

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 15

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 13-15

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All right, buckle up everybody, because today's deep dive is going to take us straight back to the early days of Christianity. Ooh, sounds exciting. It is, especially if you're into figuring out how the early church kind of formed its identity.

Right, like how they were wrestling with the Old Testament in light of Jesus. Exactly. There were some serious debates going on, like whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised.

Yeah, that was a big one. Huge. So we're going to be looking specifically at Acts chapters 13 through 15.

Lots of action in those chapters. Tons. We'll be focusing on Paul's journeys and the whole Jerusalem Council shebang, all thanks to this super interesting lecture series on Acts by Dr. Craig Keener.

I'm familiar with his work. Very insightful. Oh yeah, he's great.

And by the end of this, you'll have a much, much clearer picture of this major turning point in Christian history. I'm looking forward to it. So let's jump right in.

We start with Paul's missionary journey and all these intense speeches he gives. He was a powerful speaker. Seriously.

And in Pisidian Antioch, he does this really interesting thing where he basically takes a page from Jesus' playbook. Literally. Oh, so? Well, just like Jesus did on the road to Emmaus with the disciples, Paul uses the Old Testament to explain who Jesus is, his mission, his death.

Ah, I see. Drawing those connections. Yeah, and it's not just like a random verse here or there.

He's really weaving things together. Oh, absolutely. He pulls from Psalms, Isaiah, even Habakkuk, to show how Jesus perfectly fulfills all those prophecies and promises about the Messiah.

He was a master at that, finding those threads throughout Scripture. And he even quotes Isaiah 49.6 directly, where it says, I have made you a light for the Gentiles. But get this, he applies it to himself.

Whoa, bold move. Right. It shows just how much Paul understood his own mission.

Like, he's claiming that servant of the Lord, titled from Isaiah, the one who suffers for others. He saw himself continuing that mission, bringing salvation to the Gentiles. Powerful stuff.

But it's not all sunshine and roses for Paul, you know. Oh, no, he faced a lot of opposition. He and Barnabas go through some intense stuff, like that crazy story in Lystra where they heal a man, and people think they're Greek gods.

Oh, yeah. Zeus and Hermes. I know, right? Can you imagine the chaos? Talk about a culture clash.

Totally. The people are so blown away. They're literally ready to offer sacrifices.

A testament to how differently cultures interpreted divine power back then. For sure. But Paul, ever the evangelist, takes this wild situation and preaches about the one true God.

Making the most of every opportunity. Always. And, get this, he even gets stoned in Lystra.

Seriously? Yeah. But then he shows up again later, full of courage, to strengthen those new believers. Talk about resilience.

His commitment was truly inspiring. Definitely. And the message he leaves those believers with.

Super powerful. What was it? Through much tribulation, we must enter the kingdom of God. Whoa.

Right. He's preparing them for the reality that following Jesus will come with difficulties. He knew that firsthand.

Exactly. But things get even more heated with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Ah, yes.

The big debate. The big one. And it all boils down to one word.

Circumcision. A very loaded word. For sure.

The question was, should Gentile converts have to undergo this Jewish ritual to be considered saved? Massive cultural and theological implications. Absolutely. Circumcision was a huge deal in Jewish tradition.

It was a sign of the covenant with Abraham, a mark of belonging to God's people. I can see why it was such a point of contention. Totally.

For many Jewish Christians, it was like, inconceivable to think someone could be part of God's people without it. So how did they even approach such a deeply ingrained difference? Well, they called a council in Jerusalem, a gathering of the apostles and elders to hash it all out. Sounds intense.

It was. You had all these different perspectives clashing. The conservative Pharisees, who are all about sticking to the Mosaic law.

Peter, who brought up God accepting Gentiles to the Holy Spirit in baptism without circumcision, drawing a parallel to his own experience in Acts 10. Diverse viewpoints, for sure. And then you have James, Jesus' brother, who emerges as a key voice in this whole thing.

He's the leader of the Jerusalem church. Yeah. Exactly.

And he ends up supporting Gentile inclusion. Right. But he proposes some guidelines to help maintain fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

He even uses Amos 9:11-12 to back up his point about God's plan to include the Gentiles. Appealing to Scripture to find common ground. Exactly.

And it's important to remember that James wasn't saying Gentiles had to fully convert to Judaism. Right. It was more about finding a way for them to coexist peacefully within the church.

Yeah. And he lays out four specific prohibitions for Gentile Christians. Okay.

I'm curious. What were they? No food sacrifice to idols, no consuming blood, no meat from strangled animals, and no sexual immorality. Interesting.

Those seem pretty specific. Well, they actually align with the Noachide laws, which were these seven moral laws that many Jews believed applied to everyone, not just Jewish people. Could you elaborate on those a bit? Sure.

So the Noachide laws were basically a universal moral code based on the story of Noah in Genesis. They included prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery, and eating the limb of a living animal. So, like basic ethical principles.

Exactly. And by connecting the guidelines for Gentile Christians with these laws, the council was trying to bridge the gap between the two groups while still upholding those core ethical values. That's pretty clever.

Right. James found a way to like appease both sides and promote unity. Not an easy feat? Nope.

And this decision was a big deal, arguably one of the most pivotal moments for the early church. So they recorded it in a formal letter. Shows how seriously they took it.

Oh yeah. This wasn't just a casual agreement. They want to make it clear that this applied to the whole church.

Wow. But right after this big moment of unity, we see a disagreement pop up between Paul and Barnabas. I know, right? They end up parting ways.

It's a reminder that even the closest companions can have differences. And that even after finding common ground on huge issues, there can still be disagreements. It really highlights that human element in all of this.

They were real people, you know, with different personalities and convictions trying to figure out how to live out their faith. Makes you think, doesn't it? It does, especially about how we approach disagreements within the church today. That's a great point.

The Jerusalem Council offers a model, maybe not perfect, but still, for how we can handle these things. Dialogue, respectful debate, seeking consensus. All while staying rooted in Scripture.

It's remarkable how they found that common ground despite their differences. They didn't shy away from the tough conversations. And that raises an interesting question for us today.

How do we interpret and apply biblical teachings in our modern context? Ooh, good one. Like the early church had to figure out how to apply Jewish law to Gentile believers. We face similar challenges today as we encounter different cultures and worldviews.

It's a constant conversation for the church. How to stay true to our beliefs while being sensitive to those differences. Right.

How to foster unity without forcing uniformity. Questions every generation of Christians has grappled with. And these weren't just theoretical debates.

They had real consequences. Absolutely. Think about being a Gentile convert told you had to be circumcised.

That wasn't just personal preference. It could have social and political implications. A reminder that theology isn't just some academic exercise.

It shapes how we understand God, ourselves, and how we live in the world. It affects everything. Exactly.

And another thing that stood out to me was how the early church used the Old Testament to understand Jesus. Right. They didn't just toss it aside.

They found ways to connect their Jewish heritage to their new faith. Seeing those links between the Old and New Testaments. For them, the Old Testament was the foundation of their faith.

And that makes me think: how do we approach Scripture today? Are we reading it in a way that connects to our lives and helps us understand God's plan? Or are we just picking and choosing verses to fit our own ideas? It's easy to fall into that trap. Definitely. But the early church gives us a different model.

They engaged with the whole of Scripture, wrestled with its complexity. Trying to grasp its deeper meaning. And they didn't shy away from debate.

Working together to discern God's will. It wasn't always easy or pretty, but it was a process of growth and discovery. And through that, they shaped Christianity as we know it.

Their struggles, their insights, all of it had a lasting impact. An impact we still feel today. It's pretty amazing to think that these events from almost 2,000 years ago can still speak to us so powerfully.

It shows those fundamental questions of faith, identity, and belonging. They're timeless. And it reminds us why studying church history is so important.

It's not just memorizing facts and figures. It's understanding the roots of our faith, learning from those who came before. Gaining wisdom for the challenges we face now.

Because just like the early church, we're still a work in progress. We're still learning, growing, trying to live out the gospel in a complex world. And we do it best when we do it together.

In community, seeking to understand each other. Even amidst our differences. It's messy, it's beautiful, and it's hopeful.

Beautifully said. Their example can give us courage as we face our own challenges within the church. And what's fascinating is that this look into Acts 13-15 reveals that even the early Christians didn't always get things right immediately.

Oh yeah, they had debates, disagreements, even divisions. Like the split between Paul and Barnabas. They were both passionate leaders, but with different approaches.

Especially regarding John Mark. Exactly. And taking a step back, this reminds us that the church is made up of imperfect people.

People who are still figuring things out. We're all on a journey. And sometimes, those differences can lead to something new and exciting.

Like how Paul went on to do amazing work in other areas. And Barnabas mentored John Mark, who ended up writing the gospel of Mark. So even when conflict happens, it doesn't have to be the end.

It can be a chance for growth, reconciliation, even spreading the gospel further. Always something to be learned from these stories. Absolutely.

So as we wrap up this part of our dive into Acts 13-15. It's clear these events were game changers for the early church. Giving us insights into the gospel's power to break down barriers.

The importance of unity in the midst of diversity. And the ongoing challenge of understanding and applying Scripture to our lives. We've seen how they used the Old Testament to explain Jesus.

How they grappled with including Gentiles. And how those decisions shaped Christian history. And I think this leads us to a final thought-provoking question.

Hit us with it. How do these events inform our understanding of Christian unity and diversity today? That's a big one. It is.

Especially in a world that can feel so divided. We'll have to unpack that in the next part of our deep dive. Can't wait.

Makes you think about the challenges we face, right? Like trying to stay unified while respecting all the different cultures and theological viewpoints within the global church. It's definitely a balancing act. And I think the Jerusalem Council gives us some good pointers, you know? Right.

Like they show us the importance of having those open dialogues, respectful debates. And really striving for consensus. But always staying grounded in Scripture.

Letting that be our guide. I think it's amazing how they managed to find that common ground, even with all those different viewpoints. Yeah, they didn't shy away from the tough questions at all.

They actively listened to each other. And that makes me wonder, how should we be interpreting and applying biblical teachings in our own context today? That's a tough one, isn't it? I mean, the early church had to figure out how to apply Jewish law to Gentile believers. And we're kind of doing the same thing now, right? Like as we encounter all these different cultures and worldviews.

Yeah, it's an ongoing conversation for the church, figuring out how to stay true to our core beliefs, but also be sensitive to those cultural differences. How to have unity without demanding everyone be exactly the same. It's something every generation of Christians has had to wrestle with.

And these weren't just like abstract debates either. Oh, no. They had very real consequences for people.

Imagine being a Gentile convert and being told you had to be circumcised. That's not just a personal choice that could have huge social and even political implications. Exactly.

It shows that theology isn't just some theoretical thing. It impacts how we live in the world. It affects everything.

It really does. And another thing that struck me was how the early church used the Old Testament to really understand Jesus and his mission. They didn't just throw it out the window.

No, they found ways to connect it to their faith in Christ. It shows that continuity between the Old and New Testaments. They saw Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises throughout history.

The Old Testament was the foundation for everything. And that makes me think: how are we approaching Scripture now? Are we reading it in a way that's meaningful? Like does it connect to our lives? Does it help us understand God's plan for the world? Or are we just picking verses that fit our own opinions? It's so easy to do that. But the early church gives us a different model.

They wrestled with Scripture. They didn't shy away from those tough questions. They debated.

They disagreed. But they were always trying to figure out what God wanted. It wasn't always easy or pretty, but it was a process.

A process of growth, of discovery. And through that whole process, they shaped Christianity as we know it. Their struggles, their decisions- they've all had this lasting impact.

It's kind of mind-blowing that events from 2,000 years ago can still have such power. It shows that those basic questions of faith, identity, belonging- those are timeless. It also shows why it's so important to study church history.

Yeah, it's not about memorizing names and dates. It's about understanding where our faith comes from, learning from those who came before us. And using that wisdom to face our own challenges.

Because the church is still evolving, right? We're still learning. We're not a finished product. We're still learning, growing, trying to live out the gospel in this crazy world.

And we're better at it when we do it together. In community, trying to understand and love each other. Even when we disagree.

It's messy. It's beautiful. It's full of hope.

I love that. And it's encouraging to see how the early church navigated those growing pains. They give us courage as we face our own challenges in the church today.

What's really interesting is that this deep dive into Acts 13-15 shows that even the early Christians didn't always get it right the first time. There was debate, disagreement, sometimes even division. Like Paul and Barnabas splitting up.

They were both amazing leaders, but had different ways of doing things. Especially when it came to John Mark. Yeah.

And I think looking back, it shows us that the church is made up of people, and people aren't perfect. We're all on a journey, still figuring things out. And sometimes those differences can actually lead to something good.

Like how Paul ended up doing incredible work in other places. And Barnabas continued to mentor John Mark, who eventually wrote the Gospel of Mark. So even when there's conflict, it doesn't have to be the end of the story.

It can be a chance for growth, for making things right, even for spreading the gospel further. So many lessons to learn from these early stories as we wrap up this part of our journey through Acts 13-15. It's clear these were pivotal moments for the early church.

They show us the power of the gospel to break down barriers. The importance of unity, even when we're different. And that constant challenge of understanding and applying Scripture to our own lives.

We've seen how they used the Old Testament to understand Jesus, how they figured out how to include Gentiles. And how those decisions changed the course of Christian history. And I think it all leads to this really important question.

How do these events from the early church inform our understanding of Christian unity and diversity today? Yeah, it really makes you think: how do we hold on to that unity today? You know, with all the different cultures and different ways of thinking about theology and the worldwide church, it's a tough question. It is. It is.

And it's one we can't just ignore. Absolutely not. And I think looking back at the early church can give us some guidance.

Right. Like, they weren't afraid to have those tough conversations, those disagreements. Yeah.

And what's really striking is their commitment to actually talking to each other, to finding some kind of common ground. And that feels so important now, especially with how polarized everything seems to be. It is.

It's everywhere. And I think the early church reminds us that unity doesn't mean we all have to think exactly alike. We can have different opinions, different perspectives, but still be united in our core beliefs.

United in our love for Christ. Right. Like, it's about finding those essential things that bind us together while still allowing for that diversity of expression.

And that requires a lot of humility. It does. It does.

And a willingness to listen, to actually hear those different viewpoints. Even when it's uncomfortable. Even when it's hard.

And to remember that we're all on this journey together. We are. We're all trying to figure out how to live out the gospel in this constantly changing world.

And just like the early church, we can learn and grow from those disagreements. We can actually become stronger and more unified because of them. So as we wrap up this deep dive into Acts 13-15, what are some key things you think our listeners should take away from all this? Well, I think the most important thing is that faith is not a straight line.

You know, there will be bumps along the way, there will be disagreements, even divisions at times. It's how we handle those moments that matter. Exactly.

Do we shut down or do we engage in that dialogue? Try to understand each other even when we disagree. Because growth, real growth, often happens when we step outside of our comfort zones. And that unity, it's not about silencing people who think differently.

It's about creating a space where everyone feels heard and respected. And recognizing that our differences can actually be a strength, not a weakness. A really powerful reminder.

Yeah. And by embracing those differences, by learning from each other, I think we can become a more vibrant, more faithful reflection of the body of Christ. That's a great way to put it.

And it's been so fascinating, you know, exploring this part of early Christian history with you. Thanks for sharing your insights. It's been my pleasure.

It's always exciting to dive back into these stories and see how much they still resonate today. And to all our listeners, thank you for joining us on this deep dive. We hope you found it insightful and that it sparked some interesting thoughts.

And remember, each deep dive is tailored just for you. So keep sending us those requests. Absolutely.

We love hearing from you. So keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep diving deep into this fascinating world of knowledge. And we'll see you next time.