

“WHEN CONTROVERSY COMES TO CHURCH.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 15:1-19

Introduction.

Our country is cracking. A house divided cannot stand. Just in the past year we have been confronted with three major, contentious, dividing issues: racial tensions, Covid restrictions, and a presidential election. Three huge battles waged in our country in just the past year. And the battles haven't stayed out there in the country, they have come into our community, into our church and even our homes.

God in His perfect providence has visited these things on our nation, and He wants us to live in these time with faith, wisdom, humility and grace, not faithlessness, doubt, fear, and anxiety.

Christians are just as divided as non-Christians. We need the Gospel now more than ever. Our only hope is found in Jesus Christ. Our divisions can't be healed by politicians or violence.

This is nothing new or strange. Controversy, strife, division and tension have followed the church of Jesus all through history. Let's consider this great moment in church history and see what lessons there are here for us.

Context, Background.

When things are changing, change brings tension. When our world as we know it is no longer normal, it creates stress and resistance to change. We feel it in our world and nation.

For the Jews in Jerusalem it was huge. The center of gravity was shifting away from the Jewish Jerusalem Church to the Syrian Antioch Church. The make-up of the church was changing from Jewish to Gentile, the leadership was changing from James to Paul. The missionary movement and growth of the church was coming from the Gentiles.

This was getting radical and racial. What started out as a reform movement within Judaism was starting to become a truly new thing altogether, an international movement. Could just anyone become part of the family of God?

Controversy concern circumcision.

Acts 15:1 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Acts 15:5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

Certain men from the Jerusalem Church went north to the Antioch Church. They said they were sent by James. They insisted that the Gentile converts observe Jewish ritual laws, especially circumcision. We learn later they were not sent by James, but were a certain party or faction, called Christian Pharisees or Christian legalists.

This was no small controversy, in fact, it has huge and complicated. Read Paul's letter to the Galatians to get the intensity of this and how much was at stake. In Galatians he calls them trouble makers who distort the Gospel.

So influential were these Judaizers that when they came to Antioch they even persuaded Peter over to their side, and many others followed Peter, including Barnabas. We read about that in Galatians 2 where Paul had to confront Peter's hypocrisy and compromise face to face.

The first great theological controversy had to be faced and settled. The church was being divided over this. Is salvation by works and keeping the Law of Moses, or is salvation by grace through faith?

They were saying faith in Jesus is not enough, not sufficient for salvation. They must add to faith, circumcision, and add to circumcision observance of the Law of Moses.

In other words, Jesus is not the fulfillment of the Law, but Moses is the fulfillment of the Gospel.

At stake was the Gospel, the work of Christ on the cross, the sufficiency of Christ and the perfection of His salvation. The foundations of the Christian faith are being undermined.

Is a sinner saved by the sheer grace of God through faith in the crucified Christ?

Has Jesus by His death and resurrection done everything necessary for our salvation or are we saved partly by the grace of Jesus and partly by our own good works?

Is justification by faith alone, or by a mix of faith and works, grace and law, Jesus and Moses?

I can tell you this emphatically. We would not be here today if this council had not happened and if these questions had not been raised and this clarifying conclusion not reached.

This was an epic watershed moment in the church. From this moment on Peter is going to disappear, Paul is going to be leading the new movement and Jerusalem is going to fade in significance as the Gospel spreads to Asia and Europe.

This is every bit as equal to that moment in the 1500's when Martin Luther stood up to the Roman Catholic Church and said, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

Tensions erupted into a full scale disagreement. To address all of this three apostles make speeches, Peter, Paul with Barnabas, and then James.

15:7-11, Peter.

Peter reminds them of what they have seen and heard and know to be true.

Acts 15:7-9 Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

God called and sent Peter.

Cornelius heard and believed.

God poured out His Holy Spirit on the Gentiles just as with the Jews. God made no distinction.

God knows their hearts and accepted them.

God did this by their faith, not external rituals.

Acts 15:10-11 “*Therefore*, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

Wow, what a knockout blow. Why are you putting on the Gentiles a yoke that no one else has been able to bear? No one has ever been able to keep the law, no one has ever been saved by keeping the law. No one has ever been reconciled to God by keeping the law. This burden closes heaven to everyone.

Vs. 11 is the simplest creed of the church.

God makes no distinction. God levels the playing field making it the same for everyone. We are on equal footing, as heirs together of grace and members together in this new community, the body of Christ. There are no second-class citizens in the church of Jesus Christ.

We are all sinners, we are all unworthy of salvation, we are saved only by faith in Jesus, we are all co-heirs in His kingdom and fellow heirs with Christ.

15:13-21, James.

Then James, the president of the council, brother of Jesus, author of Letter of James in NT speaks and make the final proclamation.

Notice what he does. He doesn't pull rank, he grounds his authority for saying what he says in Scripture, not on what Peter or Paul said. He quotes the prophet Amos.

The text he quotes gives two promises from God, *first* that God will raise up David's fallen tent, which is a prophecy of the resurrection and exaltation and kingship of Christ who is from the house and line of David.

Second, that the Gentiles will be brought into the covenant community through this Davidic Christ. The inclusion of the Gentiles was not an afterthought or a Plan B. It was foretold by the prophets and planned from before the foundations of the earth.

So Scripture confirms what Peter and Paul were experiencing and testifying to.

Under the new covenant the church of Jesus Christ is no longer ethnic. The church was made up of those who put their faith in Jesus, no matter their ethnic background. The Gentiles don't have to become Jews in order to be saved.

Implications and application.

Is faith through grace enough?

Is Jesus enough? Do we need Jesus plus something else? There are always those in any church who want to do something to earn or deserve their salvation.

Legalism is the ultimate joy killer.

Notice these men. Are they rejoicing in how the Gospel has come to the Gentiles? No.

Legalism takes the focus off Christ, and puts it on us.

Keeping rules takes our eyes off the sufficiency of God's grace.

It diminishes the absolute supremacy of Jesus, it robs Him of His glory.

The work of Jesus Christ on the cross was not good enough.

Legalism brings guilt, because we will always fail or fall short of the rules.

Do better, be better, try harder is a guilt-ridden way to live. (Hard to please parents).

Legalism brings pride, pride in my self-righteousness, in how much I can do.

Pride that I am better than others, more holy. Not as bad as those sinners.

Legalism bring bondage. It trades our freedom in Christ for the chains of legalism.

Christ has earned our freedom for us. Legalism kills the joy of our salvation.

It is based on rules and lists and boxes to check off and keeping score.

What external standard to you hold yourself and others too, besides grace?

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

There are hills worth dying on that this was one of them.

What about race relations?

On this MLK Jr weekend this is good for us to consider.

The Jews are having a very hard time wrapping their heads around the fact that God would take what is unclean and unite it to the holy seed of Abraham, to the covenant promise of God to Israel, and now make them both together one body of Jesus, the Church of Christ on earth.

The Word of God was not just preached to them, but the Spirit of God opened their eyes and hearts to believe. They heard the outward call, and were drawn inwardly by the Holy Spirit.

In Christ's church there is to be no distinction. There is no Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. God made all the human race in His image and His salvation is freely offered to all people. He will be worshiped by every tribe, tongue, language and people.

Heaven will be the most ethnically and racially diverse place in the universe. God created the diversity of the races for His glory. It is good and pleasing to Him.

Among Christians there should be no hint of racism or racial tension in our hearts, homes, church and community. We all have one father in Adam. We are all blood cousins. In Christ we are brothers and sisters.

The cross has torn down any dividing wall of hostility. In the racial tensions that continue to divide our country, Christians should be peacemakers. One of our many prayers as a church should be that God would be pleased to add to our number brothers and sisters from other races and cultures and ethnic groups. We should pray that we would be more of a reflection of the diversity we will see in heaven.

I have said before Lynden is a hard town to be in if you are a minority. We should go out of our way to be welcoming and inviting.

Do we harbor prejudice in our hearts? Ask yourself some questions.

Would you be OK with your son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter dating a Christian of a different race? Would you be OK if a family of a different race moved in next door? Would you welcome a person of color into our fellowship? Would you vote for them to be an elder or deacon or pastor?

Any hesitation may be an indication of some hidden prejudice. This sin is in our all our hearts. It is something we must honestly recognize and confess and fight against, in our language, attitudes, responses, fears, jesting, etc. This is a heart issue, only fixed by the forgiveness of the Gospel.

Can we have unity in the midst of controversy?

When we are faced with serious issues, issues that can divide the body, we must learn to listen to each other, discuss fully, and then agree together. There must be room to disagree on non-essentials, making allowances for each other and giving grace.

When things get personal they get prejudiced. We take sides, I am in this camp, you are in that camp, it becomes us and them. We start taking past each other and we stop listening.

Face masks.

How should we handle a controversy that is not doctrinal, but is more practical, about what we do and how we do it? What lessons can be learned from the council in Jerusalem?

There are hills worth dying on. Calvary is one of them, the importance of the cross, justification by faith, grace alone without works. Removing racial dividing walls is another.

Opinions about Covid are not hills worth dying on. Have your opinions but know when to keep them to yourself and know when to hold them loosely and how not to hit others over the head with yours.

It is not a sin to wear a face mask and no one should ever be made to feel it is. It is not necessarily a sign of fear to wear one, and even if someone is afraid of getting sick, there is no shame in that. There are many good reasons for precautions.

No one should ever tell someone else to take off their face mask, you have no business doing that. If you can't hear or understand someone, politely ask them to speak up.

Take the high road, like I said last week, be like the noble Bereans, not like the hot-headed Thessalonians.

May we be noble, taking the high road, giving grace, putting aside our own rights, thinking more highly of others, making allowances for one another.

Unity.

How can we have unity in our midst? How can we be of one mind?

By making Christ the center of our fellowship and our relationships, not rules, legalism, external things. By not making personal preferences or personal opinions be the basis of our unity, but rather making love and care for one another the ground of our unity. By making thinking more highly of others the ground of our unity, by making dying to ourselves the ground of our unity.

I Corinthians 10:31-33 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, 33 just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.