

ACTS 15:1-5, 22-29

CONSULTING THE BROTHERS

“Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.’

“...Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.’”¹

Baptists are an independent people. I don’t know that we should brag about it, but it has been observed that where there are two Baptists, there will be at least three opinions. Baptists advocate the autonomy (independence) of the local church and stress freedom for believers. However, we frequently lose sight of the fact that when our independence overrides our desire for unity in the Faith we have deviated from the Faith. We insist on the independence of the believer; we are equally insistent that there can be no deviation from foundational truth. Certain revealed truths define us as Christians; and adherence to accepted doctrinal truth defines us as Baptists. There can be no deviation from these truths without transforming us into something we are not.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus is truly God and truly man; we believe that He died a sacrificial death because of our sin, that He rose from the dead and that He ascended bodily into Heaven where He is seated on the right hand of the Father. We believe that solely by faith in the Risen Son of God sin is forgiven and man is brought into a living and right relationship with the Living God. We believe that these truths are revealed in the Bible, which is inerrant and infallible in the original manuscripts.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Baptists are known as consistent advocates of religious liberty. Baptists hold to the autonomy of the local church—no outside agency can dictate to the congregation in matters of faith and practise. We champion the concept of the priesthood of the believer, believing that each Christian enjoys equal access to God. We accept two ordinances—baptism of believers and the Lord’s Table for those who have identified with Christ in baptism as believers. We promote the biblical doctrine of a regenerate church membership; and we hold to two offices within the church—elders and deacons. All these truths arise out of our conviction of biblical authority for faith and practise.

The message today explores the interdependence of Christians. I do not deny the need for balance in our interactions, and I am certain that we need to define the parameters of co-operation. Nevertheless, we do benefit through consulting the brothers in the Faith when questions of faith and conscience arise. I invite careful consideration of an incident that occurred in the early church in order to examine this issue more closely.

THE CONFLICT — “Some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ ...Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.” A church is a voluntary community charged with holding the members responsible for moral, ethical and theological decisions. The manner in which we live and the truths we teach are never in isolation from other congregations.

Disagreements over worship style, while entertaining, are not worthy of prolonged discussion. Questions of polity, while important to our identity as Baptists, should not be central to our faith as Christians. However, should a church promote unethical behaviour, or should a church even tolerate unethical behaviour, without deliberating, sister churches must call that church to account. If the congregation refuses to act with integrity, churches that would honour Christ must recognise the breach in fellowship caused by the actions of that congregation. The step of disfellowshipping the errant congregation must always be taken with the hope that the wickedness will cease.

Should a sister congregation tolerate immorality among its members and that toleration of immorality becomes known, affiliated churches are bound by love for the Saviour to rebuke that sister congregation and to cease all ecclesiastical interaction with the aberrant congregation until the error is corrected. In a like manner, when a church promotes immoral behaviour and refuses to cease promoting such wickedness, we are obligated by our love for the Risen Son of God to cease all association with the errant congregation in hope that they will become ashamed of their actions and correct the sin.

Similarly, when a church embraces and/or promotes errant doctrine, especially doctrine that distorts soteriological truth (the doctrine of salvation), distorts theology proper (the doctrine of God), or that distorts Christology (the doctrine of Christ), it is incumbent upon sister congregations to call that church to account. Again, if a congregation persists in doctrinal error, it will be necessary for the honour of the Lord Christ to refuse to fellowship with that church until the error is renounced.

However, the message today does not so much seek to be a manual for dealing with error as it is a message challenging us how to respond to doctrinal questions that may arise. The study focuses on the response of churches to questions that disturb the peace of a congregation, and for which clarity is sought. If we will fully understand the issue, it will be helpful to consider the setting of the conflict.

The New Beginnings Baptist Church of Jerusalem was a Jewish congregation; the New Beginnings Baptist Church of Antioch was a Gentile church. These churches shared the Faith; but they represented separate cultures. Nevertheless, the Antioch church respected the Jerusalem church. All the Apostles held membership in the Jerusalem congregation, and many of the elders of that congregation had personally heard the Master as He taught. The Faith of Christ the Lord is rooted—firmly rooted—in the Old Testament. The Gentile congregation looked to the Jewish congregation somewhat as the “older brother” in the Faith. There was respect because of their precedence in the Faith.

The Gentile congregation had consistently taught the message they had received from the first scattered members of the Jerusalem Church [ACTS 11:19-26]. Paul, a teacher in Antioch, had received his message from the Master Himself. His message declared that salvation—the forgiveness of sin, life in the beloved Son, acceptance by the Father—was all of grace. The Christians of Antioch had believed and taught that Jesus died because of our sin, that He was raised from the dead for our justification, and that when we submit to Him—the Risen Lord of Life—as Master of our life that we are saved.

Paul and Barnabas had preached this message among the Gentiles during their first missionary journey. Salvation is by faith; the grace of God is freely extended to all who will receive it. They believed that salvation is offered in Christ the Lord. The Antioch church had sponsored the first missionaries; and the message they proclaimed was the message of grace and life in Christ the Master. When Paul and Barnabas returned from their mission, “they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” [ACTS 14:27].

However, there was no respite from their labours. The text begins with the conjunction, *kai*—“but,” as it is translated in the text that I am using. The word suggests an event that occurs immediately, without an intervening period, following their return to the home church. A contingent of teachers from the mother church arrived in Antioch, and they were teaching that it would be necessary to be Jewish in order to be saved. The men would need to be circumcised. The implication of their message was that if they would be really saved the Gentiles would need to embrace the entirety of rabbinic law—keeping Kosher, observing the Sabbath, maintaining the entire catalogue of minutiae that had encrusted the Mosaic Law throughout the centuries. This was tantamount to insisting that people must make themselves acceptable before they could be saved.

The congregation was naturally disturbed. Two distinct messages were presented. One was the familiar message of grace that they had believed and that they had received. The other message, bearing what appeared to be the imprimatur of the Apostles, appeared novel since it taught that salvation was dependent upon performance of specific rites. Naturally, the Gentile believers were confused and the peace of the Body was disturbed.

The undercurrent of the text, masked by our English translation, is forcefully suggestive. My text says that “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them.” The word translated “dissension” is a Greek term that is used of an uprising or a rebellion. The first readers of this account would know that Paul and Barnabas went toe-to-toe with these errant teachers. They were unwilling to see the Gentile congregation browbeaten and treated as heretics by these self-appointed regulators of orthodoxy. Thus, the missionaries resisted the error to the point of insurrection.^{2,3}

² So the word is translated in LUKE 23:25. See, also, ACTS 19:40 and ACTS 23:7.

³ Cf. A. T. Robertson, **Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. III** (Broadman, Nashville, TN 1930) 243

The Master Himself compares the people of God to sheep [e.g. JOHN 10:1-15]. We are a gentle people who seek peace with all people; certainly we do not enjoy fighting. Among us are always found spiritual bairns who may be easily led astray and readily confused by plausible arguments. Those appointed as elders and those who serve as teachers must always be on guard against error, and they must be prepared to confront that error when it is surreptitiously introduced to the congregation [e.g. ACTS 20:28-30], as was the case in Antioch, when the Judaisers attempted to introduce errant doctrine.

The contemporary image of pastors is a caricature. They are “nice.” Ministers don’t raise their voice and they don’t oppose anything or anyone. The minister must always be glad for the opportunity to pray before every turtle race that comes to town. Pastors always tolerate every irritable crank that demands focus on her particular issue. Ministers never offend anyone, no matter how wrong the action of the people. However, the image of a “nice” pastor distorts reality. The pastor is an undershepherd and he must one day give answer to the Great Shepherd for oversight of the flock. If the pastor understands his task, he is to defend the flock against hurt and harm. He is responsible to expose error and equip the flock to stand firm in the face of spiritual assault.

So, Paul and Barnabas opposed the Judaisers—raised their voices and withstood their error. What began in secret was at last fully exposed to the light. Perhaps you wonder why the Antioch church did not decide the issue themselves. These Judaisers appear to have presented themselves as representatives of the Jerusalem church. Therefore, the church at Antioch referred this question to the Jerusalem congregation, “Did you give these men permission to come to us? Are they here with your blessing? Do they represent you? Or, are they here on their own?” At issue was a doctrinal matter of sufficient importance to stop the Christian movement; and the church at Antioch needed to know if the message they were proclaiming was wrong.

What can we learn from this? By no means do I imagine that my list is exhaustive; rather, I consider it as suggestive. First, **some truths are worth fighting for**. Sound doctrine is vital to the health of a church, and failure to maintain purity of doctrine invites death for a congregation, death for a movement, death for a denomination. Churches must pay careful attention to the truths presented from the pulpit lest they be moved from their secure foundation.

Second, **error always lurks nearby**; and just when we are most extended (and perhaps most spiritually exhausted), evil seeks to insinuate itself. Heretics do not arrive, saying, “I am here to damn your soul. I am here to destroy your secure position.” Instead, heretics come with a message claiming to seek your empowerment, claiming to seek your benefit, claiming they seek God’s glory. Error comes, not in a package that is repulsive and repugnant, but rather appearing plausible and appealing; and the unwary and the unthinking are deceived and led astray. I am astonished at the susceptibility of the flock; and I note that it is not always the young in the Faith that are deceived.

Again, **churches must be prepared to resist any deviation from the Faith**. Especially those appointed as elders, are required to be vigilant concerning what the membership is ingesting. Some wish to argue when they ask for my input on some preacher, on some teacher, on some book they are reading. I am not always complementary simply because a writer or a speaker is well-known. Tragically, there is sometimes death in the pot, and the elder must warn against that error.

THE CONSULTATION —“Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the Law of Moses.’”

In one of his earliest New Testament missives, Paul provides an autobiographical vignette of his trip to Jerusalem [see **GALATIANS 2:1-10**]. No doubt, this event was still fresh in his mind as he penned those words. He relates that he was cautious as he reviewed his message before the Apostles. He was concerned lest he had misrepresented the truth. However, the Apostles rejoiced at the account of the salvation of the Gentiles. Instead of insisting that the Gentiles be circumcised, the Apostles welcomed Paul and Barnabas, and they welcomed Titus—a Gentile—without requiring him to be circumcised.

When the messengers from the Antioch church reviewed their concerns, the church considered their concerns through a meeting with the leaders. The Apostles and elders met with Paul and Silas, and we might well assume that Titus was also present as “Exhibit A.” The opposing sides presented their case—Paul verses the Judaisers, grace verses law, freedom verses slavery. The debate was thorough and animated.

Then, Peter rose to spoke. Reviewing how God had exposed the bigotry of his own heart, the Big Fisherman was adamant that the Gentiles were saved by faith—just as the Jews were saved. The conclusion of his appeal was this; “We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” [**ACTS 15:11**]. If the Jews had to believe despite circumcision, then their circumcision was of no value; and the Gentiles were saved in the same way that the Jews were saved.

The missionaries then related all that God had accomplished through them. At the conclusion of their recitation of God’s saving power, James, the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, spoke. Returning to the theme that Peter had raised—that God had indeed blessed Gentiles with salvation—he appealed to Scripture, citing the Prophet Amos. He made this sensible conclusion from the testimonies and from Scripture: “My judgement is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” [**ACTS 15:19**].

Here are some observations that seem vitally important for us as a congregation. First, **churches consult with churches**. This point is more important than you might think, since the tendency today, even among Baptists, is to refer all matters of doctrine, morals and ethics to a denominational committee. Such an event would be utterly foreign to the New Testament. This practise is fraught with danger if the churches themselves are not party, and if the committee becomes de facto a supra ecclesiastical entity.

No outside agency may dictate to the churches in matters of faith and practise.

Congregations determine at the local level doctrinal positions, forms of worship to be employed and the degree of intra-church co-operation. A denomination may declare a church to be either in fellowship or out of fellowship on the basis of declared doctrine, but no person or agency outside the local congregation can dictate matters of doctrine or impose conformity of practise on a church. As contemporary churches surrender responsibility for issues of faith and practise to denominations, those same churches have contracted a spiritual malaise that threatens the viability of the Christian Faith.

Churches send messengers to consult with other churches. Paul and Barnabas did not go to Jerusalem as “delegates”; rather, they were charged by their home congregation in Antioch to present the concerns that had been raised by the teaching of the Judaizers. A messenger carries a message; a delegate possesses delegated power. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find permission for a church to “delegate” the authority Christ has given to it. A church cannot delegate its responsibility to discipline errant members. Neither can a church delegate responsibility to examine those who will serve as elders. Denominations may attempt to usurp such biblical authority, but the New Testament church cannot delegate her authority. In this vein, the concept of “credentials” would be foreign to the apostolic churches. The Jerusalem church did not “credential” the Judaizers; and neither did the Antioch church “credential” Paul.

THE CONCLUSION — “[The congregation] sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.’”

Note what happened next. “Then it seemed good to the Apostles and elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” [ACTS 15:22]. I am not merely splitting lexicographic hairs when I say that this must not be construed as a council, a synod or even a denominational assembly. This was a congregation deciding a question referred by a sister church [see ACTS 15:2].

My confidence arises from several observations. As the messengers of the Antioch church travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria toward Jerusalem, they encountered a number of Christians [cf. ACTS 15:3], apparently representing churches that were not represented in Jerusalem. Note, also, that Paul did not vote on the matter, nor did any of those sent with him vote on the issue. Instead, the Jerusalem church—without Paul’s participation—rendered a decision as requested by the Antioch church. This point is important since some appeal to this passage as validation for usurping congregational authority by denominational entities.

A local congregation referred a matter to a sister church, requesting an answer to a question. It is appropriate that the decision would be communicated to the church that first referred the issue. Issues of doctrine are not private matters to be swept under the rug and kept out of sight. Instead, doctrinal issues should be openly addressed. Likewise, broad issues of ethics and morals should be openly presented so that all the membership knows the position of the church and can thus abide by that position. Churches would do well to adopt a sunlight policy to illuminate their doctrinal discussions. Membership must be informed of all issues of doctrine.

The assembly concluded that the Jerusalem Church had not authorised anyone to travel to Antioch; neither had the church authorised a new message concerning salvation. The issue was settled—salvation is by faith in the Risen, Living Christ. Additionally, the Jerusalem church commended Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, certifying their efforts in advancing the Faith. It is an admission that their labours among the Gentiles are no different from the labours exerted by Peter and John among the Jews. Did you hear this message? Salvation is free! The forgiveness of sin is free! Life in Christ is free!

Several applications of this letter are immediately suggested. The response of the Jerusalem leadership serves to **caution against instructing without congregational warrant**. Tell others of your faith; invite others to Christ and invite them to share in worship of the Living God. However, each member of this assembly must seriously consider the caution that James penned—likely, at some point soon after this conference. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” [JAMES 3:1].

Missionaries are not sent out by boards; Missionaries are sent forth by churches. Pastors are not appointed by denominations; rather pastors are appointed by God and received by the congregations. Whenever I speak in this community, because I am an elder of this congregation, I represent the congregation. No denominational leader should be permitted to address this congregation, or any congregation, because he decides it is his right to do so. The congregation decides who shall speak!

Precisely such an event occurred during my first pastorate here in Canada. A denominational serpent, a man who has since become a well-known writer, seized the opportunity to speak while I was away on holiday. He called a special meeting of the church; because he was a denominational leader, the people permitted him to lead the congregation in rescinding a series of prior decisions. I confronted him, telling him plainly to his face that he had violated basic Baptist doctrine, and his only defence was that it was necessary because “hindquarters” decided that it was required.

Again, the missive forwarded by the Apostles and elders serves as a reminder that **the strongest entity on this fallen earth is a congregation united in doctrine and in purpose**. The local church has power to advance the cause of Christ despite every obstacle, if the people are united in faith and if they work at maintaining the peace of Christ the Lord. The local congregation has power to build sister churches, when they speak with one voice and with one heart. This power arises from the promise of the Risen Son of God. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [MATTHEW 28:18-20].

Honesty compels me to caution that the power we enjoy as a congregation is firmly centred in our adherence to the Word of God. The experience of the apostles and elders was subject to the Word of God? We too often turn things around and make the Word subject to our experience. I recall a man who stood in a Deacons’ meeting and declared that if there was a conflict between the constitution of that church and the Word of God, the Deacons were obligated to obey the constitution because we were Canadian. He believed his thoughts were superior to the inerrant, infallible Word of the Living God! What a travesty of the Faith of Christ the Lord!

The final application as result of our study is leads me to remind each listener that **the final arbiter of faith and practise on this earth is the local congregation guided by the Bible**. Speaking of discipline administered by the congregation Jesus uttered an awesome truth to His disciples. “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them” [MATTHEW 18:18-20]. Though we frequently misapply the Master’s statement as though it served solely as a promise of answered prayer, the context demands that we apply it to discipline for unrepentant church members. Christ walks among the lampstands and His Spirit guides the church that seeks His will through submission to His will as revealed in the Word of God.

This question was asked—a question worthy of your deepest consideration. How can sin be forgiven? How can a person know God? What is necessary to have peace with God? What would you do to have peace with God? Would you believe? The hardest thing asked of us is to believe that Christ Jesus died because of our sin and that He was raised for our justification. Modern theologians are nonchalant about the Faith. Believe, after a fashion, and be saved, such as it were, or be damned in a measure, seems to be the timid call of modern churchmen.

However, the message of the Word of God is forthright, easily understood, and when it is received it is powerful to ensure the transformation of life. This is the message the Jerusalem church affirmed. This is the message we have preached. And this is the message we are charged to preach until Jesus returns to call us to Himself.

The Word of God offers life in the Son of God for all who believe. The Word promises all mankind, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’ [ROMANS 10:9-13].

Have you trusted Christ? Are you walking in obedience to His commands? This is the call we deliver to all who are willing to receive it. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” [ACTS 16:31]. May God preserve us as a congregation, and may He have the pre-eminence as we seek to walk according to His Word and as we submit ourselves to His reign. Amen.