

Fight the Good Fight

Acts 15

December 17

A large number of people have experienced the pain of a church fight. Church fights are one of the causal factors of people dropping out of a relationship with the church. Church fights reflect negatively on the Lord and the gospel, particularly, in the minds of unbelievers.

Yet, there are some things/issues worthy of a fight. Three times near the end of his life Paul described ministry and life in terms of the language of fighting. Paul challenged Timothy, “you may fight the good fight” (1 Tim. 1.18). Paul commanded Timothy, “Fight the good fight of the faith (1 Tim. 6.12). Paul described his life, “I have fought the good fight (of faith)” (2 Tim.4.7). According to Paul, the fight for “the faith” and the gospel is a good fight. In our generation, most church fights connect to personalities, preferences, and styles rather than the gospel.

Acts 15 described a fight for the gospel regarding the requirements of salvation. What may contemporary believers learn about fighting the good fight for the sake of the gospel from our passage?

First, the good fight of the gospel affirms the exclusiveness of salvation through faith in Christ alone and the inclusiveness of the offer of salvation to all kinds of people (Acts 15.1-5). The conclusion of Acts 14 states, “He (God) opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (Act 14.27). Acts 15 describes some Jewish believers and Jewish-Christian Pharisees wanted to close the “door of faith” and mandate that Gentiles be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15.1,5). (In his Christian testimony before the Sanhedrin, Paul stated, “I am a Pharisee,” rather than claiming he once was a Pharisee (Acts 23.6). One key to “fighting the good fight” is to understand the issues. The issue was a denial of the grounds or basis of the salvation of Gentiles rather than the possibility of Gentile salvation. Must Gentiles be circumcised in order to be saved?

Second, the good fight of faith affirms only one way of salvation exists (Acts 15.6-21). The church convened a conference to discuss the issue. Luke narrates four leaders that defended the gospel of salvation through faith (Peter vv. 7-11), Barnabas and Paul (v. 12) and James the brother of Jesus (vv. 13-21). Peter defended the inclusion of the Gentiles based upon God leading him to proclaim the gospel to Cornelius (Acts 10-11). Peter’s argument contained three points and a conclusion. First, God commissioned Peter to proclaim the gospel to Cornelius (Act 10.32-33; 15.7). Second, God cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith (Acts 15.9). Third, God gave Gentiles the Holy Spirit as He did the Jewish believers “at the beginning” – the Day of Pentecost (Acts 11.15, 17; 15. 8). Peter concluded, “We believe that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they [the Gentiles] are” (Acts 15.11). The missionaries Barnabas and Paul recounted the miracles God worked among the Gentiles (Acts 15.12). James, the brother of Jesus, cited Scripture as evidence of the inclusion of Gentiles. He quoted from Amos 9.11-12 a prophecy about God restoring Israel and people from all nations would be incorporated into one people of God.

Third, the good fight of faith communicates with other believers to prevent misunderstanding (Acts 15.24-29). The early church took three steps to ensure the church outside Judea would possess knowledge of the momentous decision. First, the leaders selected godly men to accompany Barnabas and Paul to the Gentile mission field to verify the unanimity of the decision of the church in Judea. Second, the leaders drafted a letter communicating the outcome. Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. Third, the leaders requested Gentiles to be respectful of the dietary and moral standards of Judaism for purposes of fellowship.