



SUNDAY, MAY 21, 2023

A Good Argument PART 1

ACTS 14:26-15:21 (NIV)

THE DIVISION OF THE DISCIPLES

A SERMON BY
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REV. DR. HOWARD-JOHN WESLEY, SENIOR PASTOR



Date: May 21, 2023

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley

Sermon Title: *A Good Argument, Part I: The Division of the Disciples*

Scripture: Acts 14:24 - 15:18 (NIV)

After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things'—things known from long ago.

SERMON SUMMARY

Despite having a negative connotation, arguments have their place and can help us discern and discover the will of God. As hard as this proposition is to digest, we see evidence of it in the episode that unfolds in Acts 14:24 - 15:18. Paul and Barnabas take issue with the teaching of a group of Pharisees (also known as Judiazers) who demand all Gentile converts first be circumcised to follow Jesus. Through this argument about circumcision, a deeper question arises: *“What is the requirement for salvation?”* Is one saved through “religion”—strict adherence to the rules and rituals of the Jewish religion? Or is one saved through “relationship”—accepting, by faith, the finished work of Jesus?

With the central question of salvation before them, the significant players in this drama gather in Jerusalem to settle the matter *in community*. The Pharisees are there, and they speak. Peter is present, and he speaks. Paul and Barnabas are in the house as well, and they speak. After all points of view are presented, James (one of Jesus’s original disciples) determines that the yoke of circumcision is not required to be a part of the Jesus Movement, and the matter is settled.

Pastor Wesley points out that the best way to have a good argument is to do precisely what was done in Jerusalem: welcome and include multiple perspectives. In fact, if any dispute does not include the thoughts and views of all impacted by its outcome, it is not a good argument. This sermon series will continue on June 4th with more components of a good argument.

KEY POINTS

1. This sermon series focuses on one of the most significant obstacles for Christians. This obstacle is our ability to get along with one another.
2. We discern God’s will better in conversation than in isolation.
3. One cannot clearly discern the communal will of God alone.
4. The presence of an argument does not signify the absence of God. Instead, arguments are opportunities to hear God in new ways.

***Village Members and Facilitators,
The Curriculum Team does not expect you to cover all the questions.
We ask facilitators to choose the best questions for your Village from each section.***

GETTING TO KNOW YOU QUESTIONS

1. We learn that the first use of the word “Christian” was in the city of Antioch. Do you remember when you first considered yourself a Christian? What were the circumstances? How did you arrive at this choice of term to describe yourself?
2. Have you ever had an experience of learning from someone whose opinion dramatically differed from yours? What was that like for you? How did you position your heart to hear and learn from this person?
3. How do you exercise the ability to hear and respect perspectives unlike yours?

INTO THE BIBLE QUESTIONS

1. We learn in this sermon that the earliest name for the followers of Jesus was “The Way.” Please read Isaiah 40:3 and describe what you think of the name “The Way.” Can you imagine calling yourself “a follower of The Way” today? Why or why not?
2. II Peter 1:20 states, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture becomes a matter of someone’s own interpretation.” How does Village help you live out this scripture?

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. The Judiazers/Pharisees thought they were keeping the faith pure by defending Jewish laws and rituals. Have you ever staunchly defended a position, only later to find that you were wrong? How did you move from the old viewpoint to the new one?

2. This sermon points out that all the various factions who gathered in Jerusalem were welcomed (Acts 15:4). How do you “welcome” people with whom you deeply disagree? What are the steps you take? What are the scriptures you call to mind? And is it worth it in the end?

3. Acts 15:12 states, “All the assembly fell silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul.” Listening helps us understand another’s point of view before we craft an argument or speak. What steps might you take to listen more intently to those with whom you differ? How might you change if you listened to people with deeper intention?

4. What would have happened at the Jerusalem Council if any of the speakers took the position, “It is My Way or the Highway!”? What behaviors and or phrases hinder or help communication when perspectives are different?

“CAN I PUSH IT?” QUESTIONS

1. In Acts 15:5, the Apostle James allows the Pharisees to speak at the Council of Jerusalem. The Pharisees were part of the Jewish religious leadership that fought assiduously against the emerging Christian community. Today, they might be compared to the religious right. What does this sermon say to you about the right of this group to speak their minds and share their position?

2. Leadership in organizations is often hard-won. Once achieving a certain level of prominence, stepping down can be difficult. In recent days, there has been an uproar over the tenure of Senator Dianne Feinstein, as there was over the refusal of Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s decision to remain in office. How can organizations be more accountable in the transition of leadership?

3. Pastor Wesley ends this sermon by stating, "This nation will never be great as long as leadership marginalizes the voices of some communities." What is the Church's role in centering marginalized communities?

ACTIVITY

Within your Village, develop a list of six norms to engage in "A Good Argument." Once you have your list, share with your fellow villagers which items are most difficult for you. Note the challenging norm and place it on your personal prayer list.

SPIRIT WORK

Many of us have heard the adage, "There is a reason why God gave you two ears and only one mouth." We can apply this wisdom when we face disagreement and conflict. Write a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help you fully listen and understand the views of others without simply waiting to speak. Keep this prayer with you throughout the week, and pray the prayer whenever conflict arises.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS

Within the structure of Village, there are various affinity groups. Each week the team creates questions specifically for these individual groups. However, any village may draw from the questions listed below if the Spirit so moves.

For Married Couples

1. We find in Acts 15:12 that the assembly silently listened to Paul and Barnabas. How has silence been an asset or a hindrance in your marriage?

2. In this sermon, we learn that greatness is associated with service. How can you achieve more greatness in your marriage by serving each other or serving others together?

For Young Adults

1. Social media culture allows anyone to voice their opinions on any issue. However, online debates often become ugly, and people often say things online that they would *never* say in person. Is it possible to have a good argument online? If so, how? If not, why?

2. While we can recount many arguments that soured relationships, have you ever been in a dispute that strengthened your relationship with the other party? How did the argument improve your relationship?

For Parents

1. Pastor Wesley notes, "If you are a parent, you need to learn how to have a good argument." Who are the role models in your life that impact how you have a good argument with your children?

2. Parents are primary examples of right (and wrong) behavior for their children. How do you model having a good argument in front of your children?

For Seniors

1. Many of us were raised to *never* disagree with authority figures, even when they were wrong. Think back to someone with whom you wished you could have openly disagreed. What effect did the inability to state your disagreement have on you? How can reflecting on this experience positively affect your relationships with younger people?
2. Was there ever a time when you felt your opinion was the only right one because you were the oldest person in the room? If so, what could you have done or said differently at that moment?

For Women

1. Think of a time when a different opinion positively changed your life. How did that moment help you to be more accepting of different views?
2. Sunday's sermon teaches that "we can get God wrong all by ourselves." Other than Village, with whom do you collaborate to understand scripture better?

For Men

1. When was the last time you heard someone's position and did not respect it? As you reflect on the sermon, what did you learn that would have helped you listen differently?

3. Sunday's sermon teaches that "we can get God wrong all by ourselves." Other than Village, with whom do you collaborate to understand scripture better?

For Returning Citizens

1. Community is a safeguard for discerning God's will. Who's in your community? How do their views differ from yours? Do they (or do they not) help safeguard your discernment of God's will?
2. Was there ever a time when you felt that your opinion was the only right one because of your experiences? How did this impact the conversation? What could you have done or said differently in that moment?

For Differently-Abled Persons/People

1. Pastor Wesley notes that damage is done when leaders discern God's will for communities who are not included in decision-making conversations. How would church life change if differently-abled communities were always included in church dialogues?
2. This week's sermon warns us about interpreting scripture alone. As we close this Village season, what are other spaces where you can dialogue about God and Scripture?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Pastor Wesley's sermon slides are available on ASBC's website. To view and download, [click here](#).
2. As we journey towards Pentecost, we encourage you to read the book of Acts to learn more about the life of the Early Church.