

A Good Church Fight
The Church in Action – Acts 15
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“I know it’s the Christian thing to do, but I don’t think we should do it.” That sentence kicked off the biggest church fight I’ve ever been in. It wasn’t horrible, no punches were thrown, but there were definitely some strongly differing opinions about what we should do.

The church I served in Chicago had been approached by a Korean congregation about using our space for worship and fellowship on Sunday afternoon. That’s a no-brainer, right? Of course they could use the space! So, I took it to the board, expecting an enthusiastic “Yes!” Instead, I got lowered eyes and cleared throats and a few sighs of, “Well...” Turns out before I got there, the church had let another Asian congregation use the space, but the smell of the ethnic food from their meals lingered in fellowship hall and some of the people didn’t like that. Amazing how green bean casseroles are signs of church fellowship, but kimchi is controversial enough to become an issue for the Property Committee.

I pled my case that this was what hospitality was all about, that we were stewards of our building and God called us to open our doors to others, including others with smelly food. I swayed a few people, but most of the board was reluctant to go along with it. Then the board chair, a stately gentleman with a big heart and an outdated perspective, said, “I know it’s the Christian thing to do, but I don’t think we should do it.” And we didn’t.

Churches fight over all kinds of things. Something of them may seem silly, like what kind of music to play in worship and whether or not the kids should be in the sanctuary with the adults. But underneath every church fight are deeper feelings of control, comfort, and familiarity. I heard about one church that was having their pew cushions recovered in a slightly different color, and one church member was so mad that the first Sunday the new pew cushions were in place, she brought a lawn chair into the sanctuary and sat in that instead. If aliens ever study Christianity, they’re going to conclude upholstery is one of our core doctrines.

Today in our Acts passage, we have a church fight. A big one. A significant one, the consequences of which will impact the rest of history. Last week, we looked at the story of Cornelius, a Roman soldier and Gentile who believed in Jesus. Peter, one of the main apostles, was called by God to go to Cornelius and preach, but Peter didn’t want to do that because Jews and Gentiles weren’t supposed to mix. This wasn’t a matter of prejudice; it was what the Bible told Peter to do. Gentiles were unclean. They didn’t deserve to be chosen by God.

But God gives Peter a vision and says God has made all things clean, so Peter goes to Cornelius and preaches the gospel and ends up baptizing him and his whole family. Yay! I love a story with a happy ending. But, hold onto your communion cups because things are about to get a little rocky. You see, Peter knew God wanted him to preach to the Gentiles, but the ruling church council didn’t know that, so when they get wind of the fact that Peter is hanging out with the unclean folks, they call an emergency board meeting, which may be the three scariest words a pastor never wants to hear.

Here’s the crux of the issue. For all their lives, Jews had been told they had to follow the law that was given to Moses, which included the males being circumcised and everyone following strict dietary regulations. That was just the way things were. So, when these Gentiles start showing up to worship, the Jews have no problem with that...as long as the Gentiles get

circumcised and following the same dietary laws. In other words, these Gentiles are welcome as long as they become Jews.

But Peter and Paul were saying that wasn't necessary. Jesus came to fulfill the law, so followers of Christ were no longer beholden to those laws. To make Gentiles follow them was an unnecessary burden, and it also went against the new thing God was doing among the Gentiles. So, we're at a stand-off. Purity versus hospitality. Who's in versus who's out.

The scene plays out like a courtroom drama. The Pharisees make their case as to why the Gentiles should conform to the Jewish laws, and then Peter speaks. Peter was at the original Pentecost, when God poured the Holy Spirit out on the Jews, and with Cornelius, when God poured God's spirit out on the Gentiles. So, he knows a thing or two about this. And he basically says, "Look, folks, I know we've always done it this way, but God is doing a new thing, and who are we to stand in the way of that?"

Well, Peter, we're the church, that's who, we have a long history of standing in God's way when God is doing a new thing. With a world that is changing all around us faster and faster every day, the one place that shouldn't change is the church. Church should feel like it felt when we went with our Meemaws and Pawpaws. We should sing the same hymns and see the same people and sit on the same pew cushions as Jesus did when he came to our church. The church shouldn't change.

I remember an older church member coming up to me once after worship with a look of concern on his face. He was a long-standing faithful presence in the church but was struggling with some of the changes that were taking place. He looked at me with a scrunched-up forehead and said, "Pastor Kory, I didn't know any of those people who were serving as deacons today. And some of them were way too young!" And I get it. I get why this would scare him. This wasn't the church he knew 10 years ago. But what it represented was a church that was welcoming new people and encouraging young people to serve.

The reality is that if the church isn't changing, it's dying. That doesn't mean next week there will be screens and smoke machines and a drum kit up here, but it does mean we have to constantly be looking at the new things God is doing among us and ask, "How can we be part of that?" How are we using technology to communicate the gospel? How are we ensuring our building is accessible and inviting? How are we saying that Crestwood is a place to experience the extravagant expanse of God's love to people who've been shunned by other churches? What is God doing and how can we be part of that?

After Peter makes his case, James stands up to speak. James was the brother of Jesus but wasn't converted until after Jesus dies. He has become the leader of the fledgling church, the supreme court justice of this council. And what he does is masterful. After Peter shares his experience, James backs it up with scripture, quoting the prophet Amos, who says, "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." Then James makes his decision, which will fundamentally ensure the continuing spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Here's what James says, put in a letter to go out to all the churches: Read Acts 15:22-31. There you have it. The Gentiles are welcome into the church as long as they follow a few dietary laws and abstain from sexual immorality. No circumcision required, which is huge, because dating all the way back to Abraham, circumcision was the defining sign of the covenant between God and God's people. But no longer. Somewhere in the back of the room every Gentile man quietly whispered, "Praise the Lord." God is doing a new thing.

Why did James choose the things he did? Well, the dietary laws were crucial to the Jews because it was an important part of their identity. Imagine you have a strong gluten allergy and the person you're dining with orders breadsticks and pasta and cheesecake and just sits there eating it right in front of you. That person has every right to do that, but it's pretty insensitive on their part. Having the Gentiles stay away from certain non-kosher foods was about being respectful of the Jews with whom they would be sharing table fellowship. And prohibiting sexual immorality seems like a given, but it was so rampant in the ancient world that James felt a need to put it in writing.

What fascinates me about this letter is not what was decided, but the reasoning James gives for it. "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials." Do you hear that? Do you get how monumental that is? James isn't saying, "We're doing this because it feels right." But he's also not saying, "We're doing this because the Bible tells us to do it." It's both. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

For so long, the belief was, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." That's great, but the Bible doesn't have a lot to say about AI or strip-mining, and it was contradictory things to say about how you treat foreigners and what you do with your enemies. So, we can't read the Bible in a vacuum. We also have to ask how what the Bible says applies in our day and time, in our context and culture. And to do that, we have to use our brains. We have to factor in our experience. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

This will be an ongoing conversation here at Crestwood. As we seek to be intentionally inclusive, as we seek to be good stewards in sharing our resources and opening our doors, as we seek to move this congregation into a new era of leadership and service, we are going to do our best to follow where God is leading us, using both the Bible and our brains to discern our path forward. You may not agree with everything. I may not agree with everything! But it's not my church. And it's not your church. It's Christ's church, and we are simply called to use all the tools at our disposal, including God's word and our own minds, to figure out how to be the church Christ is calling us to be. My prayer is that we constantly seek to know the Christian thing to do...and then we do it.