

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Reach: Resisting Entropy”

Dr. Jay Howell

Acts 15:22-41

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We continue our walk through this pivotal section of the Book of Acts, Acts 15-16. This is when the church really had to do some challenging internal work, how would they approach a point of controversy and division. But because they went forward the way they did, things really started to move forward in a powerful way.

We’re in this part of Acts, as you may have already figured out, because it hits on a lot of the same challenges we’re looking at in this REACH Campaign. So each week we’re considering not just aspects of the campaign, with the building updates and the missional focus, but also how the Spirit might lead us in a similar way as the early church was led.

Last we saw the point of decision, the decision not to require male Gentile converts to be circumcised. And this week we read how that message is sent throughout the churches, and what happens afterward. In exploring this we find examples of the church showing close connection, and in another just how tragically that connection can be broken. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among them and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers and sisters of gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose men and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers and sisters. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas

remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the brothers and sisters in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the brothers and sisters commending him to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God who draws us into communion, we pray for your Spirit which binds us together to be with us this day. Speak to us anew through your Word, that we might be edified by this testimony of connection within the body of your Son, the church, but also challenged by how closely we must treasure it. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

All things are inclined toward decay, toward randomness, toward disorder. That at least is the claim of the scientific concept of entropy. You may have recognized that word if you glanced at the sermon title. Maybe you remember it from science class, whenever that may have been for you. It’s not exactly a cheery subject, since the basic premise is, eh, everything falls apart. Paint peels. Food goes bad. Bodies age. Structures that began in pristine shape, if left untended, fall into disrepair. Even over an astronomical scale, stars burn out or even explode. Somehow it is programmed in the natural order of things to fall out of harmony.

So, no, it’s not an encouraging thought. But I believe in entropy. Not that physics needs me to believe in it, but I buy it. The reason I buy it is because I live with three living, breathing examples of entropy embodied—well more like two, but the third one is gaining on them. How many times have I sat down in the living room, with things looking relatively neat and in place? Then I go do something else, only to turn back to see the living room in shambles, toys strewn here and there, couch cushions and pillows thrown to the floor, shoes and shirts inside out and flung across the room. And Frances and I wonder, “How could this have happened?” Well it’s because we live with, as I like to call them, two little engines of entropy, and things fall apart.

And without the decided effort to resist disorder, to resist things falling apart, that’s how things will tend to go.

Though it’s not necessarily scientific, the notion of connection, of fellowship, of community within the life of the church I believe falls into a similar category. Community, unless cultivated deliberately, unless closely cherished, and most of all unless bound and empowered by the Spirit of God, will tend to fall apart. It doesn’t just happen.

We see examples of this in this next part of Acts 15. The controversial decision was made *not* to impose a requirement for circumcision upon male Gentile converts, and that was a big deal. It answered the question, the most divisive question to first face the church: just how Jewish would this new Christian thing be? And the church answered, “It is more important to welcome and embrace those whom God has already drawn in than to force them to follow our own preferences and traditions, long held though they may be.”

What follows, then, is sending out that message, that decision. That’s what the passage today is about. They appoint messengers to go out, bearing a letter from the council, including Paul and Barnabas as they returned to Antioch. A good bit of the passage is repetition of the decision, just as it was written in the letter that went out, but then once the message was received, what happened? In v. 30 it says: “When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.”

The decision was such that it brought rejoicing within the church. Why is that? It was a relief, certainly. I suppose especially for the guys. But it communicated something fundamental about how the church was going to move forward, placing a higher importance upon the welcome of those who weren’t there yet.

Here’s the thing. The church in these early years was often on a razor’s edge. It can often be thought that the church was this perfect happy gathering. Simply not the case. There’s danger. There’s disagreement. There’s fallout. At any number of points the church should and would have split or otherwise failed altogether. But for some reason, because there was such connection between these early Christians, a shared identity in the person and work of Jesus and in the mission he had sent them on, the church endured even an existential crisis such as this one. The rollout of a decision like this could not have succeeded if the church hadn’t said, “We are going to stay together.”

It’s easy not to do that. Easier, certainly. Entropy, after all. It’s easier just to split into groups that self-select, look alike, think alike, like the same things, have similar backgrounds. It’s easier. Heck, that’s what people have been doing for a long, long time.

Case in point. Just look at what happens next. Just see how potentially tenuous this hold on connection is for the early church. At this pinnacle of the church’s connectedness, of rejoicing at this prioritization of the welcome of those who aren’t here yet, and kind of as a sidenote, the vindication of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in particular, what happens? Paul and Barnabas split. They have a disagreement so sharp that they part company. About what? Well, because of a man named John Mark, who tradition holds would be the one to draft the Gospel of Mark, but he had abandoned them at another point earlier. Why? Doesn’t say. But because of that desertion, Paul didn’t want to receive him back, while Barnabas did. A lot we could say about that particular

disagreement—merits to each side, I suppose. But suffice it to say, no one comes off looking so great. But as a result of this disagreement, a tragic thing happens. Barnabas, this man who had first vouched for Paul when he came to Jerusalem under suspicion by other leaders, this man who had sought out Paul later to join him on his missionary travels, this man who testified with Paul as to God’s powerful work among the Gentiles, would not continue to minister alongside him. The dynamic duo had split up. Things fall apart, and even something like connection, fellowship, community in the church doesn’t just happen, because left to our own devices, that’ll fall apart too.

We’ve talked a lot about the importance of connection and how it applies to this REACH Campaign, and I want to direct your attention to some words shared by two of our own on this very topic: Robin and Joe Anderson. [Watch video.] I’d invite you to turn to p. 32 in the campaign book, just as a look at how these updates will connect the entire building. I want to commend to you something Robin said. When talking about the building, she spoke of how we might connect it “so that it might not be a barrier.” In other words, for our building to be something that fosters connection, cultivates fellowship, rather than be a barrier to it.

That’s an important distinction for us to remember as we’re talking about the all too practical things of building plans and updates. Will a building magically transform the heart of ministry within us? Will it be a silver bullet for spiritual growth and outreach, for a sense of hospitality? No. Of course not. If that’s the hope, this is a waste of time. The most hospitable building ever will never overcome an inhospitable church, because that’s when something is truly broken, something that only can be healed by the grace of Christ and the power of the Spirit.

But that’s not what I see here. I don’t think that’s what you see either. No, what we sense is the same thing I shared a couple of weeks ago. You remember those words from a pastor friend in the area, the one who told me this was the “least accessible, least hospitable church building” she had ever seen? Yeah, that stung. But the point was it was the *building*, not the people. We are an hospitable church. Our building is not. You heard Joe say it a moment ago, and it’s a common tale among churches built over decades: “It’s been built in bits and pieces.”

And because we who are here see it often enough, because we’ve chosen just by virtue of being a part of the church that we can tolerate it, we can get used to the way things are and not see them through the eyes of someone who’s here for the first time. We don’t notice it until it impacts us or someone we care about.

I remember one distinct moment when it hit me. This was a turning point for me, one that sticks with me, that convicts me still that we had to do something about a building that did not reflect the heart of who I knew our church to be, of who we are called to be. How many of you remember Dave and Gene Baker? The very first couple to be married in our church. Sadly Dave

passed about three years ago, and subsequently Gene passed just over a year later. But at the time of Dave's passing, Gene was confined to a wheelchair.

So as we gathered with the family before the memorial service, we were with them in the Fowler Conference Room, as we typically do. But as we were heading out of the room to go to the service, it dawned on me that Gene would have some challenges. She had two options. She could head out the back of the main office, up the parking lot, and back in through the main sanctuary doors, or—and this is what ended up happening—her sons could hoist her up the back stairs to the sanctuary, all for her just to go to her husband's funeral.

I know that's not the first time that has happened. It was just the first time I saw it happen. And I was embarrassed, y'all.

Now I have to acknowledge here that the church, the global historical church has made do with much less. It is no requirement to have a building in order to follow the Lord faithfully as a church, and furthermore if, God forbid, a tornado came through tomorrow and blew the building of Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church to the ground, would it be sad? Devastatingly. Would it be difficult? Absolutely. But would the church be gone? Not for a second. The building maybe, but the church and its ministry and its calling continue on. I have to affirm all of that, so that we keep things in perspective here.

That said, at some point a church like ours can and should do better than forcing widows to be hoisted up the back stairs of the sanctuary.

To say it another way, at some point a church like ours should feel empowered to say, "Our building is going to cultivate connection, not hinder it. Our building is going to foster fellowship, not fight it. We are an hospitable, connected church, eager to welcome in those who aren't here yet. Our building should say the same."

After all, if left untended, whether it's a building or fellowship, things fall apart, things break, things wear down. It's only the deliberate act of resisting that disconnection, of saying, "We're not going to fall apart," it's only in following the Spirit's lead, that binds us together.

We saw that sense of connection in the early church. We saw the rejoicing that took place at the decision to prioritize the welcome of those who weren't there yet. We saw just how tenuous that connection can be.

Imagine what more we might see if we bring these barriers down.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.