

Text: Acts 15
St Stephen's

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Sat/Sun

Truth and Grace: Clarity and Charity

I had some idea as I left seminary that leading a church could be challenging, but one of the things that caught me by surprise was the amount of conflict inside the church. People would argue about candles and music and whether we should put bibles in the pews and how many candles we should light. I was surprised. But I found that conflict is normal, because people are normal. It happens in churches, good churches: in families, in good families: it happens wherever you have people. Well, in chapter 15 it is on full display, and I want to take some time to look at it carefully with you today.

In Acts 15 we see **three sources of conflict** inside the church. First is...

- **Diversity in Membership**

...as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. Acts 15:3

Once the gospel went from the Jews to the gentiles, you had a 'diversity' problem. It **comes with the gospel**. The gospel is about God's undeserved love for broken people. The world deals with human brokenness by **putting up walls**. We think if we can put up wall, we will protect ourselves from people who are different or broken or bad. So we have walls of prejudice and containment all over the world. Most of those **walls run right through our hearts**.

The problem with the gospel is it **jumps boundaries and leaps over walls**... walls that I am not so eager to leap over. It is a **wild, untamed kind of love**... And all of a sudden you find yourself in a church small group with some people that you have avoided all your life. It takes your breath away. It *'makes you glad'*, and makes you **mad**. It's a stretch. That is what was happening all over the Roman world as Jews and Gentiles came to faith in Christ. The **diversity of membership** was a source of

conflict.

The second source was...

- **Disputes over Doctrine**

some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently.

Acts 15:1-2 (NLT)

Bill explained this to you last week, how the Jewish Christians were saying to the Gentile Christians that your **faith in Jesus** was not enough. You had to add **obedience to Moses** if you wanted to be saved. That, of course, changed the whole dynamic of the gospel. Instead of forgiveness and inclusion in the family being a **free gift** to broken people, when they added obedience to the law, it went back to the **performance plan**. What was a **gift**, now had to be **paid for**; what was **free** now had to be **earned** – not just by Jesus but also by you. That is the performance plan, and the problem with the performance plan is it doesn't work. You can't get it done. So Paul and Barnabas *'argued vehemently'* against it. **Disputes over doctrine** became a source of conflict in the church.

There was a **third source of conflict** in this chapter, and it doesn't come till the **last paragraphs**. It was...

- **Differences in Strategy**

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia... They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Acts 15:36-39

We **met John Mark** back in chapter 12, when Peter was in jail and late at night all the disciples were in the home of John Mark's mother, praying. And Peter had a miraculous delivery from jail, and came to the home, and they didn't at first believe it. Remember? Then we **see him again** in ch 13, where he has joined Barnabas and Paul on their **first mission journey**. But we find that he left them in the middle of the trip and went home.

We now pick him up in Ch 15, a **couple of years later**, and Barnabas wants to take him out on the second mission journey. But **Paul won't have him**. Paul thought Mark was a **quitter** – the phrase is 'he had deserted'. And Paul doesn't want to put up with it. But Barnabas wants to give him **a second chance**. And they got into a fight about it, such a fight that Paul and Barnabas split up. **Differences in strategy** became a source of conflict in the church.

How do you deal with conflict? I want to start with how they dealt with the question of doctrine, and then come back to John Mark. Here is **what they did** first...

Get Together, Get Help

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion...

Acts 15:6-7

Up in Antioch they met and talked and prayed and argued... and they couldn't get it resolved. So they **went for help**. That is the strategy of Jesus about conflict in the church. If you have a problem with someone, **get together** and work it out. If you can't work it out, **get help**. Don't gossip. Don't **trash** someone. Get together, work it out. If you need help, get help.

More marriages fail because we would **rather talk about someone than talk to** someone. More ministry teams break up because we would rather talk about someone than talk to someone.

Harold Lewis. 8 3-hour lunches. If we are going to separate, he will have to do it to a friend. If he is going to sue me, he will have to sue a friend. I wanted to try and create an environment where better things could happen.

Here is what they did next...

Look at What God is Doing

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

Acts 15:8

One of the best ways through a difficulty is to take the time to **look around and see what God is doing and join him.** That is not always easy to do, but it is important to do.

Peter is speaking here, and he starts talking about what he saw God doing when **Cornelius** was converted. How all these gentiles and Cornelius came to **faith in Jesus** and even before Peter could baptize them, **God filled them** with the Holy Spirit. Peter couldn't fail to understand. **God had jumped the fence first** and Peter had to jump with him.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Acts 15:12

Then Paul and Barnabas start to tell the same kind of stories from their first mission journey. They are saying, 'Look at what God is doing! Let's get in on the action.' When you are in a tough spot and you look around and see what God is doing and you join him, **you immediately get on the solution side** to the problem.

Then... (here's the next step)

Listen to What God has Said

"The words of the prophets are in agreement with this..."

Acts 15:15

James is the leader of the church in Jerusalem at this time, and finally at the end of all the discussion he gets up, and what he does is open his Bible and **compare what they have said with what God has said.** And he concludes, they are **in agreement.** God has all along had these gentiles on his heart. 'The prophets agree.' And for everyone, **that settles it.**

You have to **check out your sense of what God is doing with what God has said, because sometimes we can make mistakes.** The Bible will always be your best guide to what God is doing and saying...

Then they **write a letter** to all the churches... 'No circumcision' required. Salvation comes by faith alone. By grace alone. In Jesus alone. The

performance plan is over. You are free from it.

You **can't come to God with hands that are full** and say, see how much I deserve your blessing. See how much I have earned... That is living by the performance plan. It will break you, crush you. It is a terrible way to live. But when it does, you can **come to God with empty hands**, and lo and behold!!! He welcomes you and fills your hands with good things. There is **not room enough in your hands** for all your accomplishments and all God's gifts. God wants you to **get over yourself**. Let go of yourself and come to Christ and you will find yourself, your real self... Jesus promises. The **truth is established**. It is a cornerstone of the gospel.

Now there is **one more thing** they did, and it's important...

Grace Each Other

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements...

Acts 15:28

Now... **grace each other. Serve each other.** Make room for each other. (four abstentions...) Don't step on each other. Make room for each other. Give each other '**Grace Space**'. Once the truth is established, it is **grace that heals and brings people back together**.

I think in evangelical churches we are better at truth than we are at grace. It is easier to be 'right' than it is to be gracious. So let's focus on this grace thing for a bit and go back and finish up with a look at

Barnabas and Mark.

"Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus; Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord."

Acts 15:39,40

The church knew that grace could get them through this disagreement. Grace would bring healing. They knew that **with Jesus** a failure or a fight was not the **end** of the road but the **start** of a journey that could bring them where they most longed to go. Grace can do that. So they

commended them to grace, offered them up to grace. They prayed for grace. **They injected grace.**

Every one of them was touched by it. Paul and Barnabas never gossiped or trash talked. They didn't nurse bitterness. Every mention of Barnabas and Mark by Paul in his letters after this incident are unhesitatingly warm and appreciative. He gave what he had received. Grace. The unearned, undeserved one way love of Jesus.

- **What happened to the missionary work? God doubled** the number of mission teams out of that church. Paul & Silas, Barnabas & John Mark... They **got on with doing what Jesus had called them to do,** and God blessed it.
- **What happened to the relationships?** At the end of Paul's life, after 2 or 3 more mission journeys and some 20 or so years, Paul is in prison, abandoned by most, waiting for his execution. He writes Timothy these poignant words...
"Luke is the only one here with me. Bring Mark with you; he'll be my right-hand man" 2 Tim 4:11 (Msg)
 And John Mark did come and he served the Apostle. He became in the end Paul's "right hand man". That's what grace does.
- **What happened to John Mark?** Well, he not only became Paul's right hand man. He became famous by a different name. He authored the second book of the NT, the one we call the Gospel of Mark.

That is what God can do out of the rubble of our conflicts - by the grace and truth of Jesus.