

Acts 15:1-1
Church Council
WRCoB 5.2.21

Last Sunday I ended the sermon
With the Ethiopian eunuch questioning Philip
As to whether he

Someone who because of his physically altered state
Someone not allowed to assemble with other believers

Whether he, an Ethiopian eunuch, could be baptized
And become a full-fledged church member.

We heard Philip respond.

*"I can think of all kinds of people
Who are going to be upset, but, yes.*

*I have no idea how the church leaders back in Jerusalem
Are going to react, but yes.*

*Because who am I to say no when it is clear
That God has already said yes."*

We saw Philip out there
Responding to the Holy Spirit's direction
Evangelizing and baptizing people

Without any thought of any possible ramifications
Back at church headquarters.

Now, in another part of the region
In what is now Turkey

Paul and Barnabas were doing the same thing
Baptizing folk as the Spirit led them

It was obvious to those who were witnesses
It was the work of the Lord.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem at church headquarters
Things were getting a bit tense.

The church leaders had their drawers in an uproar
What, with all these people groups joining the faith.

In response to what was happening
They sent a delegation from Jerusalem to Antioch
To confront these evangelists

Their concern was the absence of certain ritualistic acts
Namely genital mutilation for adult male converts.

The Jews called it circumcision
The Gentiles didn't want anything to do with it!

But . . .

**Acts 15:1b Unless you are circumcised according to the
custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.**

Paul and Barnabas saw things differently
Even though Paul himself was a Pharisee.

For they observed what was happening
Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit
Mass conversions were taking place

And there was little they could do
But look with wonder at the work of the Spirit.

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Upon the delegation's return and report
The General Offices called for Paul and Barnabas.

They were to immediately return to Jerusalem
And explain why they were going against
Church protocol.

And as they were returning
They shared what God was doing in Antioch
And everyone rejoiced, well, almost everyone.

The Jewish Christians leaders were beside themselves
Threatened by what was happening.

Stressed their Deuteronomic code was not followed
And what would happen next?

Worried that soon they would be outnumbered
And then what?

There were just too many changes happening.

There felt out of control.

And their feared that their vision of the church
As an outcropping of Judaism
Jews for Jesus, so to speak

Was changing into something they hadn't anticipated.

And they could not trust the work of the Holy Spirit.

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When all had arrived in Jerusalem
The church sat in council.

The delegates listened intently to what was going on
At the outlying regions of the Gospel's reach.

Many rejoiced at the enthusiasm of the new believers.

No matter, the conservative leaders stood at the mikes
And squelched any excitement with this statement

**Acts 8:5 The Gentiles must be circumcised and required
to obey the law of Moses.**

After a heated debate
Peter went to the microphone to speak.

It was God who sent him to the Gentiles
And it was God who declared no distinction
Between the Jewish and the Gentiles Christians.

Because it was not the physical act of circumcision
That saved a soul but faith that purified the heart.

Acts 15:10 “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of these disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

With that, the conference fell silent.

No one stood up to go to the microphones.

And in that silence, the Lord began to move hearts.

Paul and Barnabas continued to speak about what they saw.
And how lives were changed.

Spoke about individuals who came
To the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ
In tears of repentance
And shouts of joy in their salvation.

For you see, a change had taken place.

It changed when the deliberation moved
From the abstract subject of circumcision

To hearing the personal stories
Of the signs and wonders of the presence of God

James, the elder of the church in Jerusalem
Brother to Jesus himself
Then stood up to the microphone.

“What Paul and Barnabas has said is true.
It agrees with scripture.

God has been preparing for this moment

**Acts 15:17 so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been
called.**

**19 Therefore I have reached the decision that we should
not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.**

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It is interesting to see how hearts changed
When what they were discussing moved
From the abstract to the personal.

As long as they were talking dogma
They could argue fiercely about the rights and wrongs.

But as soon and you put a name with it
It begins to change things.

That what seems to have happened here
At the church council in Jerusalem.

They could argue until the cows came home
On the need for complete obedience to the laws of Moses

But when Paul and Barnabas started telling personal stories

When they started to talk about actual people
And how they were being transformed

Who could say no to that?

Signs and wonders that God had done through them.

Who could argue against that?

Some Jewish Christians will still have a problem
Sitting in the same pew as a Gentile Christian.

It may not have changed the views of everyone.

But the church leaders decided not to impede the progress
On the evangelistic outreach to the Gentiles

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So let's summarize what we are talking about.

1. People from different ethnic groups are coming to faith in increasing numbers. They believe as everyone believed that salvation comes through the grace and love of God in Jesus Christ.
2. The church leaders felt very strongly that circumcision was still a sign of the covenant between God and God's people. They demanded that all male believers continue to be circumcised if they want to be a part of the faith community.
3. Paul, Barnabas and Peter argued that they have witnessed the Holy Spirit transforming these people and they should not be required to follow circumcision for they believed it was genital mutilation.
4. James, a leader in the church provides a solution that allows the Jews to be Jews and Gentiles to be Gentiles. The two groups will be allowed to live and

worship as full-fledged Christians, all part of the one body of Christ.

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The Church of the Brethren

Was one of the first denominations to join
The World Council, National Council
And the state Councils of Churches.

We did so because we believed in the work of ecumenism.

We believed we were stronger together than separate.

We were and still are the only Anabaptist denomination
In these ecumenical organizations.

The others, like the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ
Chose not to join because they had trouble

Aligning with other Christians

Who thought and believed differently
On matters of faith and practice.

Since its conception, the history of Christianity
Is a history of schisms upon schisms.

Currently there are 45,000 denominations
In the world today.

Why are there 45,000 denominations today?

Namely, because we don't see eye to eye
With other churches, both theologically and socially.

And this, unfortunately,
Is occurring in our church denomination today.

A new denomination formed last fall.

It is named the Covenant Brethren Church.

Currently it boasts of 28 congregations
Plus two in the process of voting,

1800 members plus another 377
If the two congregations vote to join

And 52 newly ordained pastors.

All of these churches were Church of the Brethren.

Others have left the denomination to become independent.

According to Rev. Shumate, our District Executive
There are no longer any Church of the Brethren
In the state of Tennessee.

Why is this split occurring?

For several reasons

Issues surrounding human sexuality

The authority of the Bible

The authority of Annual Conference

Women in leadership

To name a few.

And whether or not I find myself
On one or the other side of the issue from you.

I want to ask whether it's possible
To acknowledge that we are not in agreement

BUT THAT, as we see with the church's struggle
During the time of the Jerusalem Council

Conclude
Like what James concluded
When he said

Acts 15:19 NLT

¹⁹ “And so [our] judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the (place the people group here) who are turning to God.

James provided a solution that allowed
The Jews to be Jews and Gentiles to be Gentiles.

The solution allowed the two groups
To live and worship as full-fledged Christians
All part of the one body of Christ.

Can't we not do the same?

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And so when I consider the question
Posed by the Ethiopian eunuch

“What prevents me from being baptized?”

Or when consider those Gentile Christians
Who refused to be circumcised

I would pray that we might, like Philip declare

*How can we say no when it is clear
That God has already said yes.”*