

It is Good When Believer Dwell in Unity

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 15:22-35 / January 25, 2026

Introduction:

This morning, we are continuing Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and its impact on the Christian mission. Last week, we saw how the truths of salvation by grace through faith alone and God's plan to make a people from every nation, tongue, and tribe were solidified through the Spirit's testimony. These truths led James, an elder in the Jerusalem church, to determine that no additional burden be laid on the Gentiles for salvation while calling them to turn from all idolatrous practices. Our passage today, follows that determination and call with a powerful move of the Spirit in bringing beautiful unity to the early church. I want to consider how we this unity on display and what it reveals to us. Consider two points of unity emphasized in this part of the story. First, in verses 22-29, we see,

A Unified Decision

When studying scripture, especially biblical narrative, one clue for finding the main point of a passage is repeated words or phrases. Verses 22-29 hold a key repeated phrase used alongside intentional language to show Luke's point. Look at verse 22, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers." Underline the phrase "it seemed good," as it guides the flow of narrative. Luke moves the narrative forward by focusing on what seemed good to do next. Note the way he draws attention to the leadership and congregation, saying, "it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church." This emphasizes a collective decision. What was that decision? It isn't an approval of the James' judgment. The language of verse 19 shows James had the authority to issue the ruling. This unified decision is what to do in light of that. It is affirmation and implementation, starting with choosing Judas and Silas, proven and faithful disciples, to go with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. Continue in verses 22-27, they sent Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas, "with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.'" Note the repetition of "it seemed good" in verse 25, followed by language of unity. Yet, this time, the unity is between the apostles and elders, as the letter is addressed from "both the apostles and the elders," showing they are the ones who heard people were unsettling Gentile minds without their instruction and the ones who determined what to do about it. The statement, "having come to one accord," emphasizes their unity in what follows. Don't miss the biblical pattern of the apostles and elders leading the early church. Now, three things are worth highlighting before moving on. First, the word used for "troubled" is the same word Paul uses in Galatians 1:7, when saying, "there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ." Their primary concern is for gospel purity and the souls of all who trust in it. Second, notice how they confirm their approval of Paul and Barnabas' mission and authority by commending them as "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Finally, to ensure the decision is unquestioned they share Judas and Silas' were sent to, "tell you the same things by word of mouth," combatting those who falsely claimed authority from Jerusalem with men who have authority to confirm the letter's contents. So, the flow of narrative shows the entire Jerusalem church in unified agreement to send this letter and delegation because of the unified decision of the apostles and elders. Yet, Luke's emphasis on unity isn't done. Notice what the letter says next in verses 28-29, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality."

If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” Do you see the repetition of “it has seemed good” with language of unity again? Only, now that unity is between the Spirit and us. What is meant by “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit”? Some suggest the Spirit gave a specific prophetic word in the discussion, but it would be odd for Luke to leave that prophecy out of the story. Others suggest the unity from their gathering is the evidence of the Spirit’s presence and guidance. While possible, the language points to an agreement with the Spirit. I am persuaded they mean the Spirit’s testimony Peter and James drew attention to in the council’s discussion. If you remember, Peter and James spoke of the Spirit’s activity in coming upon the Gentiles as evidence of their salvation apart from the law, and the Spirit confirming this would happen through Old Testament prophecy. In other words, the Spirit’s prior testimony is in agreement with this decision. This binds the decision to the promises and work of God prior to the council, rather than some special revelation in the moment. We will return to this observation later. At this point, consider how Luke emphasizes the decision, letter, and delegation are all products of a unified decision made, not only through unity in the church, but unity between them and the Spirit. Next, in verses 30-35, Luke shows,

A Unified Response

The idea of unity is continued even though the key phrase is absent. Look at verses 30-31, “So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.” Note the whole congregation is gathered to hear the letter read. This suggests the response in verse 31 is a collective or unified response. Think about their response with me. Everyone is rejoicing. In what? That no additional burden is needed for salvation, and in the exhortations to abstain from idolatrous practices. They saw saving grace and the requirements as encouragement. Church, this means they didn’t view the requirements as burdensome. Some suggest we shouldn’t talk about idolatry or sin today and only focus on love and grace. We shouldn’t warn of the wrath of God but only speak of His mercy. We don’t need to call people to obedience. We only need to help people see what forgiveness means. Yet, God’s Word consistently holds out the beauty of salvation by grace through faith alone, alongside the call to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Why? Because God’s grace in Christ is power. Power perfected in weakness. We don’t come to Christ simply to escape the torments of hell and get to heaven. We come to Christ because we have seen the glory of God and know the only way to truly live in and for God’s glory is with Christ’s help. The truth of saving grace was just as much of an encouragement as the call to change their lives. They were unified around the truth of the gospel and the call of the gospel. Unified in the joy of salvation and the joy of sanctification. Unified in turning from the idols of their hearts to the living God whose saving work had cleansed them. Family, unity isn’t found in the denial of truth, it is found in our commitment to it. Luke’s emphasis on this doesn’t stop here. Continue in verses 32-35, “And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” Note two ways unity is displayed in these verses. The first is more obvious. The end of verse 33 shows Judas and Silas being “sent off in peace by the brothers” back to the church in Jerusalem. This peace points to the blessings of reconciliation. Do you remember what led to the council? A disruption in fellowship Luke called “no small dissension and debate.” That dissension and debate could have caused irreconcilable differences between the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. Who hasn’t seen church debates cause division? Yet, the response wasn’t division, it was peace. How was that achieved? I believe the actions described in verses 32 and 35 answer this question. In verse 22, Judas and Silas, as representatives and prophets from Jerusalem, “encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” In verse 35, Paul and Barnabas were, “teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.” These mirrored actions bookend the achieved peace. Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas worked together to strengthen the disciples in the decision by the council with the word of the Lord.

The way division was avoided was through a unified response of rejoicing in the God's revealed Word and unified faithful proclamation and encouragement from God's Word. This Word is what strengthens believers, keeping the gospel of Jesus Christ and pursuit of the glory of God as our focus to bind the hearts of God's people together. This brings me to how we should respond to what Luke is emphasizing. First, we should,

1) Seek Unity through The Spirit's Testimony

Unity in Christ's church is important as eighteen New Testament passages call for some kind of pursuit of unity. Psalm 133, read earlier says, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" calling it precious like anointing oil and the dew on Zion, "For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." There is a blessing in unity, but it is not achieved in a vacuum. We don't find unity by seeking the lowest common denominator and trying to please everyone. Consider the example we see in how to find unity from this passage, especially in difficult decisions. Note what the final repeated key phrase points to in verse 28, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The foundation for them coming to one accord in their decision was how it was in agreement with the Spirit's testimony. They didn't appease or negotiate with the believers from the party of the Pharisees. They sought to follow the Spirit's testimony and neither their traditions, history, nor personal wisdom kept them from accepting it. Yet, they didn't rely only on how they had seen the Spirit move. The testimony they believed came through actions of the Spirit interpreted through the teaching of Scripture. We should not be afraid to look for the Spirit's activity when seeking direction, but, because of the promises of false representations of the Spirit, we only trust in an experiential testimony when it aligns with Scripture. As David Peterson says well, "Only when Christians are united in interpreting the acts of God in the light of Scripture can it be said that the Spirit has been leading like this" (David G Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 439). Family, we can misinterpret how the Spirit is moving, and we can be deceived by false claims of the Spirit moving. Likewise, our wisdom and understanding can deceive us. To seek this kind of unity as a church, we need to interpret what we see in light of what we have been told in God's Word. And our leadership should lead us in that interpretation. Second, we should,

2) Humbly Come Under the Instruction and Encouragement of The Lord

Consider again the responses of the Gentile believers in Antioch. Look at verses 31-33 again, "And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them." They viewed the decisions from the apostles and elders as "encouragement." And they receive the word of Judas and Silas as encouragement before sending them off in peace. The exhortations weren't off putting and its prohibitions weren't burdensome. There is no hint of them feeling like they are missing out on something with its restraints. They humbly came under the instruction of God's Word to remove the idols of their heart and received the encouragement of Judas and Silas to continue in that endeavor. This should be the posture of our hearts. The instructions and commands we see pressed upon God's people are not burdens, they are true freedom. Family, there are many ways people try to undermine clear instructions from God's Word, and we need to humble our hearts to see the Spirit's testimony through it. Finally, we should,

3) Rejoice in God's Saving and Sanctifying Work

The way their response is described stands out to me. Consider what Luke says in verse 31, "they rejoiced because of its encouragement." Their response wasn't a solemn acceptance of the decision by the council. It was filled with joy. Joy in the truth of the gospel and its call to turn from any association with idolatrous practices. Practices that were part of their way of life. Family, we should not only rejoice in our salvation, we should also find joy in Christ's demands on our lives. This kind of joy is what binds our hearts together and moves us to see no exhortation as burdensome. This joy will keep us from thinking we are missing out when God calls us to give up that sinful habit. This joy will cause us to leave everything and go on mission if asked.

This joy will lead us to strive for peace with all people, pray for those who persecute us, turn the other cheek, keep no records of wrong, the list could go on. Because this joy moves us to seek first His kingdom and live to share the glory of Christ in the gospel instead of seeking our own ease, comfort and protection. As we continue in Acts, the trials and tribulations of God's people increase exponentially from this moment on. One would expect their joy to dissipate, but instead we will see it increase. Why? Because they learned to rejoice in God's saving and sanctifying work. Will we do the same?

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes to lead us in worship in song, I want to call us to press into our remaining time together. We believe it is not only important to hear God's Word, but to respond to it. So, we have an extended time of worship in song each week for reflection and response. And to help our hearts engage, we invite physical expressions of response. Each week, we invite you to come kneel before the Lord as a physical posture of humility. Or come forward to receive prayer from our prayer team worshipping with lanyards on in the front rows. We also have tables available to take communion each week as a physical expression of remembering Christ's sufficient sacrifice for you. One at the front, and the second near the Mezzanine in the back. All the bread is gluten free to serve those concerns. Also, as we desire to ensure financial giving is a joyful act of worship, we have offering baskets at those tables for you to physically give as a response of worship if you desire to. 2 Corinthians 9:7 says, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." So, this is not a coercion to give and we encourage everyone to give as and how you would like, whether here, online, by mail, or not at all. This is merely an opportunity for a physical expression of worship as you give. Family, these things are not requirements but aids to help our hearts respond to God's Word each week. So, as we enter this time of reflection and response, ask the Spirit to guide you and come at any time as you are led. Would you pray with me as we seek God's grace together?