from God—_____ through Scripture and the Holy Spirit is essential.

C. Building Bridges in the Body of Christ

1. The Jerusalem Council modeled a spirit of unity and mutual respect.
2. Today, churches should work toward _____ and _____ rather than division over secondary issues.

VI. Relevant Scholars and Theologians

1. Augustine of Hippo argued that the church should evolve in its cultural expressions while remaining true to biblical doctrine. He wrote, "If you believe what you like in the gospels, and reject what you don't like, it is

not the gospel you believe, but yourself.” (Contra Faustum, Book 17). (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Volume 4, 1887).

2. Martin Luther led the Reformation by challenging church traditions that contradicted Scripture, emphasizing salvation by grace through faith. He stated, “The church has no authority to establish new divine promises of grace, as the papists pretend, for these belong to God alone. The church is built, not on human tradition, but on the Word of God alone.” (Lectures on Galatians 1535). (Luther’s Works, Vol. 26, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963).
3. John Wesley advocated for renewal within the church while emphasizing holiness and social justice. He warned, “At the same time that we adhere to the fundamentals, let us not so cleave to human institutions as to refuse any fresh light which may be given us.” (Sermon 102: On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel). (The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 7, edited by Thomas Jackson, London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872).
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke on the church’s role in resisting oppression and embracing God’s new movements in history. “We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God.” (Life Together, New York: Harper & Row, 1954).
5. N.T. Wright emphasizes the importance of understanding how the early church navigated cultural shifts while remaining true to the gospel. “When God does new things, there are always those who say, ‘We never did it that way before.’ But the Spirit calls us to faithfulness, not nostalgia.” (Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church, New York: HarperOne, 2008).
6. Katie Geneva Cannon, the first Black woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), advocated for an ethics of liberation that rejects oppressive traditions. She wrote, “God is always revealing new dimensions of truth to those who are willing to move beyond the boundaries of tradition.” (Black Womanist Ethics, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).
7. Howard Thurman explored how faith must transcend institutional traditions to address the real needs of the marginalized. “The religion of Jesus makes the love-ethic central. But if one’s tradition is used as a

means of oppression, then it is not the love of Christ being practiced, but an idol of human making.” (Jesus and the Disinherited, Boston: Beacon Press, 1949).

8. Renita Weems, a biblical scholar who examines how faith communities wrestle with change and evolving understandings of God’s truth, stated, “Religious traditions must be examined in light of the God who liberates, not just the institutions that seek to preserve power.” (Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible, San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).
9. Willie James Jennings explores how the early church navigated ethnic and cultural shifts and how today’s church must follow the Spirit’s leading. “The most faithful traditions are those willing to be broken open by the Spirit of God.” (The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

VII. Prayer Focus

1. Thank God for His unchanging truth and for guiding His Church through seasons of change.
2. Ask for wisdom to discern between human tradition and God’s truth.
3. Pray for unity in the Church as it navigates new cultural and theological challenges.

VIII. Conclusion

Acts 15 demonstrates how the early church handled a major doctrinal and cultural shift, choosing biblical truth over rigid tradition while maintaining unity. Like the Church in Antioch and Jerusalem, we must seek God’s wisdom as we navigate change, ensuring that our faith remains grounded in the gospel while open to His new work.

Let us commit to being a church that discerns wisely, embraces God’s movement, and remains united in His truth.

IX. Discussion and Reflection Questions

A. Reflection Question:

1. How can churches today balance honoring tradition while embracing God’s new work?

B. Reflection Question:

1. Are there traditions in your church or personal faith that might need to be reexamined in light of Scripture?

C. Reflection Question:

1. How can we ensure that our cultural preferences do not become barriers to the gospel?

D. Reflection Question:

1. What lessons from Acts 15 can help us navigate disagreements within the Church today?