

Series: Turning the World Upside Down # 4

The Constraint of the Church

Acts 15: 7-12

This morning I would like to continue in the series: Turning the World Upside Down. Paul and Barnabas were making a significant impact for the Lord, reaching many who were lost, and even forcing those who rejected the Gospel to acknowledge that there was something different about their ministry. [These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also.](#)

This had not been an easy journey for Paul up to this point. There had been great victories, but they also faced determined opposition. In the previous chapter Paul was assumed to be a god, and yet when the Jews incited a riot, those who were ready to worship Paul turned on him, stoning him, believing him to be dead. God clearly had His hand upon Paul, and even an angry mob was unable to kill him. No doubt he was bruised and battered, but he continued his work for the Lord.

Our text this morning finds Paul and Barnabas back at Jerusalem among the believers. One would assume that things would have been relatively calm there, but opposition waited Paul in Jerusalem. Soon after his return, a great dispute broke out in the church at Jerusalem. Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James were all present and they all possessed godly restraint. It would have been easy to have become enraged with those who disputed with them, but they handled the situation with wisdom and care.

If you have served the Lord within the church for any length of time, I am sure that you are no stranger to disputes among the congregation. We are human and there are times when our humanity shows. Dispute and conflict will arise, but those who are successful in turning the world upside down for Jesus have learned how to handle these situations. Let's consider the [responses](#) surrounding the conflict in Jerusalem as we think on: [The Constraint of the Church.](#)

I. The Dispute Among the Assembly (7a) – [And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up...](#)We find there was much disputing. This doesn't appear to be a small disagreement, but a full blown confrontation. Let's look a bit closer. Notice:

A. The Origin of the Dispute (5) – [But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.](#) Really this should come as no surprise. Jesus had more problems with the Pharisees and religious elite than he did with those among the world. These were typically very legalistic and intolerant of those who had views different than their own. Sadly this confrontation originated by

those who were part of the assembly. These may have believed in Christ, but they were determined to have their way concerning their view as well.

- I have said many times that Satan often gets more credit than he deserves. In many parts of the world the church faces great opposition from without, but sadly in America most church conflict originates from within. If we are to be effective for the Lord, making a difference in our communities, there must be unity among the church. We will never reach the lost or increase membership if there is fussing and fighting among the church. Most people don't enjoy that type of environment and it certainly isn't inviting.

B. The Opinion of the Disgruntled (1, 5) – *And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.* ^[5] *But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.* These had apparently accepted the fact that Jesus was the Christ, Savior of the world, but they rejected the idea that faith in Him alone was sufficient to secure salvation. As we will see, this dispute concerned the Gentile believers, and the Pharisees wanted to force them to be circumcised in order to confirm and validate their salvation. Jesus had not taught this to be necessary and Paul was not placing that burden on new believers either. This was nothing more than a traditional preference. The Jews wanted the Gentiles to conform to Old Testament tradition. They placed tradition above the teaching of Christ.

- Many today are not effective in ministry because they are hung up on tradition. I am not opposed to tradition. In many ways it can be beneficial, but we cannot allow tradition to trump conviction. We must be willing to follow the leadership of the Lord even if it requires doing something differently. We cannot develop a preconceived notion regarding who is acceptable in the eyes of God and who isn't. We must be willing to engage and welcome all people into our services, seeking to reach them for Christ. There is no need in placing undue burdens upon those who need Christ just so they will conform to our ideas or preferences.

I. The Dispute among the Assembly (7a)

II. The Discernment of the Apostles (7-9) – Here we discover the discernment of the apostles through their measured response to those who were disgruntled. If we are to maintain a positive influence that is effective in ministry, we too need proper discernment when conflict arises. There are some fundamentals we must always consider. We find that Peter spoke of:

A. The Sovereignty of God (7) – *And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.* Peter reveals the reasoning behind their argument was futile. This was definitely not the work of man. God was sovereignly working through Paul and in the hearts of the Gentiles. They could try and refute the ministry of Paul if they desired, but they needed to know they were in fact working against the Lord as well.

- We need wisdom and grace to discern the will of God among us and properly respond to what He is doing around us. There is much that I am unsure of. I am not a biblical scholar, but I do know that Christ came into this world and gave His life a ransom for sinners. He desires to seek and save that which is lost. We would do well to draw nigh to Him, in such a way that we can discern what He is doing, and move forward with Him in an effort to evangelize the lost and encourage the believer. He will accomplish His purpose, whether we agree or not. He would gladly use us in ministry, but He doesn't have too!

B. The Salvation of the Gentiles (8) – *And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;* Peter revealed that God had ordained that the Gospel be taken to the Gentiles. He had used Peter to reach Cornelius and his house, as well as Paul and Barnabas to reach many Gentiles for Christ. They were from a different race of people and from different cultural backgrounds, but the grace of God had brought salvation to Gentile believers. The Gospel was preached unto them and they responded in salvation, receiving the Holy Ghost just as the Jewish believers had.

- As I considered these words, I was reminded that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no man comes to the Father except through Him. There are not many ways of salvation. God doesn't view people by race or class as we do. He sees them all as sinners in need of salvation. His offer of grace has been extended to all, and all can receive salvation through Christ Jesus! The drunk in the gutter is saved the same way a child raised in church is: by the grace of God. We would do well to remember that salvation is of the Lord and not of man's ability or devices. All who receive salvation come through Christ.

C. The Sanctification of the Gentiles (9) – *And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.* Many of the Jews were having a hard time accepting the fact that Gentiles had been made part of the family of God. They questioned their salvation, and likely had no intention of worshiping with them or allowing them to have part in their fellowship. Peter reminds them that God had saved them, and that He saw no difference in a born again Gentile than He did in a born again Jew. They were children of God through Christ. Their hearts had been purified by faith, literally cleansed of sin and defilement. Whether the Jews liked it or not, God accepted them.

- This really spoke to me as I considered seeking to make a difference for Christ in our day. There can be little doubt that our nation has come a long way in regard to racial equality, but there is still a sense of spiritual discrimination in the church. Many have their idea of whom God would save and whom He wouldn't. Sadly, in some congregations, certain believers are held at arm's length. They are never fully embraced as they should be.

- Let me be clear, there are no second class Christians! All who are born again are part of the family of God. We are all going to the same heaven and we serve the same Lord. Men may try and place separation among believers, but God doesn't. It isn't about our skin color, background or bank account. It isn't about where we work or whom we associate with. It is about being saved by the grace of God. If you are saved, every believer is your brother or sister in Christ! Fellowship embraces all who attend and we must continue to do so.

I. The Dispute among the Assembly (7a)

II. The Discernment of the Apostles (7-9)

III. The Declaration of the Apostles (10-12) – Here we find how Peter, Paul and Barnabas concluded their discussion concerning this dispute. They didn't resort to petty arguments, but offered biblical truth. We can learn from their wisdom. We find they discussed:

A. The Inability of the Law (10) – *Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?* Peter declared that it was unacceptable to force the Gentiles to bear a burden (keeping the law) that neither they nor their fathers were able to keep. This practice had not resulted in justification for the Jews and it wouldn't for the Gentiles either. There was no need to expect them to keep the law and Jewish tradition. God had not put that burden on them; He had offered grace!

- You will have to agree that this practice continues today. Many churches uphold the banner of Christ, preaching salvation through Him alone, and yet they shackle their people with undue burdens. Often tradition and long held opinions are held in the same regard as Scripture. I would never advocate abandoning biblical standards, but many today are bound by legalistic tradition.

B. The Security in the Lord (11) – *But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.* This must've enraged the legalist, but Peter declared the Gentile believers had received the same salvation as the Jews. They had come the same way and they

were just as saved, even without circumcision. Peter kept his focus on the primary objective, reaching souls for Christ. He refused to be sidetracked by this disagreement.

- Many churches today have lost focus of the objective and are ineffective for the Lord because they are consumed with petty disagreements. Much of what the church majors on today will not matter in eternity. May we keep our eyes on the Lord and our focus on the work He has given us. We cannot afford to allow insignificant disagreements hinder our labor for the lost!

C. The Testimony for the Lord (12) – [Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.](#)

Paul and Barnabas addressed the congregation to offer irrefutable evidence of the hand of God at work among the Gentiles. The Jews may have had an opinion, but Paul had facts. He had witnessed, firsthand, the miracles and wonders of God, resulting in the salvation of Gentiles. In the end, rather than arguing, Paul gave praise to the One who deserved it.

- The church can argue and fuss all it wants, but as the saying goes: the proof is in the pudding. Churches that are turning the world upside down for Jesus will experience tangible results through changed lives. I pray that we will draw nigh to the Lord so that we too can experience His presence and power. When He begins to move, we won't have to defend our position. We will then be able to point the doubters to the work of God and give Him the praise!

Conclusion: Churches will experience conflict from time to time. We are all human, and even at our best, our humanity will show at times. The key is how we handle those times. If we are to be effective in reaching the lost, we must keep our focus on the main objective. We can't afford to get bogged down in senseless disagreements.

Jesus is the only way of salvation. Apart from Him there is no hope. However, we need to be reminded that all who come to Him in salvation receive the same salvation we received. Our focus must be on working together for the glory of God and the good of our fellow man.

Maybe you are here today and you have not been saved. Maybe you feel as if your sin has taken you beyond salvation. That is exactly what the enemy wants you to believe. I can assure you, none are beyond the reach of God's grace. If He has spoken to you today, please respond to His call.