

Text: Acts 15:1-5

Title: Doctrinal Storm Brewing

Truth: The early church had a serious doctrinal dispute over the matter of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. We too have to contend for the truth.

Date/Location: Wednesday 6/19/2013 and 6/26/2024, 7/3/2024

Introduction

Not everything was smooth sailing in the early church. We saw some problems associated with growth in Acts 6. Now we see some problems in the area of doctrine, caused by false views held by a faction in the church and occasioned by many Gentiles coming to faith. This incident shows how the leaven of false doctrine comes into the church, even and especially those times when there is fruitful ministry as there was in Syrian Antioch as well as through the missionary efforts of the church.

I. The False Teaching, v. 1

- A. Certain men came down from Judea—since Judea was in the hill country it was a downward journey no matter which compass direction they went out of the city. These men were apparently professing Christians but were what we would call “Judaizers” because they were from Judea and wanted to “Judaize” Christian doctrine to fit their emphasis on the Law of Moses.
- B. They came to the church(es) and taught the Christians. This is the way that false teaching is spread.
 1. Teaching doesn't necessarily come with a bright neon sign saying, “This is teaching” or “This is false teaching.” It can be in a sermon; it can be in a book; in a radio message; in a podcast; in just talking one-on-one with people; in home and small-group Bible studies; etc.
 2. They somehow wormed their way into the position to be able to teach. Hopefully we have enough of a fence around the pulpit that teachers with bad doctrine do not get into it. But sometimes there can be an oversight that allows someone to have influence on the church, to which we must be ready to respond.
- C. If we wanted to be very “charitable” in our initial approach, we could say that this was a “controversial teaching” instead of an out-and-out false teaching.
 1. This is because there was a transition time from the Law to Faith as the church was born and growing through infancy. There were

Jewish/Gentile issues; sacrifices were still ongoing at the temple; Jewish culture was strong; and none of the New Testament had been written.

2. Additionally, when we first hear a new teaching, we have to be cautious not to jump to conclusions too quickly. We ask questions, investigate, look up things, listen, etc. After a while we can form a less tentative and more firm conclusion.
 3. From our standpoint so many years later with so much clear Biblical revelation, we *should* be able to say with confidence that these men brought a *false* teaching. If genuinely followed, their teaching leads to destruction because it leads *away* from Jesus, not toward Him.
 4. We need to be able to do the same thing today. Collectively as a church we need to be able to discern false teaching, rebuke it, and maintain sound doctrine.
- D. Their false teaching was this: “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”
1. In other words, let's boil it down like this: “in order to be saved, you have to be circumcised.” Or, “salvation cannot be attained by faith alone; you must be circumcised.”
 2. The implication of their teaching was “you have to keep the whole Law of Moses to be saved, not just the circumcision part.” This is because if you break one part of the law, you break the whole thing (James 2:10, Gal. 5:3). See the last clause of Acts 15:5 to substantiate this understanding. They were trying to impose the large body of regulations from the Law upon a congregation that was made up of at least partly Gentiles who were never under the Law, and cannot now be placed under the jurisdiction of the regulatory function of the Law of Moses. And even if the congregation were entirely Jewish, their teaching would still be wrong! We are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).
- E. This message is so far off because it says nothing about believing in Christ or repentance from sin or turning to God. There is no language here that reflects the true doctrine of salvation. This is a departure from the only way of salvation. In other words, this *is* a false teaching, not just a *controversial* teaching!

II. Response to the False Teaching, v. 2

A. Individual Response

1. The response from Paul and Barnabas, who were prominent leaders in the Antioch Church, was not milquetoast (a very timid, unassertive, spineless person, especially one who is easily dominated or intimidated).
2. They engaged in dissension and dispute. In fact, it was “no small dissension and dispute.” Said another way, this was a huge debate. Luke does not record all the ins and outs of it, but we can hope that all parties conducted themselves in a Christian fashion during this debate. Usually it happens that one side, if not both, become angry and lash out at the other side. This is particularly true if one side is teaching false doctrine and is not truly saved. They do not have the Spirit of God to temper their emotions and conduct.
3. This is unlike the response of some today to false teaching. “Meh” (an interjection, often used as an expression of indifference or boredom). Who cares?

When I wrote this sermon originally in 2013, events at Northland Baptist Bible College were on the minds of some. Recently the former Northland Baptist Bible College has gone through a lot of changes, some good and some terrible. The institution's leadership is in upheaval. But with the new “softer” direction and blatantly contemporary music and openness to charismatic doctrine, it seems like a strong opposition response was called for. But, to remain “gentlemen,” the more conservative group left the governing board instead of standing against to the bad changes even if it threatened their financial support.

Taking a strong stand against wrong is not discordant with being a gentleman. In fact, walking away from a problem that you have responsibility to fix is not gentlemanly at all.

4. The truth is worth fighting for. Jude 3-4 tells us so. That text says “certain men.” It is always “certain men” who are the problem!
5. I think God uses this example of apostolic sternness to teach us a similar kind of approach. Christian men need to be Christian men, and not walk away from a “fight” over false doctrine.

B. Church-Wide Response

The Acts 15 issue was so important that the church leaders, and presumably the whole church, decided to send Paul and Barnabas and certain others to go up to Jerusalem to hash out the question.

Why go to the Jerusalem Church?

1. It was the other prominent church and the one in the area from which the false teachers had come.
2. There were many godly leaders there, mainly the apostles and elders.
3. Not because of hierarchy. I do not see the Jerusalem church as the mother church or “in charge” of all the other churches.
4. Because of the importance of the question. I see the two churches as peers, and the question is so important as to require a “universal church” wide response to the false doctrine to settle the issue once and for all.

The issue was settled, but unfortunately it and similar ones keep coming up again and again over the centuries.

5. Because of wisdom. The two churches were wise because they sought counsel of others.
 - a. Our “independence” is good in principle to protect us from overreach of a denomination and because that seems to be the way the churches operated in the New Testament.
 - b. But the independent mentality can put us in jeopardy of not seeking the reasonable, Christian wisdom of other brothers. They may have a different perspective than we do because God has led them through different experiences. They may have more wisdom than we do.
 - c. For example, when a church is in upheaval about an issue, or a pastor, it would be good for them to seek the advice of other godly leaders in other churches. Too often those in the church do not want to seek that, probably because the answer will not be to their liking and they want to run the show themselves. How quickly we as Christians can abandon the teaching of the Bible that only the fool ignores counsel when we are trying to answer the “practical” and difficult questions of church life (Proverbs 12:15).

III. Traveling to Jerusalem, v. 3-4

- A. The missionary team continued giving reports about Gentile conversions as they traveled to Jerusalem. What a contrast! They were focused on the work of the Lord while having to deal with this question. The early Judaizers (sect of the Pharisees) were focusing on what they thought was the required work of people.

- B. The missionary reports caused great joy among all the Christians who heard of God's work. This is like what we experience (or ought to) when we see successful missionary work around the world.
- C. They were warmly welcomed by the Jerusalem church and its leadership. Here is an example of how to receive our missionaries when they come.
- D. Another report of what God had done with them. We cannot emphasize enough that this phrase in v. 4 and the same one in 14:27 - "all that God had done with them" shows the true, underlying nature of the missionary endeavor. And that is that God is working through His servants to make disciples and gather them into churches. Missionary work is God's work first, our work second.

May I ask you this question: what is God doing with you these days?

IV. Conflict Reignites, v. 5

- A. It is at this point, when the missionaries reported what God was doing in the Gentile lands, that the doctrinal conflict came up again.
- B. Some Pharisees who professed faith in the Messiah stood up and basically offered an objection to what Paul and Barnabas were saying.

Feel the situation! Here is a meeting of the gathered church body listening to reports on the missionary activity of God, and someone stands up in the middle of the meeting with something negative to say. Immediately you get the feeling that something is about to happen. Then they contradict the account of the missionaries, give a strong and diametrically opposed alternative, and then seem almost to expect that the pair will go back and re-do the missionary work to "get it right" the second time. This is serious.

- C. The content of the objection was that those people among the Gentiles must be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses. This false teaching was not just about circumcision, but about the whole law-keeping methodology to getting and maintaining spiritual life.

The Pharisee-sect was mixing their old practices with the new beliefs and saying that one could not abandon those old beliefs...or actually, that one had to also *add* those old beliefs and practices. They thus showed a complete misunderstanding of the gospel.

D. Question: were the sect of the Pharisees who believed real believers or not?

1. I grant that in the formative phases of the early church, it was understandable that there could be some confusion. After all, the one who has been accustomed to the old wine will not immediately appreciate the new because he says the old is better (Luke 5:39).
2. Any confusion should quickly be cleared up in the real believer's mind when they are instructed in the right way. If the dispute continues for a long time, the person is being stubborn and giving evidence that they are not truly regenerated, because the mark of a true believer is that they will embrace the teaching of the Word of God.
3. Today there is no excuse for someone to believe the way the Pharisees taught in Acts 15:1, 5. The text of Scripture is very clear, both in the remainder of Acts 15 and in Romans and Galatians and elsewhere.
4. The jury is out on whether these Pharisees were really believers since we do not have an after-action evaluation on these particular men. They may have changed their mind, but they offer a pretty good case that they remained immovable in their view (“much dispute,” v. 7) and were only superficially believers. After all, if someone is so convinced that he will stand up and boldly contradict what someone else is saying, it is not often the case that such a person is easily swayed to the opposing view. And when standing up and boldly contradicting the *apostles* is even a bigger issue.

Conclusion

We have not yet seen how the total church responded to such division. But what we have seen is that even in the early church there were serious doctrinal issues that caused “politics” in the church. We ask God to keep such things away from us, but sometimes it happens in churches and it is necessary to lead through it. We also see that Paul was willing to contend for the faith delivered to the saints. He was not about to let the gospel Jesus revealed to him to be eclipsed by false teachers.

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