



SUNDAY, JUNE 4, 2023

# A Good Argument PART 2

ACTS 15:1-21 NRSV

**THE DIVISION OF THE DISCIPLES**



SCAN FOR PHJW  
SERMON NOTES

A SERMON BY  
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**Date:** June 4, 2023  
**Preacher:** Rev. Dr. Howard-John Wesley  
**Sermon Title:** "A Good Argument - Part 2, The Division of the Disciples"  
**Scripture:** Acts 15: 1-21 NRSV

*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. "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."*

## **SERMON SUMMARY**

During the first installment of Pastor Wesley's newest sermon series, *A Good Argument*, we learned that the first component of any good argument is welcoming and including multiple perspectives. This week, Pastor Wesley shares the second component: standing on the testimony of theophanies. A *testimony* is an individual's account of what one witnessed or experienced. A *theophany* is a manifestation of God to an individual or group. By unpacking the circumcision debate in Acts 15:1-21, Pastor Wesley points to the deeper question at play. Which is the right path to salvation: the law of Moses or the grace of Jesus Christ?

Paul and Barnabas state that circumcision (and obedience to the other laws of Moses) is unnecessary and that salvation comes through God's grace. Each time the Judaizers turn to the law (i.e., circumcision), Paul and Barnabas identify theophanies (in Acts 14:27, 15:3, 15:4, and 15:12) in the life of the Gentiles and testify to God's salvific power for all people. When the Judaizers claim that the law says, "God can't" save uncircumcised Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas testify that, by grace, God can. Like Paul and Barnabas, Pastor Wesley asks us to see and appreciate the everyday theophanies around us. God's manifestations and revelations can be grand and glorious. They can also be small and easy to overlook. No matter their size, theophanies allow us to witness and testify to God's goodness and grace.

We must be careful about declaring what God "can't" do. God is bigger than any box we put God in. When we declare what God can't do, the Almighty has a way of placing theophanies in our lives to give us a new testimony. It happened to the Judaizers. It happened to Pastor Wesley. If we are learning how to have a good argument, we must embrace the new testimonies God gives us. Will you allow the theophanies you experience to give you a newer, broader, and deeper understanding of God?

## **KEY POINTS**

1. The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to equip and empower us to bear witness to the Gospel and lead others to Christ.
2. The role of the Holy Spirit is to unify us and help us express the love of God.
3. Even if we disagree with others' perspectives, we must learn to value them.
4. God's voice lands on our ears more like a symphony than a solo.
5. Theophanies in our lives lead to testimonies. While others can challenge our theology, they cannot challenge our testimonies.
6. "God" and "can't" do not go together. God can do **all** things. Too often, we limit God by shortchanging God's grace and saying what God cannot do.

***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.***

***INTO THE BIBLE QUESTION***

There are several theophanies in Acts. (Ex. The Ascension of Jesus in Act 1 and the Descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2). What other theophanies can one find in Acts, and how does God show up?

***LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS***

1. Have you ever experienced a theophany (a revelation or manifestation from God)? What was that like? What did you learn from your experience?
2. When was the last time a theophany surprised you *or* invited you to reevaluate what you previously believed about God or Scripture?
3. Pastor Wesley says Christians sometimes put God in a box, but God is bigger than our boxes. Have you ever put God (or God's grace) in a box? Why? Who or what helped you to see God in a new way?
4. How have you experienced God widening your understanding of Scripture?
5. Pastor Wesley notes that the Jerusalem Christians believed that adhering to the law of Moses was a prerequisite for salvation. How does the contemporary Church continue to mirror the Jerusalem Christians' preoccupation with prerequisites rather than focusing on God's gift of grace?

6. What do you believe is the purpose of sharing testimonies? Share a moment when you shared a testimony with your Village family. How did it feel to share?

***“CAN I PUSH IT?” QUESTIONS***

1. Pastor Wesley identifies two sins from which the Church must repent: 1) enforcing standards that the Church does not follow and 2) seeing God’s presence in someone’s life but denying witnessing it.
  - a. How does the Church today ask people to follow God’s laws in ways that the Church does not?
  - b. What new understandings from God does the Church continuously ignore?
2. What role does the Church play in moving America toward repenting for the genocide of Native Americans, theft of indigenous lands, and enslavement of African people?

***ACTIVITY***

List three things you were taught about God, Christianity, or Christian living as a child (or in the early years of your Christian walk). Write how these beliefs have changed or evolved.

### ***SPIRIT WORK***

The Holy Spirit empowers us to share our testimonies. Write a testimony you would like to share with others. Practice sharing your testimony during your meditation time. How does it feel to speak it? How else can you prepare yourself to share your testimony with others?

### ***ADDITIONAL RESOURCES***

Pastor Wesley mentioned the Commonwealth of Virginia's role in enforcing the enslavement of baptized Africans in 1667. The language of "An act declaring that baptisme of slaves doth not exempt them from bondage" can be found [here](#).