

April 29, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
Dispute Resolution
Acts 15:1-21; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Matthew 18:15-20; 5:7, 9; 21-26
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Since January we've been thinking together about the early Christian Church through the lens of a book in the Bible known as "The Acts of the Apostles."

Those first Christians had powerful experiences of God's presence, and of the Risen Christ, and of the Holy Spirit. They saw significant growth in numbers, and significant growth in faith and fellowship. And one temptation for us, reading their story two thousand years later, is to see these idyllic first days, filled with life and energy as the way it should always be. And that, of course is true! But the truth is also that the ideal – like the Garden of Eden – never does last for long here on earth!

In fact, even the best stories of human beings and human communities we see in Scripture only ever provide us with "moments" of truth, "glimpses and hints" of heaven on earth, but never "the real thing" that lasts for eternity (something God will only give us when history itself comes to an end).

And, in fact, paradoxically, what history teaches us is that if we strive too rigorously to make it happen on earth, or push too hard for utopia here and now, we'll almost inevitably cause more harm than good.

This is something that Jesus himself taught: do you remember Jesus' story about the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13 (24-30)?

It's about a field sown with *good seed* by a farmer. But in the night someone comes and sows weeds among the wheat: so the field is a mix of good and bad. And when the farm hands see this, they ask the owner if they should try to pluck up all the weeds.

And surprisingly, the farmer says to them:

*"NO! I'll do that at the harvest, **because** -- if you try to make the field perfect now, there'll be collateral damage! In your quest for perfection and purity, you'll destroy the good stuff with the bad."*

So, God himself, as it were, says: "BE PATIENT! WAIT! *Yes, of course, do what you can to make things better, but also be willing to live in the messy middle!*

So, in the early church we begin with the idyllic, but pretty soon there are challenges to the church and to the followers of Jesus.

- **Some of them coming from the outside** – from people who think that belief in Jesus *as the unique Son of God* is blasphemous or narrow. And they attack the church.
- **BUT then -- perhaps more perniciously – some challenges also come from the inside** – So that *on the inside* there's the problem of hypocrisy (in personal lives) and human error and organizational chaos (in social ministry).

And Acts shows us all these things – all these internal imperfections. And, in particular, as we move into the middle of the story in Acts chapters 9-15, it's the problems stemming from change that dominate the story: the confusion, hostility and resistance to changes; all the difficulties that the early church faced in dealing with and accepting those changes

- Changes in the racial diversity of the church
- Changes in the interpretation of scripture in the church
- AND Changes in the laws and practices governing the community life of the church.

To begin with of course, it was just a trickle: the church changed slowly.

In terms of race, for example, in Acts Ch. 8, we're told that an African Government Official from Ethiopia becomes a convert: but in his case he heads off home to the south, and there's not much impact in the church in Judea, the region around Jerusalem.

And then in Acts chapters 9-10, we're told that *another foreigner* – one of the hated Romans who crucified Jesus, a Soldier named Cornelius, becomes a convert. And God wants Peter (*Jesus' closest friend, the first leader of the church*) to treat him as an equal and to step inside his house – to enter a place Peter would have thought of previously as disgusting and forbidden. And he does it! He crosses the threshold into this new world, and welcomes Cornelius into the household of faith, not as a superior, but as a partner.

And, like the conversion of the Ethiopian, this conversion, important as it is, has limited impact to begin with:

- The foreigners, the people of other races than Jewish, are still few and far between in the early church
- The great majority of Jesus' followers are still primarily Jews, or foreigners who are converts to Judaism, so that *they already know the culture and the ethos and the morality of God's ancient people*.

BUT this is not to last. And by the end of the first decade after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the dam begins to burst! Which is what we began to see last week, in Acts Chapter 11, when **the message of Jesus comes to** the third largest city in the Roman Empire: a city called Antioch, located at the NE Corner of the Mediterranean Sea.

It's in Antioch that the church begins to explode numerically with people *from multiple races and multiple religious backgrounds, or none* – becoming believers: and they're all flooding into the church; and they're all looking for a relationship with the One who *made* them; who *loves* them; who *leads* them; coming to believe that this God has become known in Jesus of Nazareth.

And as the story unfolds in the next 3 chapter in Acts (Chapters 12-14), what we see is that this flood of foreign converts continues as the two great leaders in the church in Antioch – Paul and Barnabas – are sent as missionaries into the region we know of as Turkey. It's there that the *number of churches and diversity of people within the church, grows even more, leaving some of the original Jewish followers of Jesus after his resurrection feeling as if the whole movement is now chaotic and out of control, and feeling as if the power in the church now belongs to outsiders and newcomers instead of to them!*

And the resentment and the anger and the confusion with all these changes, festers and grows, especially when ancient customs and laws *begin to change as well*.

They would have felt as if the Bible itself was being abandoned;
as if the Biblical roots of the faith were now being ignored;
as if God's divinely revealed standards were being despised.

- **So that now**, for example, *with all these foreigners*, baptism and the Lord's Supper are the things you are supposed to do as religious rituals that marked you out as one of God's people.

- **Whereas in the “Old Days”** – for over 1,400 years, it had been circumcision and the feast of Passover that were the visible and biblical signs of entry and belonging in God’s people.
- **And Whereas in the “Old Days”** – it was much harder to be faithful to God you had to pay scrupulous attention to God’s will – revealed in over 600 laws in our OT Scripture.
- **Now, with all these newcomers,** people were saying that all you had to do to please God was to pay attention to the character and teaching of Jesus. *Sure: he was tough on the 10 Commandments (see Matthew 5-7!). But all those other Old Testament laws about religious feasts and festivals and eating kosher, and circumcision – apparently they could be pushed aside with impunity!*

and

- **Whereas in the “Old Days”** you knew who you were by blood – and could be proud that you were born into the family of God’s chosen people
- **Now** – if you were a Christian and Jewish, it seemed you were just one of the crowd, with no sense of privilege or inherited greatness at all.

It must have been an awful feeling for many of the Jewish followers of Jesus in the early days of the church, when the dam burst, and radical change was everywhere!! And gentile pagans (like you and me) came flooding in. And all these pent-up emotions could so easily have turned into a church “civil war” that could have destroyed the fledgling church. And for a while it looked as if this *would, in fact, happen*. BUT IT DIDN’T!

And the reason why? Well – because instead of shouting at each other, staying within their own little groups and caucuses, the four leaders of the early church, Paul and Barnabas (the great missionaries to the world!) and Peter and Jesus’ brother, James (the “pastors” holding the fort with the old church in Jerusalem) buried their pride and ate humble pie!

They realized that **winning on the truth while destroying the work of Jesus and his church was not the Jesus way at all**. And that no matter the cost, they needed to meet face-to-face to hash things out, which is the context of our passage today in Acts 15.

Listen to the story in Acts 15:1-21

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses,** (‘You’ here, means ‘**you Gentiles,**’ **you foreigners,** **you latecomers into God’s family of faith:** = ‘Unless **you** become like us, and follow **our** time-tested interpretation of the Bible’) *you cannot be saved.*” (That is, ‘you don’t belong to the family of God; you’re not one of us’)

²And after Paul and Barnabas **had no small dissension** and debate with them (The word ‘Dissension’ here is same word in Greek as ‘**riot**’ OR ‘**revolt.**’ **In other words, this was a pretty hot mess! a fight!**)

Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

(They could have run the other way, claiming, “*We’re right, they’re wrong.*” But they didn’t)

³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.

⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some believers who belonged

to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “***It is necessary for those foreigners to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses.***”

⁶The apostles and the elders ***met together*** to consider this matter.

(They did it decently and in order. Like a court of law, everyone had a chance to speak, and the key leaders had a chance to sum things up.)

⁷After there had been much debate, **Peter**

(Jesus closest friend and the first leader of the church.)

stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.

(A reference in particular to Cornelius and his household.)

⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made *no distinction between them and us*. ¹⁰Now therefore -- why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and THEN listened to **Barnabas and Paul** as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

¹³(And then, after they had finished speaking, Jesus’ brother, apparently growing in authority, and previously the leader of the anti-change faction)

James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon Peter has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵This agrees with **the words of the prophets**, as it is written,

^{16,17}*‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up, so that **all other peoples** may seek the Lord—**even all the Gentiles** over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸known from long ago.’*

(In other words, James is saying that he was wrong: he’s come to see that God’s plan, foretold in Scripture, was always for a day to come when the floodgates of God’s Kingdom would be opened to the rest of the world.)

¹⁹Therefore, says James (*changing his mind*), I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰**but** we should write to them

- **to** abstain only from things polluted by idols
- and from fornication
- and from whatever has been strangled
- and from blood.

(In other words, the gentiles needed to pay attention to the Ten Commandments that Jesus affirmed, and pay attention to the consciences of Jewish believers – and nothing more.)

And everyone agreed with James -- and that’s what they did: they agree on the course ahead, and the way to communicate it, and in so doing, they managed to keep the church together:

- Meeting face to face
- Resisting every temptation *to demonize each other*
- Giving time for everyone to have their say

- Studying the Scripture together, to see not just their own side, but perhaps a different view of God’s side.
 - ***And when some won and others lost -- they gave in graciously***
- AND so they held the church together

Pastoral Counselor, David Augsburger, speaking about conflict, especially in marriage (in his book, Caring Enough To Confront, 1973, 2009, pp.9-10), **calls this approach: “CARE-FRONTING.”** He says,

Care-fronting

- is being upfront with **important facts**
- while offering **genuine caring** that lifts, supports, and encourages the other.

Care-fronting

- unifies concerns for **goals—my goals, your goals, our goals**
- with concern for **relationship**

Care-Fronting

- aims to retain **something to stand for** (goals)
- as well as **someone to stand with** (relationship)
- without sacrificing one for the other
- or collapsing one into another.

Care-Fronting

- allows each of us to be **genuinely loving**
- **without giving away one’s power** to think, choose, and act.

In such honesty, one can love powerfully and be powerfully loving. These are not contradictory. They are complementary.

The opposite of Care-Fronting is:

- *to express powerless love – until anger erupts in loveless power*
- *to yield in pseudo-love – until one overloads to the breaking point and then to explode with demands heated to the boiling point.*

In the early church, the meeting in Jerusalem was a “care-fronting moment” that worked! (It doesn’t always! It’s not magic, but it IS powerful). In this case it defused the explosion, **and provides an example for all of us -- as followers of Christ** on how to behave when our *world is falling apart*; when *change seems out of control* and *our relationships* become difficult and conflicted -- whether in the church, or in our families and marriages, or beyond.

This was a **care-fronting moment**. BUT it was also a **truth-telling visionary moment**, too, wasn’t it?

At that Acts 15 meeting the church leaders discovered that ultimately they were of one mind: they all agreed on one thing: **THERE WAS NO GOING BACK**: no room for nostalgia to win the day, the best days *were not behind them* but *ahead of them*. God had opened the door to a new future.

And if at times entering God’s future *led to some chaos – so be it!* Change is always accompanied by a measure of chaos and loss and confusion! It’s always so.

And if at times entering God's future meant you had to read and re-read the Scripture to see God's will and work from a different angle and admit you weren't always right, so be it: the God who humbled you would also lift you up!

And if at times to enter God's future it appeared that outsiders were beginning to run the show – so be it! The church didn't belong to Peter or Paul or James or Barnabas **BUT to Christ** – the only head of the church

AND IF the risen Jesus was leading the way -- then all would be well: His imperfect church would fulfil his mission with imperfect people – *like us and not like us* – from *every tongue and tribe and nation*; people who loved him a little and wanted to love him more.

And if this was God's Call for the early church, then surely it's still God's Call for us at National as well: finding our joy and purpose, not by holding on to the past – *of course we honor it, and do not abandon it casually (neither Barnabas or Paul would advocate that!)* – but holding on far more firmly to Christ, who calls us

- to be ambassadors of reconciliation wherever relationships are broken
- and to be the hands and feet of Jesus himself in his vast and changing world

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