

Acts 15:1-18

Churches often have their spats. We debate all kinds of things: property, parsonages, pastors, sexuality, euthanasia, constitutions. Church disagreements, however, are not always bad. It really depends on what you're fighting for. In one particular church they got into a bit of a conflict over pew cushions. New cushions were to be put in the sanctuary. One of the women became so irate over the colour the committee picked that on the Sunday the cushions were consecrated, she brought her lawn chair.

A church in Cambridge, where I had one of my placements, had a few members who did not like the small blue hymnal we used to have, "With One Voice." One woman would arrive on Sunday morning and check the worship bulletin. If "With One Voice" were being used, she would turn around and go home. Another member would change their offering to Benevolence rather than Current whenever "With One Voice" was being used. Conflicts can, at times, be very silly.

Sometimes a good dispute – properly addressed – can lead to new insight and understanding. A disagreement, honestly processed, can lead to greater clarity, a stronger bond, and a more faithful witness.

Today in Acts we see how Christians convened a church council to handle major theological disputes that arose. The tradition of church councils such as this one continued for many centuries. It can be beneficial to call a council when there is some important problem to resolve. The Holy Spirit often reveals its will through

the wise consensus of spirited leaders. We often see this at work at our Synodical and National Assemblies. The discussions can be long, heated, even dragging out over several assemblies before a resolution of consensus is reached.

The Gospel started in Jerusalem. That was where the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. The Gospel was alive with spiritual activity for a number of years. But slowly Jewish legalism spread and the Jerusalem church lost her fervour. As we have seen, they never developed a true mission program. Many Christian “true Jews” could never come to terms with the new kingdom concept of a worldwide church that included all nations and all peoples.

Some of the legalists in Jerusalem, even though they were Christians, wanted to exert their influence over Gentiles in the Antioch church and make them subject to the Jewish ceremonial law that influenced the Jerusalem church. In particular, some Jewish-background teachers went from Jerusalem to Antioch to teach believers that “unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved.”

Paul and Barnabas challenged them, saying the Gentile converts did not have to submit to the Jewish ceremonial laws in order to become part of the body of Christ. This was a break from the accepted Jewish “proselyte system.” The debate at Antioch grew intense. The church delegated Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem to seek the advice of the apostles and elders.

The Jews, Hellenists, proselytes, God-fearers, Gentiles, and barbarians had come to faith. Many of these believers knew nothing of the laws of Moses and

Jewish history. They did not know God's covenant with Abraham was sealed by the sign of circumcision. Not only was every Jewish male child to be circumcised, but so were aliens who lived with them and servants who worked in their houses.

There were three types of Old Testament laws:

1) Moral laws that apply to every people in every culture. "You shall not murder, you shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery." These laws are written equally on the consciences of people all over the world.

2) Civil laws were unique to Israel and formed the basis for the legal regulations: what to do if someone's animal destroyed your garden, or who is exempt from going to war. These civil laws are not binding on other people and other nations. Civil laws vary from country to country.

3) Ceremonial law defined Jewish worship and observances of faith: dietary laws defined clean and unclean meat; sacrifices and holy days are codified under this part of the ceremonial law, described when and how Passover and the Day of Atonement are observed and the kinds of sacrifices needed and when to make them; the law of circumcision required every Jewish male to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Circumcision identified Jewish males as "Jewish."

John Wesley had a good rule of thumb. He said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The church fight that happened in today's Acts narrative was over something essential! It had to do with the nature of

salvation. There was a certain group of individuals – Luke doesn't call them by name, he simply says a certain group. In other words, this group doesn't represent the whole. They're not really speaking for the church; they're speaking for themselves. One of the worst forms of ecclesial abuse is when a group of individual assumes to speak for the church.

This particular group was of the Pharisee party. They'd heard about the Gentiles in Antioch. Rumour had it they were being baptized and welcomed into the fellowship without circumcision. And speaking for the church, this group said:

"You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised." You cannot be a Christian unless you first become a Jew. If you don't accept the law, Christ will not accept you!

The question before the council was whether ceremonial laws applied to new Christians from Gentile backgrounds. The moral and civil laws were never an issue. The party of true Jewish Pharisees from Jerusalem insisted that they do. They wanted all Christians, including Gentiles, to eat kosher food, keep Jewish holy days, especially the Sabbath, and most importantly, to be circumcised. In contrast, Paul and the mixed congregation up in Antioch had come to the conclusion that these ceremonial laws were not binding on Gentiles. Paul went to great lengths to show that ceremonial laws had been satisfied in Christ. Jesus himself said, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Paul taught, "Christ is the end of the law to everyone who believes."

By saying Jesus was the “end of the Law,” Paul meant Christ had fulfilled ceremonial Jewish law. The Jewish ceremonial law demanded an animal sacrifice for sin. But Jesus became the Lamb of God and shed his blood for our sin. His sacrifice on the cross fulfilled the requirement of the law. Instead of slaughtering lambs when we sin, we confess our sins to God and ask to be forgiven.

For Paul, this same principle applied to other ceremonial laws like circumcision. Paul said that if circumcision or any other ceremonial law were required for new believers, then it would be adding another requirement for people to be forgiven their sin and given the righteousness of God. Paul insisted, “A man is not justified by observing the ceremonial law, but by faith in Jesus.”

Now there's a big difference between a moral or civil law and a ceremonial law or custom. A custom is a norm, a tradition, a practice that is helpful, meaningful, but not necessarily essential. But a moral or civil law is a rule; it's an edict, a non-negotiable. Sometimes the church disagrees over what is custom and what is law. Often the lines between them are not clearly defined.

If what this Pharisee group is saying is true, circumcision or becoming a “Jew” first is necessary for salvation, then the grace of God in Christ is not enough for salvation. You have to add to it the Law of Moses. Peter, on the other hand, wisely frames the theology of the early church: “We believe,” says Peter, “that we are saved the same way, by the special favour of the Lord Jesus.” Period.

The Pharisee party believed in grace. They had accepted God's grace in

Christ. But they were so bound to their own customs that they were confusing non-essentials with essentials. And they were making life more difficult not only for the Gentile Christians, but for the Holy Spirit!

So the outcome can be considered a model of conflict resolution. The Antioch church doesn't go rogue; they don't wash their hands of the Jerusalem church. They respect the apostolic community - just as our congregations respect our Synods and our National Church. They understand that they would have never even heard the Gospel had it not been for them.

So they don't say, "Forget Jerusalem, we'll do our own thing!" The Antioch church sends a delegation to Jerusalem - to the mother church. They send key leaders, Paul and Barnabas, among others. And when they arrive, they are welcomed by the apostles and the elders. There's a mutual respect. The mother church doesn't say, "Oh brother! Here comes trouble!" They welcomed them, and they called the meeting to order.

Apparently, in this community everyone matters. Everyone has a voice. And the church - the mother church - takes time to listen. The Spirit, of course, turned the tide of the meeting when Simon Peter took the mike: "Friends," he said, "you know that from early on God made it plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the message of the Gospel and embrace it – and not in any secondhand, roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who cannot be fooled by pretense on our part, but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy

Spirit exactly as he did to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very centre of who they were, and working from that centre outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed Him. 'So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? What are we fussing about?'"

It's a difficult thing, to let God be God? It can be so hard to trust grace! We may appreciate grace, but we need to put some parameters around it, some controls, some restrictions, and limits. Paul and Barnabas got up and gave their witness too, about the signs and wonders that God was doing among the Gentiles. And then everyone became quiet. And God spoke in the silence.

After a moment James took the floor. This is not James the apostle, the brother of John. This is not James, son of Alphaeus, another of the original twelve, sometimes called James the Less or James the Just. No, this is James, the brother of Jesus. He wasn't even a believer until after the resurrection.

But James is now head of the Church. And after listening, he speaks. He places all that they have heard in the context of Scripture. It is clear that the experience of the Gentiles is actually a fulfillment of Amos: "In that day I will restore the fallen kingdom of David. It is now like a house in ruins, but I will rebuild its walls and restore its former glory. And Israel will possess what is left of Edom and all the

nations I have called to be mine. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do these things.”

And then, notice they don't take a vote. Spiritual leadership doesn't decide God's will through opinion polls and secret ballots. Spiritual leadership discerns God's direction through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and then moves to consensus.

And so, after holy conferencing, James speaks for the church. "We will not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God," he says. For grace is enough! Later James will write up the decision in a later verse: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to impose this burden on you." Notice the order of priority. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. There was a high trust level in James. Tradition says that they had a nickname for him. They called him "Old Camel Knees." Apparently, his knees were so hard from constant intercession that they looked like those of a camel. It's easy to trust a leader like that.

Speaking for the church, James wrote to Antioch, saying, "God's Grace is enough!" With one caveat. Please abstain from eating meat offered to idols, unkosher food, and from fornication and immorality. In other words, please respect the scruples of our tradition. Don't abuse your freedom by intentionally offending others, lest you look more like a pagan than a disciple. And they sent the letter, with representatives from Jerusalem to encourage them. And there was unity and there was joy! ... In Antioch and in Jerusalem.

Looking from a distance of two thousand years, we should not underestimate

how wrenching this conflict would have been for the people involved and how difficult it would have been for them to predict who history would eventually label as the “good guys” and the “bad guys.”

God’s actions through the Spirit engender new practices among God’s people, requiring new understanding, new doctrine, and the ascension of newly significant passages in place of what had long served as established guides.

How often, with good intentions, do we place barriers in the path of those who seek God? Not everyone would agree that God most desires that every person find fullness of life in God. But, perhaps, people might agree with this: regardless of faith tradition, it is easy for us to assume that our ways of bringing people to God are consistent with how God wants us to bring people to God. Like the circumcisions advocates in Acts, we believe this to be true. Yet, God seems unconstrained by our certainties and sends the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, sometimes working hard to convince us that our actions hinder rather than help people find their way. Acts makes that point more than once.

Do our churches today put additional requirements on people in order for them to be saved? We are not talking about the transformation and change that comes by the power of the gospel. We expect that the adulterer will stop his adultery and the thief will stop his stealing. Those are moral laws of God. But Paul saw a distinction between that and circumcision. It had more to do with culture and Jewish identity than with Christ.

The big question here is: “What does the gospel look like in a Gentile context? What rules are transferable or negotiable? The process followed by the Jerusalem Council is very useful in finding a way forward in our own situation. There will be adaptation in whatever ethnic or religious culture the gospel goes.

One of the great mistakes made by the Western missionary movement is that they thought that their way of doing things was the right and biblical and only way without realizing that many hundreds of year of their own culture influenced the way they thought and taught. Now, as new nations embrace the gospel, our missionary movement could make the same mistakes again.

The Jerusalem Council helps us understand the difference between the supra-cultural laws of God and cultural norms of our various religious backgrounds with these guidelines:

- 1) God by his Holy Spirit will teach what is important and not important.
- 2) Address and seek out answers to difficult problems with godly people to think, pray, discuss the facts, then make a united decision under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- 3) Have a clear understanding of the basis of our salvation.
- 4) Don't put unnecessary burdens on the necks of new believers.
- 5) No rule should ever be made outside the boundaries of Scripture.

6) Always uphold the moral laws of God.

7) Some things can weaken new believers spiritually or offend the consciences of others.

8) Abstain from things which may cause others to take offense.

There are things we can “give up” for the gospel that may not be wrong in themselves like eating meat that has been strangled or not bled out. We can do many things for the sake of the gospel. It seems that is what James is asking the Gentiles to do.

Thank God for what God is willing to do for us in order to demonstrate God’s grace in Jesus Christ. As a witness, we need to be willing to share our lives in such a way that we become a connection to others, to draw others to God’s love and God’s grace - without burdening them with customs or rituals that bring them no closer to salvation. God’s grace is for everyone - all nations and all people - with no hoops to jump through. Isn’t our God awesome?

Amen.