

(Tim Geddert, April 14, 2018)

“Reading the Bible Together” (Conference)

Presentation 3

Reading and Interpreting Scripture Together (in the community and for the community)

Why and how should we “read Scripture together”?

I want to begin this last presentation with some reflections on why we should read Scripture in the community and for the community. And then I want to use primarily one example (Acts 15) to reflect on how we should do that, especially when we are confronted with controversial and sometimes divisive issues that need to be addressed.

Why read Scripture communally?

REASON # 1

First and foremost, because most of Scripture was written primarily to address communities, not to address individuals. Reading as a community is reading as the authors intended the texts to be read. There are a few exceptions. The so-called Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) were written to individuals. But from beginning to end these letters were written to foster the well-being of communities. Both Timothy and Titus are being instructed on how to guide and shape and protect and facilitate the mission of *communities*! Even the short book of Philemon, Paul’s appeal to Philemon to forgive and welcome back and probably free the slave Onesimus, bears witness to the fact that Paul’s primary concern is the community. And there are hints in the letter that Paul actually expected this masterful rhetorical appeal to Philemon to be read publically in the Colossian church, adding one more layer of pressure on Philemon to do, not what seemed right to him, but what was important for the Christian community.

The runaway individualism of our modern and post-modern Western World would have been unimaginably foreign to all the cultures of the ancient world and many cultures in our world today. We need to train ourselves to *think* communally . . . to hear ourselves *addressed* communally by the Scriptures, to respond to the Scriptures in ways that best facilitate the unity and the mission of our Christian *communities*. Individualistic readings of texts are usually misreadings.

An anecdote to illustrate the point:

Several years ago, I assigned a research paper in a Greek class. Students were to select a passage from the New Testament, translate it from Greek, analyze the grammar, and then, based on their work with the original language interpret the text, i.e. explain carefully what the passage *means*. I made it very clear: this is NOT to be a paper about practical applications. I do not want to learn from your paper how you think you should run a youth program or conduct a hospital visit or overcome an addiction. This is a Greek paper and an exegetical

paper. The *applications* of the passage for today were not my major concern. In fact, they didn't need to include any applications in this paper. In case they chose to include some, I said, keep that part very short.

One of my students picked a well-known passage from Ephesians 4. Part of the text reads, like this:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up . . .

. . . and so on (you know the passage).

One of my student did a fine job of identifying adverbial participles, imperatives of prohibition, and datives of advantage. He used his skills in reading Greek very well. But alongside his exegetical conclusions, he kept saying things like: "This text is calling me to be honest;" and "Here I am being challenged to deal with my anger;" and, "God wants me to be honest and generous;" and "I need to learn better how to control my tongue" and I kept writing in the margins: "Isn't this about the community rather than the individual? Isn't this calling us to create a community of integrity, and of generosity, one where our speech builds up others, where kindness and forgiveness characterize our common life?"

I gave him quite a good grade, but perhaps he expected an even better grade. At any rate, he came to me and said (listen carefully): "I thought you said the application part was optional."

Well that started a rather confusing conversation that went something like this.

He: "I thought you said the application part was optional."

I: "I did. You did not need to include application."

He: "But you kept criticizing my paper for not including application."

I: "No, not at all, though I had some concerns about your interpretation."

He: "Well, I decided not to include any application."

I: "That's fine, I didn't ask you to include any application."

He: "Then why did you write the application in the margins?"

Eventually we were both confused and realized we were talking right past each other. And then the lights went on for me. His assumptions were exactly the opposite of mine.

In my view, Paul wrote Ephesians to a community. His aim was to shape that community into a place where relationships are characterized by honesty, generosity, kindness and forgiveness. To hear the message is to hear its word *to the community*.

In his view, this text, like every other text in the Bible, speaks to the individual. Yes, Paul wrote to a church, but that is no longer irrelevant. As part of the Bible, Ephesians (for me) is no longer Paul's letter to an ancient church; now it is God talking to me. God is the real author. I am the real reader. Who cares what people in Ephesus were supposed to learn in the first century? When the text says "you" that means "me." So, he read the entire text as though this is God talking just to him.

Now if he had decided to include "application" he might have pointed out some things that the church could do to help each individual in their personal relationship with God.

Do you see what was happening?

When I interpret Ephesians 4, I read it as God's word to a community . . . first through Paul to a first century community, now as Scripture to contemporary Christian communities. Of course, it is quite appropriate for me to reflect on how I as an individual can contribute to this kind of community. But that would be a part of the application section . . . the part that I told this student was optional for his paper.

When he interpreted Ephesians 4, it was not God's word to the community; it was God's word to him. If he had included the optional application part, he might have explored how the church can contribute to each individual's personal piety.

He interpreted the whole text as though it was just about him. The nature of the Christian community, as a community, never entered the picture after all, the application part was optional.

I was convinced, and still am, that he simply misread the text! And I think there is a great danger that many of us misread many texts if we do not recognize and compensate for the runaway individualism that plays havoc with the church and its interpretation of Scripture.

One more example of this. Paul writes in Romans 14:17:

"For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Paul is trying to help negotiate a series of tricky situations in the church. The issues concern what could be eaten, where, and with whom. There were old Jew-Gentile differences over Kosher and non-Kosher foods. There were new Christian differences over whether food offered to idols and food consumed in pagan festivals was off limits for Christians or not. There seem to have been conflicts between teetotalers and social drinkers, and even between vegetarians and meat-eaters. A great deal was at stake (no pun intended.)

At a deeper level, this had to do with moral compromise and appropriate enculturation, about relationships between strong and weak Christians and about church unity.

In this situation, Paul writes, *"The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

So how is an individualist reading of this text different from a communal reading?

An individualist reading would go something like this: Quit getting all worked up about food. That's not important. What matters to God is righteousness, peace and joy. What matters to God is your own personal spiritual condition: Righteousness (Are you right with God?) Peace (Are you at peace with God in your heart?) Joy (Does the Holy Spirit fill your heart with joy?)

A communal reading of the text is very different. Paul is saying, "Far more than merely food is at stake here." This is about justice. (The word "righteousness" should probably be translated "justice" here, and in many other places!) This is about harmony and shalom in the community (The Greek word "peace" hardly ever means inner peacefulness)! This is about God's Spirit forming you into a joy-filled and united community, despite your different convictions and practices.

Did you notice any differences between the individualist and the communal readings?

Is God's Kingdom about inner righteousness or outer justice?

Is it about inner peacefulness or concrete relationships characterized by shalom?

Is it about joy in my heart or a joy-filled community?

Does the Holy Spirit **set aside** our social and public concerns (here food and drink) in favor of inner spiritual qualities? OR does the Holy Spirit help us **solve** the bread and butter issues of the church in ways that unite people with diverse convictions and practices into a loving community of people willing both to free others and to restrict themselves, if that's what it takes to create a community of justice, shalom and joy.

I submit that it makes a very large difference whether our primary grid for reading Scriptures is the privacy of personal experience or the community of God's people.

So, why read communally . . . because the Scriptures address communities.

REASON # 2

But there is a second reason, pretty obvious when we think about it, but most people don't think of it. . . . Because that is the only way that anyone in the first century . . . or for that matter the first 15 centuries of church history **could** read Scripture.

Ever heard of "Berea"? Only about a million times. There are Berean schools, Berean churches, Berean denominations, Berean Christian bookstores. Berea everywhere!

It all stems from one Bible verse: "*Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness **and examined the Scriptures every day** to see if what Paul said was true.*" (Acts 17:11)

Christians, especially Evangelical Protestants, often choose "Berea" as a name that symbolizes a commitment to the Scriptures, to careful Bible study. When the Bible is the final authority by which we test claims and discern truth we are *being Berean*. But being the individualists we are, we probably imagine the Berean Christians all going home and studying their Bibles. Not so. Nobody had Bibles at home. Many couldn't read. While many Jews could read, as the Bible spread in the Gentile world the percentage of literate people in the church

would have dropped precipitously. Estimates are that about 20% of men and about 5% of women in the Roman Empire could read. And I suspect it remained at levels somewhere around those for another 1500 years.

And even when people were able to read, they didn't have books in their homes. Even among first century Jews, where far more people could read, their only access to the Scripture would have been in the synagogue, where they read it communally.

What happened in Berea is that those who heard Paul preach discerned *together* what the Scriptures taught and whether the new ideas Paul was proclaiming were consistent with biblical truth or not. That is what we are called to emulate, not individually and privately, but as a gathered discerning community.

Not until the invention of the printing press was it possible for the upper class of society to start collecting books for private reading. Not for a few centuries after that can it be assumed that the average Christian would have a private copy of the Bible in their possession. The phenomenon of individual Christians reading privately owned (or for that matter publicly accessed . . . via our devices) copies of the Bible is relatively recent in Church history. It is a wonderful blessing that we can read the Bible on our own. Let's do it! Let's never give up doing it! But let's also never let that be the norm . . . the primary context for reading and interpreting and applying Scripture.

The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit is the one who helps interpret the Scriptures. Yet it is one of the distinctive emphases in Anabaptism that the Spirit does this most effectively as the gathered community discerns together how to interpret and apply Scripture. While we do and should read the Scriptures privately, normative interpretation and application of Scripture depend on community discernment. It is not appropriate for individuals to insist that others must interpret Scripture in a particular way, just because they themselves do. And when new ideas are put forth, we neither accept nor reject them lightly. We search the Scriptures *together* so that we can both remain firmly grounded and also learn new things.

There is much to be said for reading and interpreting Scripture *together*. Sometimes reading *together* means discovering what *past* interpreters have said about the texts we are studying. Remember: God did not start speaking to the church in our generation! Sometimes it means paying attention to what Bible interpreters *around the globe* are saying, for they can see things from perspectives we can barely imagine. Studying Scripture in Bible study groups with people from diverse life situations helps us discover our own blind spots and expand our horizons. Reading Scripture together with others makes it possible to see more, or at least to see more faithfully, than any one person can alone.

And if that is true for *reading and interpreting* Scripture, how much more when we shift to the *application* of Scripture. Can I really trust myself to see clearly how my life should be shaped by what the Scriptures teach? Does the Spirit speak more clearly to me privately than to a community of discernment gathering in Jesus' name?

Our contemporary world endorses a runaway individualism. Each person is his or her own master and standard of truth. We take our individualism with us into our Bible study and we read texts as if each verse is "God talking directly to me." To hear Scripture faithfully is to

hear it address the church. And when we as Christian communities hear the Scriptures address us (corporately) and then as a church check (and if necessary correct) private interpretations, we help individuals and the community to respond faithfully. “Community Hermeneutics” has been a high value among Mennonites. Let’s not lose that! It’s thoroughly biblical.

Let’s let leaders and teachers help shape the process; let’s empower all Bible readers to contribute to our learning together; let’s submit private opinions to the wisdom of the community; and let’s help each other practice faithfully what we learn together. Let’s be *Berean communities*.

ACTS 15

We turn our attention now to one of the most important texts in the New Testament relating to the whole issue of the church discerning together how the Spirit of God speaks to the church, how God leads the church to new insights about its mission, and how the Scriptures fit into that. Perhaps the paradox of this text is that the Scriptures appear (on the surface) to play a relatively minor role in the whole process . . . but as we will see, that is only a surface reading. Looking deeper, we see very important guidance on how we read and apply Scripture together, especially when we face controversial questions that threaten to destroy our unity . . . that may well tempt us to split into two groups . . . those that agree with me and those that don’t!

The text is Acts 15 . . . too long a text to read together today, so I will assume a basic familiarity with its contents, and invite you to check the claims I will be making with a more careful examination of the text as you have opportunity . . . privately, or (much preferred), by studying the text in community.

Near the end of Acts 15 the church confesses: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28)?” How did they get to this point? And how can we?

Then as now, and all through church history, churches find themselves confronted with tough situations and agonizing decisions. Opinions and preferences clash. Feelings are aroused. Conflict emerges. The challenges of decision-making far exceed our capacity to deal constructively with them. We discuss, sometimes we fight, and often we fail to reach consensus. We leave the discussions frustrated and discouraged. Or we somehow decide something, but we’re not really convinced. So afterward there is grumbling, or perhaps we go and do whatever we want anyway. The early church faced similar challenges, and the book of Acts provides glimpses of how they dealt with the challenges—sometimes well, sometimes not so well.

Acts 15 describes the church’s response to this major challenge. Through it all, the early Christians preserved their unity and reached consensus. It did not happen without significant negotiations. There were hefty discussions, serious disputes, and strong emotions, but in the end they reached a Spirit-inspired agreement. How did they manage it? Let’s observe them and learn.

The Situation

For some time, the church in Antioch had been more progressive, more evangelistic, and more ready to experiment with new ideas than its counterpart in Jerusalem (see Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3; 14:26-28). In fact, the Christians in Jerusalem, some of whom had a Pharisaic background, were intent on preserving their Jewish heritage. They were horrified when they learned that the church in Antioch was incorporating into the believing community, Gentile converts who came directly out of paganism, not even demanding that they follow Jewish laws and traditions. They sent a delegation to Antioch. “And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders” (Acts 15:2).

A storm front developed as two views collided. On one side, the Jewish teachers from Jerusalem represented the viewpoint of the “conservative” Jews. They were certain that Gentiles can indeed become Christians but only if they become Jews first. There is only one way to come to faith in Jesus. All must come through the same gate, the law of Israel and its fulfillment in Jesus.

On the other side, Paul and Barnabas defended the “progressive” church in Antioch. Many of the Christians in Antioch had been driven out of Jerusalem by persecution (see 11:19)—driven out, in fact, by conservative Jews. Maybe there were still some old injuries festering. This group was certain that God was at work leading Gentiles to faith in Jesus. The church must accept everyone God was bringing to faith. After all, Jesus had welcomed even tax collectors and sinners. According to Paul and Barnabas, a great deal was at stake in this dispute. If the church required Gentiles to accept the traditions of the Jews, they would be abandoning the core of the gospel. A conference was convened in Jerusalem to deal with the issues.

Issues of the Jerusalem Council

So, what was the conference all about, and what can we take from it?

The conference faced a significant theological decision. Under which conditions can a person come into a reconciled relationship with God? The question was in fact quite concrete: do Gentiles need to be circumcised? (see Acts 15:1). Circumcision was one of the rites through which Gentiles became full Jews. So, behind the question of circumcision was the more basic one: do Gentiles have to become Jews to become Christians?

It was about the ethical implications of the answer to the first question. Along with submitting to circumcision, a proselyte to Judaism would also be obligated to follow the entire Law of Moses. Major ethical implications would follow if Gentiles were required to be circumcised.

It was about the ethnic implications of the larger issue. If Gentiles would not be required to adopt Jewish law, the church would be deciding that Jewish practices were not ethical issues at all but merely ethnic peculiarities. It would mean that Jewish practices were no longer essential elements of Christian faith and life.

It was about the practical implications of the Jew-Gentile question. If the unity of the church was to be preserved, there would have to be some give-and-take on both sides. They

would need to be able to make compromises on some issues of Christian lifestyle. If conservative Jews were to dictate the terms of an agreement, many Gentiles would be driven out of the church. If the Gentiles dictated the terms, it would be impossible for conservative Jews to practice fellowship with these newcomers (see discussion of vv. 19-21 below).

It was about the means by which they reached a consensus. I am certain they reflected carefully on the means by which they reached their decision. But even if I am wrong about that, clearly the author of this text, Luke, reflected carefully on this. Luke highlights their decision-making procedures so that future generations of Christians can find guidance when we find ourselves embroiled in seemingly insoluble conflict situations.

Let's jump to the conclusions of the conference, and then we will step back and observe the process by which they got there.

First, the theological question. To clarify the theological issue, they determined, ironically enough, that the Pharisaic Christians had been both right and wrong. They had correctly insisted that there could be only one doorway to salvation; every person joining the church of Jesus Christ comes through the same door. But what was that one way? Here they had been mistaken. The doorway was not Judaism—not even for Jews! No one can be saved simply by living according to Jewish law. The doorway to salvation is and must always be the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, they also gained clarity: Gentiles do not have to be circumcised; they do not have to proselytize; they do not have to obligate themselves to the entire Law of Moses. Peter explained: “On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (v. 11). Do we notice what happened? The Jews learned more about their own access to God’s saving work through the experience of the Gentiles. Now they could see that their own salvation was not linked to the fact that they were Jews, to their circumcision or to their commitment to the Mosaic law. It was now clear to them that not only Gentile salvation, but also their own salvation, was linked to the grace God had given through the Lord Jesus. That’s how both Jews and Gentiles are saved. There is only one way.

The ethical question. But what does that all mean? Can the Gentiles then throw out the whole Mosaic law and all its requirements? Is it not valid for them at all? What about the Jews? Is it not valid for them any longer either? Here we come to a significant difficulty in interpreting Acts 15.

How are we to interpret the four conditions named: “We should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (v. 20; see also v. 29).

One problem is that there are various other possible translations for some of the terms. And that explains why some of our English translations read differently on one or two of these points. But the bigger challenge is to determine what underlying principle explains the choice of these particular guidelines. On the surface it sounds as though these are being presented as the most significant issues addressed by the law. Gentiles are not required to observe all the details of the law . . . just these four points – the ones that matter most. But this of course does not work at all. Are we supposed to believe that eating a strangled animal is a more

serious matter than lying, stealing, or killing? Were these things to be allowed for the Gentiles? Certainly not.

My own conclusion is that the council was aiming to accomplish a series of important goals, and that these prohibitions represented a negotiated list of those things they believed would best accomplish these goals:

1: To make it not too difficult for the Gentiles (see v. 19). That's why they did not put ten or twenty things on the list.

2: To make it not too difficult for the Jews, either. To facilitate fellowship with Jews, the Gentiles had to be willing to forego some of the things that would be significant stumbling blocks for Jews (see v. 21).

3: To protect the new converts from slipping back into their old lifestyles. Some of the things on the list involved actions associated with their former idol worship. Continuing to do these things would make it easier for them to fall back into old religious and ethical practices incompatible with Christian faith.

4: To facilitate evangelism among both Gentiles and Jews. No doubt one side argued that they would never win Gentiles to faith if they have to start obeying hundreds of new laws. And the other side argued that they would never win more Jews if they have to associate with people who do everything we have always considered forbidden. Moreover, when Christians, both Jew and Gentile, are willing to restrict personal freedoms for the benefit of others, when the unity of the church weighs more heavily than personal preference, the church gains credibility. Others will be drawn to Christ and the church when they observe what the power of the gospel can do.

One problem with this short list is that it looks very much like a mixed list of three things that really are negotiable . . . that have to do with Jewish scruples or with Gentile temptations . . . and one matter that is clearly an ethical issue . . . fornication / sexual immorality. But I hinted before that there are significant translational problems with this list. It could very well be that the Greek word here (*porneia*) does not mean sexual immorality in general (as it does in some contexts) but rather that gray area where some people are convinced there is sexual immorality involved and others are not. That reading fits the context very well.

This short list of four prohibitions does not attempt to establish basic and permanent ethical guidelines. It would be far too incomplete to be a list of ethical requirements, no matter how we translate the word *porneia*. The Ten Commandments, for example, are conspicuously missing, commandments that the New Testament clearly presents as binding for all Christians—Jew and Gentile.

The list makes most sense if we view it as a negotiated list designed to accomplish the goals I suggested above. Nonnegotiable ethical matters—actions that are at all times and in all places sinful—are thus not addressed at all in this chapter. The silent assumption of the entire New Testament is that an ethical lifestyle, lived according to the principles of God's kingdom and the norms of Christian discipleship, is expected of all Christians, whether Jew or Gentile. Nowhere in all the ethical instruction recorded in the New Testament do we find comments on whether the guidelines apply to Jews or to Gentiles or to both. Though we may

struggle to determine exactly what that ethical life should look like, we will get no help from this short list. It was not designed to define that.

The ethnic question. The Jewish Christians, especially the conservative Pharisaic ones in Jerusalem, were clearly being shown that issues they had always seen as ethical matters were in fact ethnic matters. Whether someone is circumcised, whether someone holds to the food laws of the Old Testament, whether various cleansing ceremonies were practiced, these were all being declared non-ethical issues; from now on they are to be considered ethnic peculiarities only. As a result, the Jerusalem council clarified that ethnic diversity is acceptable and desirable within the church. Christians will and may live differently. We are thereby cautioned against seeing ethnic peculiarities as matters of ethics and especially against treating ethnic peculiarities as necessities for salvation.

We are reconciled to God through a relationship with Jesus made possible by God's grace. We learn along with other believers what an ethical Christian lifestyle involves. Most other things are ethnic, cultural, optional. That means we worship God and practice our Christian faith in diverse ways, and we relate to our surrounding culture in varying ways. But we must be willing to restrict our personal freedoms if that helps facilitate Christian fellowship or the witness of the church in the world. Above all we accept each other in Christ, as diverse as we are.

The practical question. The church was ready to adopt practical solutions to its problems, solutions that facilitated fellowship, Christian maturity, and witness. I suspect it was not easy to negotiate the four things to put on the list. Perhaps some wanted seven and others wanted only two. They ended up selecting four on which compromise was appropriate and that could facilitate the intended goals. The participants at the conference understood the choice of these four things as dictated by the needs of the moment and therefore as renegotiable in other circumstances.

Not ten years later Paul was directly asked about one of these four issues. Is it always wrong to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? He answered that it depends on the circumstances (see 1 Corinthians 8:9-11; 10:23-33). Paul understood the principles that lay behind the restrictions agreed on in Jerusalem, and he preserved these principles but proposed new applications when the situation changed. His approach should guide us as well.

In every time and place we are challenged to discern how we can make it easier and not harder for newcomers to join the Christian community. Which restrictions are necessary so that the more conservative among us are not pushed too far? What guidelines will help new converts avoid slipping back into their pre-Christian lifestyles? What helps the church to gain a credible testimony? If our list of restrictions contains twenty elements, we will no doubt have erred on one side. If we are never willing or able to reach decisions that all are willing to support, decisions that serve the church and its mission, then we err on the other side.

How Did They Manage All That?

Now that we have examined the results of the Jerusalem council, let's look briefly at the strategies they used to achieve them. I believe that from these we can learn a great deal.

They came together, even if it cost a great deal of time and energy. It was at least a three-day trip from Antioch to Jerusalem. But the unity of the church was worth the effort expended. Sometimes a church can waste a great deal of time and dissipate a great deal of energy talking and endlessly debating. But the opposite is also true. Sometimes we cannot afford to break off the conversation until we have learned to talk openly and honestly with each other, to listen carefully and sympathetically to each other, to seek God's guidance together, and to find the clarity and unity that God wants to give us.

Everyone was given an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Though the apostles and elders played a leading role, there are several indications in the text that everyone was given opportunity to participate (see Acts 15:4, 12). The text says that at one point the whole assembly "fell silent." The Greek expression implies that before this they had spoken their mind, but that they were now persuaded. If in our discussions only particularly gifted speakers dare to express their opinions, we need to work out procedures and develop a climate in which all the others are also able and willing to participate.

They recalled what God had done among them in the past. They were convinced they could learn something of God's will by observing how God had worked in their history: "You know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers" (v. 7). For us this means that our church traditions are important and are not to be carelessly abandoned. God was at work in the past and led us to previous insights and decisions.

They recognized that God was now doing something new. Paul and Barnabas ". . . told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles" (v. 12). That is the other side. Our traditions should never hold us prisoner and exclude new things God may be doing. We recognize that we did not understand the full truth in the past; that, in turn, helps us guard against thinking our present convictions constitute the full and final truth.

They examined the Scriptures. "This agrees with the words of the prophets," notes James in verse 15. We can seriously misunderstand God's activities in the past and present if we do not carefully examine the Scriptures. The Bible entered their discussion rather late in the process. For us it must come far earlier. The difference is that we already have the New Testament, whereas they relied heavily on the apostles who later wrote New Testament books. In that sense, when we examine the Scriptures, we have, as it were, the apostles present with us as well.

They aimed to make it easier and not harder for newcomers (see vv. 19-20). That should be our priority as well. Later in Paul's writings we see that he expected church members to be ready to make significant concessions for the sake of others, to limit their personal freedom for the benefit of the body. But he expected that not from the newcomers; he expected it from those already more mature in the faith. In fact, it is a sign of maturity when those who have been in the church for a long time are willing to smooth the path for newcomers and not expect them to make the major concessions.

They took seriously the interests of both sides in the debate. That, again, is the other side. The newcomers were also expected to make some concessions, to be willing to restrict their freedoms for the sake of those who had been in the church before they were. That is how true fellowship works. It seeks solutions that draw us closer together. If we can learn to

concede to one another, we experience the blessing of a wonderful fellowship that holds us together and draws in others. If we gain that, we have lost nothing, even if a decision did not go the way we had wished, even if we need to restrict our personal freedoms.

They did not say, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” until they had reached consensus. Of course, we want to invite the Holy Spirit to be present in our conversations. But if each one seeks to draw the Spirit onto his or her own side while we are still disagreeing . . . (as in: “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to *me*”), then we are not following the example of the early church. In fact, I sometimes wonder how they knew that the decision they made corresponded to the leading of the Spirit. I suspect they knew precisely because they had relentlessly pursued faithfulness and unity as a Christian community, and having taken the right steps, they could be assured that they had the endorsement of God’s Spirit for the decisions they had made.

They had listened to each other; they had examined the Scriptures; they had recognized God at work; they had been willing to move courageously in new directions. They had paved the way for others to come to faith and to join the fellowship. They agreed together. What else could this mean but that the Holy Spirit had been among them all along, leading to the right decision? How else could they interpret the results but to say that Jesus had kept his promise? When we act in similar ways, we can be assured of the same.