

Responding to God Word: How to Faithfully Interpret the Bible

Men's Bible Study at Park View

Lessons from Acts 15 for biblical interpretation today

April 5, 2005

Acts 15 records a time of great stress in the early church. At the heart of the issue was a proposed change in the way the Jewish church interpreted the Old Testament scriptures. Today's study will look at the process the church changed their interpretation of the Bible when they made a decision about a very controversial issue. We will then seek to apply these lessons to situations which the church faces in Biblical interpretation today.

Read: Acts 15:6-35

Note the process that the church used to work through the issue:

- 1). The Antioch church sent a representative delegation to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders.
- 2). They discussed the issue openly. They knew the question had to do with cultural understandings and Biblical interpretation.
- 3). There were testimonies about the evidence of what God was doing in the Gentile world. Peter shared the Cornelius story, and Barnabas and Paul shared about their missionary ventures. The assembly was moved to silence by the testimony of God's grace.
- 4). They examined the Scriptures in light of a fresh outpouring of God's spirit, as Peter had done at Pentecost.
- 5). They came to a Spirit-led consensus after careful deliberation and spiritual discernment.
- 6) They exercised the power of binding and loosing.
- 7). They wrote an official letter, sent the letter by chosen delegates, announcing the decision. The language of the letter was specific and clear.

The way that the early church worked with this issue is an example of
working with a divisive issue
the diversity in the Bible
inspired Biblical interpretation
discernment by spirit-enlightened community
cultural adaptation
diversity in application for different times and places

Questions to consider:

Does the church today have the power of binding and loosing? If so, on what level does binding and loosing happen — small group, congregation, conference, denomination, district, region, city-wide, nation-wide?

How does the church discern whether or not the Spirit is saying something new, particularly if it seems to be opposite that of a tradition or a particular scripture?

What components must be present for spiritual discernment to be truly communal?

What issues today need communal discernment for proper Biblical interpretation?