

Acts for today**'The Growing Church in the Acts of the Apostles'**

No. 7: Council of Jerusalem

'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). Unity was of primary importance to the first Christians, in a church with an astonishing racial and cultural mix. Just as today, failing to exhibit unity compromises the very gospel of reconciliation that we preach.

This concern was highlighted in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), when the unity of the church was under threat. As Gentiles joined the church, it was the conservative Jewish Christians who said, 'it is necessary to circumcise them (i.e. the Gentiles) and to charge them to keep the law of Moses' (15:5). At heart the issue concerned whether faith in Christ alone was sufficient, or whether other conditions should be imposed upon them? In their case it was Christ plus other demands brought over from Judaism. In our own church today, it can be Christ plus laying on of hands, Christ plus speaking in tongues, Christ plus rebaptism and so on.

How did the apostles respond? After listening to Peter, the testimony of Paul and Barnabas and applying Scripture, they reached a decision. While agreeing that circumcision should not be demanded of Gentile Christians, they were asked to forego eating meat offered to idols or from which the blood had not been drained and immorality.

What can we learn from them about maintaining unity within our own church life?

They allowed free and open debate.

They stood firm on essentials, while compromising on inessentials.

They permitted variety in practice among different cultural groups.

Do we value unity as highly as these early Christians? Like them, we should aim for what 'seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (28).

*The Rev Paul Hardingham
continues his series on the early Church.*

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