



CHRISTIAN FAITH PERSPECTIVES IN
LEADERSHIP AND BUSINESS

Biblical Cross-Cultural Leadership

*Principles from the
New Testament*



Edited by

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Christian Faith Perspectives in Leadership and Business

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Joshua D. Henson
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Calming the Storm: Principles for Handling Cross-Cultural Issues in Virtual Environments in Acts 15:1–32

Jane R. Caulton

Multinational companies have assembled virtual teams to successfully compete in global markets (Zander et al., 2012). Such assemblies unite people with various skills and represent different ethnic groups, cultures, and perspectives (Desper, 2013; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020; Neeley, 2015). Virtual teams flourished exponentially during the 2020 pandemic caused by the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, as global organizations embraced work-at-home as the safest environment for employees and the best way to conduct business when it was necessary for people to remain separated for their health. Managing virtual groups presents a different set of challenges than those who share local office space, as those who operate from a virtual space lack the social

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and emotional connections that promote unity (Duran & Popescu, 2014; Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004; Sivunen & Valo, 2006).

Virtual teams bring people with different experiences and perspectives together, complementing organizational creativity and innovation (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004; Neeley, 2015). Because team members come from different backgrounds, ethnicities, and locations, leaders must quickly establish team identity based on a commitment to the organizational mission and goal. Neeley encouraged that “it is critical to develop agreed-upon structures and team processes” to ensure productivity (p. 470). Bringing people together around a common cause creates a culture of unity and provides team members with a feeling of belonging.

While not a virtual team, the New Testament Church navigated many challenges as the church spread from Jerusalem to Asia during the *diaspora*. Gentiles received the gospel and joined the faction of Judaism known as “The Way.” It created a problem as their lifestyles differentiated from their Jewish missionaries, and the fledgling church dealt with a cultural dilemma: *how can they be saved if they are not Jewish—if they are different?* Such is the quandary of many virtual teams. Virtual teams may benefit from seven principles found in Acts 15:1–32: consider cultural differences (Acts 15), clarify mental models (vs. 7–10), keep communications open (vs. 1 & 20), celebrate accomplishments (vs. 3 & 12), consult authorities (vs. 2 & 14–18), invite stakeholders to the table (vs. 4), and share knowledge (vs. 23–29).

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 15:1–32

Background

According to Fea (2013), the study of history is beneficial not only to our understanding of how we came to be but also to increase our love for God and broaden our faith. In addition, it can help us develop the character of Christ as we embrace humility over narcissism and become more accepting, hospitable, and caring. Certainly, the history of the founding of the Christian church, as recorded in the Book of Acts, exemplifies this concept as it relays the struggles, sacrifices, and determination of the new faith, simply called “The Way,” in carrying out the commission of its founder, the Lord Jesus Christ (Bennema, 2013; DeSilva, 2004; Doss, 2005). During their efforts, the members encounter a cultural conflict that causes an unexpected doctrinal shift. The story, found in

Acts 15:1–32, elicits a few principles that may provide guidance for organizations whose members come from a variety of ethnic groups, locations, ideologies, and genders.

Though Acts 2 paints a homogenous picture of early converts enjoying fellowship in sharing meals, the fledgling church encountered schisms early on (Bennema, 2013; Corniche, 2010). Acts 6 notes a division between native and Hellenistic Jews, resulting in the appointment of deacons to handle organizational issues while the apostles attended to spiritual concerns. Evangelism expanded the church, eroding the Jewish ethnic boundary as more Gentiles converted (Bennema, 2013; Wright & Bird, 2019).

The apostles Peter and Paul reached across cultural and ethnic boundaries to share the gospel, bringing in more Hellenists, Romans, Samaritans, and other Gentiles. The influx of converts into the Jewish sect, known as “The Way,” raised questions of ritual responsibilities, which Paul set to diminish, if not eliminate, by focusing on the freedom the gospel of Christ gave to all believers (Telushkin, 1991; Wright & Bird, 2019). However, conservative Jewish Christians were disturbed by the fellowship of Jews and Gentiles. They challenged the practice of Jews sharing meals with Gentiles who were not Jewish converts because they felt that it impeded their covenant relationship with God (Doss, 2005). In addition, the church was troubled by false teachers and Aramaic Jews’ association with temple cults (Wright & Bird, 2019).

The Story

Acts 15 opens with Jewish Christians arriving in Antioch, Syria, and teaching the new converts that their salvation could only be completed by submitting to the law of Moses, which required circumcision (vs. 1–3). Paul and Barnabas, who worked in this sector, fervently challenged the position to the end that it was determined that the matter should be settled by the Jerusalem church, which was considered the seat of authority (Gentz, 1986; Keener & Walton, 2016; Wright & Bird, 2019). Thus, Paul, Barnabas, and other members (vs. 2; not noted how many) traveled to Jerusalem, joyfully sharing their achievements with other believers.

Arriving in Jerusalem, they convened a meeting with the church and shared their news but were challenged by the Pharisees, who stood on the law (vs. 4–11). When the leaders met later to consider the matter,

Peter reminded the group how the Lord had prepared him to minister to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10; Corniche, 2010; Hofer, 2005). He admonished, “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” (Acts 15:8–9). Then Paul, who was a Pharisee, and Barnabas described the move of God in Antioch and the positive response of the Gentiles (Corniche, 2010; Hofer, 2005; Schoeps, 2002). Then James, the Lord’s brother who had become the leader of the Jerusalem congregation, announced that the Gentiles would not be required to follow Judaic law, based on the testimony of Peter and the authority of the prophet Amos’ writings (vs. 13–21; Gentz, 1986; Metzger & Coogan, 1993; Wright & Bird, 2019). The decision was written and relayed to the Gentile churches by Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas, to vocalize the decision (vs. 22–32).

The Analysis

Evangelism expanded The Way, eroding the Jewish ethnic boundary as more Gentiles converted (Bennema, 2013). The apostles Peter and Paul reached across cultural and ethnic boundaries to share the gospel, bringing in more Gentiles. The influx of converts into the Messianic sect raised questions of ritual responsibilities, which Paul and Barnabas felt were inapplicable to the gospel. However, conservative Jewish Christians were disturbed by the fellowship of Jews and Gentiles. Israelites believed conversion to Judaism was necessary for Gentiles to be saved, even if they didn’t worship idols and remained sexually moral (DeSilva, 2018; Keener & Walton, 2016; Telushkin, 1991; Wright & Bird, 2019). They also challenged the practice of Jews sharing meals with Gentiles who were not Jewish converts. It impeded their covenant relationship with God (Doss, 2005).

Other factors may have been at play in the Jewish Christians’ demand that Gentile converts become Jewish proselytes (Gentz, 1986; Voss, 1999; Wright & Bird, 2019). First, since the church was just considered a faction of Judaism, Jews felt that the Messiah would have abided by the Torah, as must His followers. Another issue was that Gentile membership in a Jewish sect without becoming proselytes may have diminished the Israelites’ reputation as righteous followers of Yahweh. Wright and Bird explained, “This would lower the currency of Israel’s election; it would be

injurious to the holiness of the covenant people; it would almost certainly delay the coming act of the divine judgment and salvation” (p. 402). Thus, they felt that Gentiles must submit to the Mosaic law.

In addition, maintaining a positive appearance was important to Jews residing in Roman territory (Wright & Bird, 2019). Being recognized as good and responsible citizens allowed the Jewish community some anonymity, keeping them exempt “from the state cult” (Wright & Bird, 2019, p. 401). Therefore, a split in the fledgling movement may have threatened all Jews. And then there was the standing of the non-Jewish, non-pagan, Christ worshippers. Submitting to the rite of circumcision would mean becoming a Jew and keeping the new believers out of the state cults. It would also protect them from pagan accusers who would fault them for bringing the wrath of the gods upon the villages. However, it would also mean denying one’s Greco-Roman association and background, which could mean the loss of prestige and property (Vos, 1999; Wright & Bird, 2019). The Jewish Diaspora of the first century held the decisions of its leaders in Jerusalem as preeminent. The same held true in Christendom, so asking the Jerusalem church to settle the matter was the accepted course (Keener & Walton, 2016).

Keener and Walton (2016) noted that the debate discussed in verse 6 involved various factions of the period. Pharisees who followed the Rabbi Shammai, called Shammaites, were committed to the need for Gentiles to convert and observe Jewish law (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.). Followers of Rabbi Hillel were more liberal as they considered the concerns of individuals important. The mystic-minded Essenes, also present, would have sought consensus, while the “sages” (Keener & Walton, 2016, p. 905) would seek a majority vote. Like our contemporary society, Keener and Walton explained that “ancient society was heavily divided through political alliances and civic rivalries” (p. 1905). The strength of the division is depicted in the intensity of the leadership discussions in Acts 15.

Hegg (2016) argued that the primary issue requiring the attention of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was whether salvation was determined by Judaism or by a relationship with Christ. As the Torah had no prescription for Jewish conversion, the apostles were left to consider whether the Mishna, or oral tradition, prevailed over the church. Hegg opined that, though circumcision was an ordained sacrament for Jews, “the fact that God does not prescribe a method for becoming a proselyte in the sacred text of the Scriptures shows us that the rabbinic matter of proselytization was entirely man-made” (para. 11). Thus, the issue was one of status

rather than faith in Jesus as Savior of the world. The conclusion at which the council arrived was routed in the teachings of Christ, who had already acknowledged that the Jewish leaders did not engage the law themselves (Matthew 23:4).

James's conclusion that the Gentiles be released from the obligations of Moses' law was the only finish that could be expected, as according to DeSilva (2018), Luke's missive focuses on the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles (Corniche, 2010; DeSilva, 2018). Throughout the treatise, Luke highlights the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of the salvation of Gentiles. DeSilva said, "Luke underscores God's longstanding purposes to include the Gentiles in the people of God" (p. 364). Acts 2:21 highlights the prophecy of Joel, who said that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," and in Acts 13:47, Luke recalled Isaiah's prophecy of Jesus in 49:6, "I have set you as a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." And then we come to Acts 15:17, quoted from Amos 9:12: "That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" on which James pronounced the freedom of Gentiles from the law. Intertwined with the monologues of Peter and James, these references to respected sources carried much weight with the ancient church (Keener & Walton, 2016).

The council issued a "*modus vivendi*," or working agreement, because of Paul's and Barnabas's efforts on behalf of the Gentile churches (Gentz, p. 108). James' direction to "to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality" (*New International Version*, 1973/2011, Acts 15:29) included elements of moral and scriptural law (Hoefler, 2005). Still, it proved difficult for the Jewish faction of the church to accept as the issue constantly arose (Acts 16:1–3; 1 Cor. 9:19–23; 1 Cor. 7:17b–24; Rom. 2:25; Gal. 3:1–3). It also challenged the Gentile believers whose culture embraced promiscuity and idolatry (Doss, 2005). Their allegiance to such folly is evidenced in Paul's epistles (Romans 1:18–32; 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Col. 3:5), admonishing the church to turn away from those activities. The working agreement did, however, facilitate fellowship between Jews and Gentiles as it required a kosher menu.

Some, however, argue that the council's decision was inconclusive as the message did not state that Gentiles were emancipated from the law (Elmer, 2009; Schoeps, 2002; Telushkin, 1991). Instead, it developed

two factions of Christianity: those who practiced the law—Judaizers—and those who embraced freedom from the law—Hellenists (Elmer, 2009). The question of the necessity of Gentile circumcision was one that Paul contended with throughout his missionary exploits (Richards, 1998; Wright & Bird, 2019). DeSilva (2004) highlighted Paul’s consistency in linking the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s plans: “Paul underscores the continuity between the ancient hope of Israel ... and the way life and belief espoused by The Way” (pp. 367–368). While he insisted on the freedom of Gentiles from the law, Paul also admonished that the Lordship of Christ required a lifestyle change, but not an ascetic Gnostic disposition (Gentz, 1986; Packer et al., 1980; Wright & Bird, 2019). The scriptures and the evolution of the church indicate that the church was unified in its mission of spreading the gospel (Matthew 28:19) and was thus able to thrive despite cultural, political, and geographical divisions.

UNIFYING GLOBAL TEAMS

In this day, where corporations are expanding access to global markets, teams are being developed across cultural, political, and geographical distinctions, among others (Desper, 2013; Gera et al., 2013; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020; Neeley, 2015; Zander et al., 2020). The Internet has allowed global teams to become a permanent entity of work structure, allowing organizations to operate twenty-four hours daily and gain the advantage that the diversity of expertise, skills, experience, and knowledge permits.

This expansion has required the acquisition of competencies to meet constantly changing demands in a global market. It has produced a new workplace paradigm fueled by technology that allows team members to be separated by land and water while connected by lines of communication facilitated by satellite (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004; Oaks, 2022). Companies can rapidly assemble, organize, and release such teams according to their needs, which is flexible and cost-effective (Kai-Tang et al., 2014). In addition to providing large talent pools, the practice also increases innovation and work-life balance while discouraging discrimination and promoting equality (Gera et al., 2013). However, virtual teams can be hindered by a lack of proximity, frequent interaction, and the inability to assess physical cues (Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004).

Virtual teams operate in different time zones, making it difficult for team members to interact with each other (Desper, 2013; Lurey &

Raisinghani, 2001; Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004). The absence of face-to-face encounters may negatively impact job commitment and increase absenteeism, role overload, and ambiguity (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Kai-Tang et al., 2014; Mysirlaki & Paraskeva, 2020). These issues increase the challenge of leading and managing the workforce (Desper, 2013). In addition, time and distance may decrease client perceptions of stability, reliability, and permanency. Companies that depend on virtual teams must find methods of mitigating these environmental challenges.

A few principles found in the discussion of the Gentile involvement in a Jewish discussion, as relayed in Acts 15, may help. These include considering cultural differences (Acts 15), keeping communications between teams open (vs. 1 & 20), celebrating accomplishments (vs. 3 & 12), consulting authorities (vs. 2 & 14–18), clarifying mental models (vs. 7–10), inviting stakeholders to the table (vs. 4), and sharing knowledge (vs. 23–29). These contribute to mitigating differences and building empathy and trust to ensure a unified team and productive results.

CONSIDER CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The events of Acts 15 appear to be the church’s first foray into “crossing cultural boundaries” (Doss, 2005, p. 436). Doss said, “when missionaries carry the gospel into another culture, they translate the gospel not merely into another language but into another whole culture” (p. 436). To be successful, the missionaries must first understand the culture, its values, and operation, through which they can then highlight areas that align and/or deter from Christianity.

Culture is “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Kirkman et al., 2017, p. 13). It is often understood as a pattern of dimensions a worldview expresses (Harush et al., 2018). For example, cultures that focus on the progress and success of their society are considered collectivists, while those that focus on individuals are described as individualists (Harush et al., 2018; Yukl, 2006). Some cultures are hierarchical and observant of a person’s organizational level and may have specific ideas about gender roles and activities and the importance of time and personal space. These may surface in some manner in interpersonal communications and must be considered in harmonizing virtual teams as they arise.

Cultural diversity ensures teams have a wide range of skills and abilities. Still, differences in cultural identity, values, norms, and perspectives

may create fault lines of mistrust, which can erupt in disagreements and communication barriers (Harush et al., 2018; Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004). To combat the challenge, leaders should strive to create a global community where members share a common identity and sense of belonging to help members feel closer to each other and minimize conflicts (Harush et al., 2018; Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004). Emphasizing interdependence will depersonalize differences as members interact and develop more profound personal understanding. However, interaction should remain at a low level as higher levels could do the opposite and expose greater differences.

Principle One: Unify a virtual team around a common goal.

CLARIFY MENTAL MODELS

In Acts 15:7–10, Peter dramatically describes how God challenged his thinking about ministering to Gentiles. The apostle was an avowed practitioner of the Jewish faith and, therefore, considered outsiders ceremonially unclean (Richards, 1998; Wright & Bird, 2019). His mental model of Gentiles was changed when he saw the Holy Spirit fall on them as He had on the Jewish believers. Mental models are assumptions that people make about each other based on limited information (Jones et al., 2011; Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2010).

These assumptions are based on knowledge attained through various experiences, including visual, audio, sensory, and sharing, which cause people to form ideas and make decisions about the identity of others, their behavior, and their place in the world (Jones et al., 2011). However, such observations may not be valid as humans are complex and dynamic, and different individuals and are not always definable (Jones et al., 2011; Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2010). Therefore, it is important that people take time to examine the mental models they have of others.

Considering the individual mental models—the basis for assumptions and ideologies—is necessary for effective outcomes (Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2010; Mazurkiewicz, 2012). In every situation, individuals are guided by their values, perception of reality, and activity orientation (passive or active), which are set by their patterns. By understanding these patterns and behaviors, leaders can better predict and prepare for outcomes (Carley, 1997; Mazurkiewicz, 2012; Zoogah, 2006).

In the workplace, organizational values, mental models, and understanding guide decision-making and policies, which define its culture, routines, and processes (Carley, 1997; Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2010; Zoogah, 2006). Uncertainty arises when assumptions do not align with reality, which presents barriers that limit the ability to understand and interact with others (Crook & Wind, 2006; Karakaya & Yannopoulos, 2010). They obscure opportunities and threats, creating strategic blind spots.

Organizations can use the mental model concept to shape their workforce through information processing, which will help workers learn patterns of operation, understand and form expectations, learn to manipulate the environment and evaluate feedback, which aids in facilitating shared knowledge, associative learning, and smoother acclimation (Carley, 1997; Zoogah, 2006). Crook and Wind (2006) advised a four-step process for assessing mental models: (1) examine how your mental models pose barriers to understanding, (2) consider the relevance of the model in your environment, (3) reshape your mental infrastructure by putting others first, and (4) be transformative by continually changing, engaging, and evaluating new models.

Principle Two: An effective organizational leader examines and ameliorates assumptions that impact its progress.

KEEP COMMUNICATIONS OPEN

Verses 1 and 20 of Acts 15 demonstrate that the church maintained communications across geographical lines. The Jewish teachers visited Syria, and the Syrian church respected the Jerusalem leaders enough to request their guidance. It demonstrates that the communication process is the foundation of relationship building and includes the behavior and context of words (Morgan et al., 2014). Effective communication includes exchanges between leaders and team members, including feedback loops, coordinating projects and activities, and a means for conflict resolution (Pitts et al., 2012).

Differences in culture, geographical location, and manners of interaction are major sources of problems virtual teams face (Duran & Popescu, 2014; Napier & Gershenfeld, 2004; Sivunen & Valo, 2006). Global teams represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, which may

result in misunderstandings based on traditions, values, and perceptions that must be anticipated and managed (Morgan et al., 2014). Such disruptions can be alleviated through several collaborative tools. Asking open-ended questions, repeating answers to confirm understanding, and, when appropriate, injecting humor.

Feedback between sender and receiver confirms that a message has been transmitted and helps to establish shared knowledge and understanding through which team members can be unified in meeting goals and performing effectively (Duran & Popescu, 2014; Morgan et al., 2014). In addition, emotional intelligence, the ability to be aware of the emotional disposition of others and self, is also significant to effective communication (Pitts et al., 2012). It includes such factors as understanding the level of emotional intensity by observing verbal and non-verbal cues and interpreting the needs of participants to arrive at a suitable outcome.

When selecting appropriate technology, cultural implications must also be considered (Hambley et al., 2007; Hill & Bartol, 2018; Kai-Tang et al., 2014; Sivunen & Valo, 2006). In contemporary global relations, leaders must consider accessibility, social distance, idea sharing, and informing to select the best method of technology to facilitate their mission. Accessibility and social distance require more significant considerations. Accessibility refers to the individual ability to access the chosen medium, while social distance refers to the importance of understanding emotional or equivocal (ambiguous) cues (Sivunen & Valo, 2006). These may include voice inflection, gestures, and body language. While the former may be as simple as supplying mobile phones, the latter requires a more media-rich option such as web or video conferencing. Informing and sharing ideas, which are typically transmitted through discussion, must be accommodated by telephone, databases, or email. The more media-rich the technology or able to accommodate a broad spectrum of senses, the more effective the communication (Hambley et al., 2007; Hill & Bartol, 2018).

Principle Three: Proper communication will support effective team performance.

CELEBRATE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In Acts 14:3 & 12, the missionaries Paul and Barnabas joyfully tell of the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles. The believers in Phenice and Samaria were excited (vs. 3), and the testimony moved James, the leader of the church, to announce his innovative decision (Gentz, 1986; Metzger & Coogan, 1993; Wright & Bird, 2019). Celebrating the achievements of the team and members is a tool that effective leaders use to encourage and motivate their followers (Krivan, 2015; Schmidt, 2020; Yukl, 2006). It is a primary method of acquiring task commitment and strengthening desired behavior as it recognizes contributions to the organizational mission. This recognition can be public or private and can be as simple as a few words of praise or as grand as a ceremonial event with the presentation of awards. Leaders must be careful that the recognition is not gratuitous or arbitrary.

Some benefits of recognizing followers at all levels as groups or individuals include increasing morale, productivity, and innovation; fostering engagement, loyalty, and unity; highlighting workplace values; and building retention (Krivan, 2015; Laddha et al., 2012). Followers are more apt to feel appreciated, which helps to motivate them to exceed their goals. Schmidt (2020) noted, “That motivation can spread across entire teams, leading to higher job satisfaction, lower turnover, and increased profitability” (para. 4).

Providing growth opportunities is another way of recognizing achievements and increasing job satisfaction (Laddha et al., 2012; Schmidt, 2020). Employees appreciate being allowed to meet new challenges and receive guidance and access to new learning opportunities, which empower them. Schmidt advised, “building a culture of recognition is an effective way to offer the kinds of opportunities that will benefit your organization now and, in the future” (para. 12). Yukl (2006) advised that celebrations should communicate organizational priorities and values.

Principle Four: Recognizing the contributions of the team raises morale and increases innovation.