

**The Holy Spirit Acts:
TEAR DOWN THE WALLS;
KEEP THE FOUNDATION**

**Acts 15:1-35
I Corinthians 3:11**

What is essential to be the Church?

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There are many inspiring and interesting things to see when you go to the Holy Land. But one of the most impressive is the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem. It is the foundation of the Temple built by Herod the Great that was standing in the time of Jesus. The stones of the foundation are the size of boxcars. The Western Wall of the Temple Mount is the holiest place in the world for Jews today, and the faithful gather to touch the stones and pray.

But the most important stone for me is on the south side of the Temple Mount in an area called the Teaching Steps. In the time of Jesus, this is where people gathered to hear the teaching of the rabbis. Jesus would have done his teaching in Jerusalem at this place. Tucked away in a corner is a stone from the time of Jesus. It is situated where the gate led up to the Temple plaza. This is the one place on the journey that you could say without a doubt that the feet of Jesus touched that rock.

So every time I go to Jerusalem, I stand on that rock. I go halfway around the world to walk where Jesus walked. That is my foundation stone.

For the past several weeks, we have been watching the Holy Spirit work through the Book of Acts. Today we want to wrap up this series by looking at the first big church conference. It is called the Jerusalem Council. It's a sort of foundation stone for the Church. In Acts 15, we read how the issue became whether or not the Gentile Christians should become Jews before they could follow Jesus. Jesus was a Jew; all the early disciples were Jews. But now the Holy Spirit was being given to Gentiles. We heard about that last week. The Christian community in Antioch was becoming more Gentile than Jewish. So should these new Gentile believers be circumcised and commit to follow the Law of Moses before they could be considered Christians? Scripture says the question stirred up "*no small dissension and debate*" in the early community of faith.¹

The Antioch community of believers sent Paul and Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and figure things out. The believers in Jerusalem who had once been Pharisees continued to advocate for all Christians to observe the same signs of the covenant that the Jews did: circumcision and

the Law. They weren't just being rigid legalists; these were important parts of their spiritual identity.

But Peter stood up and spoke to the group. Given the fact that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles, Peter felt they shouldn't add any more burden to these new converts. Besides, the Jews couldn't even keep the Law of Moses. How could they expect the Gentiles to do it? They were all—Jew and Gentile—saved by the grace of God.

Then Paul gave the missionary report about the great work that God had been doing. Paul had already been on one missionary journey, and they had seen the Spirit at work among the Gentiles in Antioch. The Holy Spirit was blessing them with signs and wonders.

Finally the apostle James spoke. Many believe he was the actual brother of Jesus. James recalled how the Hebrew Scriptures foresaw a day when the Gentiles would return to God. So it would be wrong to stifle or impede the Gentiles who were turning to God now. If they would just keep away from food offered to idols, strangled animals, blood, and fornication (which probably in this context meant marrying a close relative), they should be welcome in the community of the Christian faith.

Those seem like kind of strange and random requirements to us, but they actually refer back to the Law of Moses in Leviticus 17 and 18. These are the rules for aliens or guests in the land of Israel. In other words, the Gentile Christians are guests of their Jewish brothers and sisters, and they should act with consideration and courtesy, as any good guest would. But they don't have to become Jews.

The Jerusalem Council sent Paul, Barnabas and others back to Antioch with this compromise, and there was great rejoicing among the believers—especially among the men who were happy not to have to get circumcised!

To the casual eye, Acts 15 seems like a rather mundane report of events. But the implication of this conference is huge for the Christian movement. This decision opens the door wide to people of every race and nation to come to Jesus. Everyone is welcome, with a few minimal requirements. (Who really wants to eat blood or marry their sister, anyway?) It is a turning point at the mid-point of Acts. You'll notice that after this

conference, the rest of the book tells about Paul spreading the Gospel across the Roman Empire.

The question this chapter raises for us today is this: What is essential to be the Church? Obviously, the requirements of James are out of date. What are the critical points that make the Church the Church? What are the essentials to be the community of faith the Holy Spirit wants us to be?

That question can be answered several ways. Theologically, we could say that to be the Church we have to believe in certain things: the authority of Scripture, the divinity of Jesus, salvation by faith, and so forth. That's a good answer.

Or we could answer in a programmatic way, and say that to be the Church we have to do certain things. Like Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, we have to practice radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity.² That's how to be the church, and it's all good stuff.

But I want to answer the question this morning out of the context of the Jerusalem Council. I believe that to be the Church, it is essential to have continuity with the past, relevance in the present, and vision for the future.

The early church had **continuity with the past**. They did not reject the Law of Moses or the covenant community of the Jews. They affirmed their heritage. They asked new Gentile converts to follow the rules Moses laid down for guests in the land. In a sense, we are all still guests of a Jewish host.³

We want to affirm our history and tradition as we move into the future. Paul wrote early in the Christian movement to the church in Corinth, "*no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*"⁴ On that sure foundation, we have 2000 years of Christian history that informs our story. We have three centuries of history as Methodists, followers of John Wesley. We have 179 years of history at First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith. This is all good stuff. This is all important stuff. Our past is part of the spiritual DNA that makes us who we are today. No matter what new thing comes along, we stand on that foundation.

In Columbus, Ohio, on the campus of Ohio State University, there is a building called the Wexner Center for the Arts in

Columbus. It was designed as an experiment in a post-modern view of reality. That means the building has no pattern. Staircases go nowhere. Pillars support nothing. The centerpiece of the building is a framework that looks like scaffolding that someone forgot to take down when the building was finished. The architect designed the building to be a work of art to reflect post-modern life—mindless and senseless. In fact, when the building was opened 30 years ago, there were no pictures on the walls. They didn't want to lose focus on the architecture.⁵

One thing, however, is very traditional about the Wexner Center—the foundation. It has footings poured into the ground made out of steel-reinforced concrete. That's because you can design the structure and the interior to reflect whatever bizarre idea you might have. But the foundation has to hold the building up. You cannot tamper with the foundation unless you want the building to come crashing down around you.⁶

To be the Church today, it is essential that we maintain continuity with our past, with the historic faith of the apostolic Church. At the same time, we must be **relevant to the present**. It's a delicate balance. We love our heritage, but we have to be aware of and open to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world today. We want to support the movement of God in any way we can. Too often we ask God to bless what we're doing. Instead, we need to do what God is blessing.

In Acts 15, three speakers in a row talk about the new thing God is doing in their time. Peter recalls how the Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit. Paul recounts the amazing work of God among the Gentiles of Antioch. James relates this phenomenon to their historic faith, then says not to hinder it. God was doing a new thing, and their fledgling movement needed to stay relevant to this new development.

We live in a rapidly changing culture. How many of you own typewriters? How many are in the market to buy a typewriter? Some of our young people are asking, "What's a typewriter?" For over a hundred years, they were the primary medium of written communication. They are still being made, I discovered on the internet, but few are being sold. They have been replaced by computer keyboards, even in third-world

countries. Kids don't take typing classes anymore; it's all keyboarding.

Or beepers. Who has a beeper anymore? That piece of technology didn't last but a few years. Now most people have cell phones, and most of them are smart on their own. (Which is a good thing, because their owners often are not.) As a church, we are still communicating the Word to the world. We can't afford to be typewriters in a world full of computers, beepers in a world of smartphones. God is doing some new things in our midst. Are we open to it? Are we staying relevant?

The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church did a massive study of our denomination a few years ago, seeking to learn the driving forces of vitality in the church. One of the key drivers of vitality in growing congregations was a mixture of traditional and contemporary worship. It was not either/or, but both/and. Now our choice has to do with live in-person worship or virtual online worship. It's still not either/or; it's both/and—both continuity with the past, and relevance in the present.

The final essential to be the Church is to have a **vision for the future**. As far back as the Book of Proverbs, Scripture says, *“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”*⁷ The apostle James remembered the vision of all the Gentiles seeking the Lord. Paul would write later to the Philippians that one day *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*⁸ There's a vision for you!

A vision is a picture of a preferred future. What do you think First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith will look like in five years, ten years, twenty years? What's your picture? Will we be an aging downtown congregation dedicated to preserving the memories of better days gone by? Or will we be a vital congregation, making disciples, reaching out in life-changing mission to the community? Are our best days behind us, or do we have a vision for the future? It takes a vision to be the Church.

I live with a very insightful woman. The other day we were talking about challenges and opportunities facing the church, and she said, “I believe there are evil forces at work in the world,

and this is a time to double down on our mission.” In fact, there are “*spiritual forces of wickedness*”⁹ (as Paul said) that would rejoice to see the Church fade into obscurity. But not on my watch! The Holy Spirit is calling us to be the Church, to double down on our mission, to have continuity with the past, relevance in the present, and a vision for the future.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan made a speech at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. The city had been divided for 26 years by a stone wall erected by the Communist regime in East Germany. The gate was the only way in or out of the Communist side of the city and a stark reminder of the political division. But Communism was showing signs of weakening, and the President wanted to challenge Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, to allow more freedom. In front of 45,000 people, he said, “We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”¹⁰

Two years later, the Berlin Wall fell. Thousands of cheering Germans literally dismantled the wall with sledgehammers and pickaxes. It was a taste of freedom, and for the first time in a long time, they had hope for the future.

To be the Church in our day, it is essential to tear down the walls and keep the foundation. If we become locked in a love affair with the past, tear down that wall! If we care more about meeting our own needs than ministering to the needs of others, tear down that wall! If we erect barriers that prevent us from reaching out or keep the community from coming in, tear down that wall!

But keep the foundation: “*No one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*”¹¹ Build on that foundation. Build continuity with the early Church and our Wesleyan heritage. Build a ministry that

is relevant to our culture and our community. Build a future with hope, in the name of Jesus Christ, to the glory of the Father!

¹ Acts 15:2.

² Robert Schnase, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

³ William Willimon, *Acts: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 130.

⁴ I Corinthians 3:11.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/05/arts/architecture-view-the-museum-that-theory-built.html>.

⁶ Ravi Zacharias, "If the Foundations Be Destroyed," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 142.

⁷ Proverbs 29:18 KJV.

⁸ Philippians 2:11.

⁹ Ephesians 6:12.

¹⁰ "Tear Down This Wall!" *Wikipedia.com*.

¹¹ I Corinthians 3:11.