

“A Faith Hard and Soft”

Acts 15:1-21

August 24, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Anyone who's been a pastor for any length of time can report on some pretty severe church conflicts. The worst one I ever heard of was from a pastor I know who was to be guest speaker at a Korean Presbyterian Church located in South Korea. He arrived to find armed guards standing at the door of the pastor's study. After he was cleared to enter the study, he asked the pastor what was going on and heard a tragic story of a very serious church conflict. The elders and the pastor were having such a sharp disagreement that the elders had threatened bodily harm both to the pastor and to his daughter who lived in America if the pastor didn't do what the elders wanted him to do.

Though it is not normal for church fights to get that serious, conflicts have always been a part of church life. It is tempting to think that there must be some idyllic stage in the life of the church where all has been peaceful and full of joy. Some look to the early stages of the church described in Acts in hopes of finding such a golden age. But it can't be found here either. In today's passage, Luke records the outbreak of a very serious dispute in the early church. Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary trip to their sending church in Antioch. They reported **“all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”** (14:27). The Antioch church, which also had many Gentile members, undoubtedly celebrated to hear of God's work among the Gentiles. Into this joyful scene enters another group of Christians, teaching that **“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved”** (15:1). In other words, Gentiles would first have to become Jews in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas took sharp issue with this teaching. Luke says that **“Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them”** (v. 2). That's Luke's typically understated way of saying that a huge fight broke out over this issue.

This was a very serious matter, threatening to divide the leaders of the church from one another. Had that happened, the church itself would have splintered into various factions. The church in Antioch recognized the seriousness of this matter and took steps to bring a lasting and peaceful solution. This church in Antioch was an impressive church. They had already shown themselves zealous in mission, being the very first church to send out missionaries. We read about that back in chapter 13, where, after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off as missionaries (13:3). Now they show themselves to excel in peacemaking wisdom as they send Paul and Barnabas, along with some others from the church, to the apostles in Jerusalem in an attempt to resolve this very explosive issue.

Their confidence in the Jerusalem leaders turned out to be well-placed. They succeed in resolving the matter, and it is their solution that I would like for us to look at this morning. They determined that Gentiles need not be circumcised and become Jews in order to become Christians. But they also recognized that Gentiles need to be sensitive to Jewish scruples about food and other ceremonial laws.

Before going any further with this passage, we need to consider how it ought to be applied to our lives. No voices have been raised in our church to require circumcision in order to be saved. So how does this apply to us? It teaches us that our health as individual Christians as well as our health as a church depends on being rock solid in essential matters and lovingly flexible in all other matters. Is salvation a “Jesus plus” salvation or a “Jesus only” salvation? The church took a stand here on the “Jesus only” side and decided not to bend. But in other non-essential matters, they decided that the law of love was to prevail and they urged flexibility. What we end up with as our central application is the paradoxical truth that to be a Christian means that we are to be the most rigid people in the world and the most flexible people. Let’s look more carefully at these two points.

I. The Hard Side of Faith – Jesus Only

These Jewish Christians who came to Antioch were advocating a “Jesus plus” theology. They were probably quite pleased that Gentiles were coming to believe in Jesus. But there is now another question that needed to be answered. What did God intend to require for these Gentile converts to become fully incorporated into the membership of the church? Did they need to get circumcised and keep the ceremonial law of Old Testament Judaism? That was the question over which there was sharp disagreement. One group said that adherence to Jewish ceremonial law was so mandatory that Gentiles would have no hope of salvation apart from their embracing of such practices. Paul and Barnabas were of a contrary opinion and insisted that Gentiles need not be circumcised nor keep the other elements of the ceremonial laws in order to be saved. They advocated a “Jesus only” theology.

Neither side was willing to bend, and things seemed to be at an impasse. I find it interesting what the church did next, especially as compared to what the modern church would have done. What do we do today when there is disagreement about doctrinal matters? Usually, one of two things happen. First, we separate from one another and form different denominations. Second, we minimize the importance of doctrine and say things like, “We’re just using different words to say the same thing” or “Don’t worry about these minor theological differences, just focus on the important things like loving and serving people.” They sought another solution. **“Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and**

the elders about this question” (v. 2). They sought a solution that would later be utilized many times in the church—they called for a council in which the leading theologians of the church would get together and debate what the Scriptures teach, after which they would come to a conclusion. Many times after this, the leaders of the church would meet in council in order to decide important theological matters. For example, one of the most significant councils in the church was the Council of 230 bishops that met at Nicaea beginning May 20, 325. A significant theological issue had arisen at that time concerning the teachings of a very popular church leader named Arius. He taught that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God and not fully God. The result of this council, reflected in what we call today “The Nicene Creed,” is our understanding of the divinity of Christ as well as the nature of the Trinity.

As is true of all councils, there was a great deal of debate in this first one. Luke records for us two decisive speeches. The first was by Peter, who related his experiences with Cornelius some ten years prior to this. Three times he makes the point that it was God’s idea to pursue Gentiles. God chose Peter to bring the gospel to Cornelius (v. 7), and God decided to give the Gentiles the fullness of the Spirit (v. 8), and God cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith alone (v. 9). All these things happened even though none of them had been circumcised. Peter’s conclusion is that to impose the requirement of circumcision is to work contrary to God and to test him. Then James made a speech. This was the James who was the half brother of Jesus, the author of the New Testament epistle that bears his name, and the one who seemed to be the chief leader of the Jerusalem church. His speech is decisive because the circumcision party had claimed to be acting under his authority (v. 24). But James agrees with Paul, Barnabas and Peter, that circumcision should not be a requirement for the salvation of the Gentiles. He bases his conclusions both on the experiences related by Peter and the Old Testament Scriptures. James becomes a real hero in this passage. Had he spoken differently, the damage to the church would undoubtedly have been significant. But as it is, the council concluded with the firm conviction that faith alone in Christ alone secures one’s salvation.

This is the place where Christians need to be as hard as stone. I have mentioned before that the most cursed word in the English language is the little word “and” whenever it appears after the name of Jesus. The Jerusalem council spoke out against Jesus *and* circumcision. This passage is of continuing relevance to us because other things have stepped in to replace circumcision. We too must fight the “Jesus and” theology. It is our native tendency to believe that Jesus is good, but he must be supplemented by things we can do. So we think that we do the best we can, and then Jesus somehow fills in the gap from our less than perfect performance. We need to take the first step by cleaning up our own lives as best we can. So we end up with a “Jesus *and* do your best” theology, or a “Jesus *and* read your Bible and pray” theology. How would you finish this statement? “I believe God would love me more if only

I” Anything that is placed in that blank becomes the “Jesus and” theology renounced by the Jerusalem council. It robs God of his glory and robs us of our joy. The good news of the gospel is that right now, in Christ and because of his atoning work, we can be perfectly forgiven, loved and accepted by God. This is the truth we must fight to hold onto. In his book, *Living the Cross Centered Life*, C. J. Mahaney shares his advice to his young son, Chad. “This is what I hold out to my young son as the hope of his life: that Jesus, God’s perfect, righteous Son, died in his place for his sins. Jesus took all the punishment; Jesus received all the wrath as he hung on the Cross, so people like Chad and his sinful daddy could be completely forgiven.”

II. The Soft Side of Faith – Loving Flexibility

The Jerusalem Council didn’t stop with a renunciation of the “Jesus and” theology. The Gentiles didn’t need to be circumcised in order to be saved, but the council did place upon them an obligation. **“Write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood”** (v. 20). Why these requirements and not others? Are these four items still binding on Gentiles today? The difficulty with this list is that the three dietary requirements clearly fit within the category of Jewish ceremonial law, while the other, sexual immorality, seems to fit within the moral law. By moral law, I mean those parts of the Old Testament law that are part of the universal moral law God means to be binding upon all people for all time. It is always wrong to kill, to lie and to steal. Commentators have attempted to resolve this either by making all of them part of the moral law or all part of the ceremonial law. I think the preferable option is to make them all part of the ceremonial law, since three of them already clearly fit in that category. How would sexual immorality fit in that category? The Greek word used here, *porneia*, is one that is very broad in its meaning. I think John Stott is correct in seeing that this word refers “to all the irregular marriages listed in Leviticus 18, in particular to marriage within degrees of blood relationship.”

If this is the correct reading, then all of these requirements placed upon the Gentile Christians fit within the category we call “indifferent” matters. That is, they are not explicitly required or forbidden in this New Testament era. But they were clearly part of Jewish culture. The Gentiles are simply being asked to be lovingly flexible with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. When they sit down to share a meal together, the Gentiles, who had no scruples about eating anything, were to be sensitive to the Jews. We see this principle at work in Paul’s life when he had Timothy circumcised. He believed that it wasn’t necessary for Timothy’s salvation that he be circumcised, but as a practical and loving gesture to his Jewish brothers and sisters, and in order to avoid needless offense, he had him circumcised.

Here's how Luther summarized this lesson of being rigid as to central doctrines and lovingly flexible on indifferent matters. "As concerning faith we ought to be invincible, and more hard, if it might be, than the adamant stone; but as touching charity, we ought to be soft, and more flexible than the reed or leaf that is shaken with the wind, and ready to yield to everything." It is easy to do the opposite—to cave in when it comes to important doctrine and to become rigid about indifferent matters. Many of these matters about which we are called to be flexible are cultural issues, and if we draw a hard line on these matters, we are saying to people that they need to become like us before coming to faith in Christ. If the circumcision position had prevailed on this day, it would have meant that Gentiles would need to become culturally Jewish in order to become Christians. What are some current examples of the church being rigid when it should be flexible? Examples are too numerous to be thorough, but let me mention just a couple. In some cases, we communicate to people that they must embrace our political perspective if they really want to be right and spiritual. Or a very common one today is to say that there is one style of music that is required in the worship services of the church. There are some churches where driving a big SUV is a sign of spirituality and others where driving the same vehicle would be close to the unforgivable sin.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, we must be rigid in holding to a "Jesus only" faith because it is the only path to true unity. About ten years ago, hundreds of thousands of Christian men gathered on the mall in our nation's capital to pray and commit themselves to following Jesus. One of the speakers asked them all to name their denominational affiliation. A cacophony of confusing voices erupted. He then asked them on the count of three to name their Lord and Savior. A united and loud shout ascended up as they all said "Jesus". The church will never be united until we unite around him

Second, we must be rigid in holding to a "Jesus only" faith because it is the only path to loving others, especially those who are different from us, which includes everyone. It works like this. Until our hearts are gripped by the fullness that is ours through Christ, we feel threatened by differences with others. We think that others must become like us, because that validates us. But when we live in the fullness of Jesus, we have all the validation we need. So a wife and her mother-in-law can work in the same kitchen and not feel threatened if the other person does things differently. Parents won't have to feel like others need to make the same schooling choices that they make. When the center is secure, we are able to accept others even when they are very different from us. Let's ask God now to help us remember all that we have in Jesus and to hold to him tenaciously and then love others even though they may be very different from us.