

In our passage last time we read about the conclusion of the first missionary journey. In spite of all of the opposition Paul and Barnabas encountered, their efforts were crucial to the establishment of the early church. The great truth the missionaries brought home to the church was that God had opened the door of faith to the gentiles. Jesus sacrifice covers the sins of all people, regardless of race, color, nationality, or background. Whoever believes the gospel, and receives Jesus into his or her heart, as Savior and Lord, will be saved.

This is the same message we carry today. It is the good news, and timeless truth, that offers hope, and eternal life, to all who believe. As we studied the text of the first missionary journey, we saw how God overcame all obstacles, so long as the missionaries were faithful. He provided for them, and protected them from the outside opposition, the same as He does for us today.

In our passage this evening, we will read of a new threat, one that comes from within the church. As we think about how the devil can work from inside to divide the church, I pray that we might gain some insights that will help us to preserve the integrity of our own fellowship, so that we might be able to always agree upon the gospel truth. Please read along with me, Acts 15:1-35.

The end of chapter 14 suggests that Paul and Barnabas had been back in Antioch a considerable time before this new opposition came to light. During that time they gave their personal testimonies of their missionary efforts. The central focus was on how the gentiles were being saved even though they had no association with Judaism. In Antioch, and in all of the churches visited between Antioch and Jerusalem, their personal testimony was received with great joy.

There were, however, some men of the party of the Pharisees who could not accept their testimony. They insisted that gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved. They had to be circumcised, and obey the Law of Moses. These Christian Pharisees opposed the whole concept of gentiles being saved, without first becoming one of them. We have seen repeated resistance and opposition from the Jews, but these were Jews who had been saved. People inside the church were unwilling to accept certain others as brothers and sisters in the faith.

Today there are far more gentile believers than there are Jewish believers, so this is not a problem in most churches. But the same spirit exists among Christian Pharisees to divide the church through dogma. While we must take biblical stands upon the truth, we must also guard against falling to the demon of dogma, by excluding others from Christian fellowship, who might not agree on some minor point of doctrine, apart from the gospel.

Jesus was God in the flesh. He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins, but arose in victory over sin and death. When we confess our sins to God, and turn from our sins to live for Him, when we receive Jesus into our hearts as Savior, and Lord, He forgives us, seals us with His Holy Spirit, and gives us eternal life. Through the Holy Spirit, and the word of God, Jesus directs our lives, giving us new meaning and purpose. We have God's instruction manual for life in the bible. The Holy Spirit interprets it for us, and helps us to apply its truths to our lives. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him.

If anyone holds to these truths, he or she is my brother or my sister in faith. There are other important doctrines we must consider, and we may have disagreements on some of these, but still maintain fellowship. We cannot, however, compromise on the gospel message.

Dogma today has many faces. As the Jews considered themselves to be God's only chosen people, there are others today who insist that you must become one of them in order to be saved. The Roman Catholic Church insists that you must be one of them, and a member in good standing, because only their church dispense the grace of God among believers. Some say that we must use only the King James. I had a man tell me that if a person surrendered their life in faith to Jesus Christ, and they were witnessed to using any other translation, that person was still lost in their sins. When I asked, "What about people who don't speak English, how are they saved?" "Do they have to learn English first, before they can be saved?" His answer was, "They can't be saved apart from the King James Version of the Bible.

I have had several people over the years tell me directly, or imply, that I am lost because I am not a member of the Church of Christ. Others have said that I am lost because I have not given evidence of the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues. Still others have said that I am lost because I do not agree with their particular understanding of eschatology. My testimony to you is that I have been born again apart from any consideration of these doctrines that divide us, and prevent others from coming to Christ in faith.

We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone. His Holy Spirit confirms our salvation, and none of the "isms," and schisms have anything to do with salvation, and the pure gospel message. We cannot add to the gospel message, nor can we compromise the gospel message by leaving out portions of the truth. A watered down gospel is no gospel at all. If we want to come to God we must submit to His clear terms, and His authority over our lives.

The bible says that the Apostles and Elders gathered together to consider the matter. Whenever questions of doctrine arise today, it is good that we consider the matter. We do not have to reinvent the wheel every time someone challenges our convictions, but we must be open to the possibility that someone else could have an insight that might help us to grow in our understanding, and relationship with the Lord. The question becomes, how do we discern what we should believe.

The bible says that as they traveled to Jerusalem, they shared with the believers along the way that the gospel had been opened to the gentiles, and the people rejoiced. We cannot just follow the crowd, but when large groups of Spirit filled believers see the truth in a doctrine, it is an indication that we need to look closely at the claims of that doctrine. This is what the apostles and elders in Jerusalem did. They debated the question, not to argue, but to arrive at the truth. Has God really opened salvation to the gentiles or not? Can a person really be saved apart from Jewish law?

At this point Peter arose and gave his personal testimony that this was nothing new. Peter had already told them of his experience with Cornelius and his family. The people in that family received the Holy Spirit. They were born again, without becoming Jews, and without strict obedience to the law. Then he made this statement in verse 10, "Why, then, are you now testing God by putting on the disciple's necks a yoke that neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear?"

This actually goes to the core of the gospel message. If strict obedience to the law could save a person, Jesus would not have had to sacrifice Himself. The foundation to the doctrine of sin is that it is impossible for anyone to perfectly keep the law, so everyone is a sinner. Jews are just as much sinners as gentiles, and everyone finds forgiveness the same way: through faith in Jesus Christ. As an Apostle, and a leader, in the early church, Peter's testimony had to be considered in the debate.

Peter's words' silenced the group and prepared their hearts and minds to listen to the testimony of Barnabas and Paul. Notice that Luke mentions Barnabas' name first, indicating that he was the primary speaker on this occasion. The missionaries not only spoke of the conversion of the gentiles, they shared how God allowed them the use of signs and wonders to lead the gentiles to receive Jesus and the gospel message in faith.

To support this new doctrine, we have the evidence of what God has done in the lives of the people who were being saved. We have the evidence of the miracles, the work of the Holy Spirit, and a general realization, and acceptance among the people of faith, along with the personal testimonies of the key leaders in the church.

Today, when all of these elements come together, it is strong evidence to support a proclaimed doctrine; but even then, there is one more test, more important than all of the others. Does this doctrine agree with the principles of the word of God?

Since we read earlier that James the Apostle had been martyred, we understand that this is James who was the half-brother of Jesus, and a principle leader in the church in Jerusalem. He is also the author of the book that bears his name. When James arose to address the crowd, he quoted a passage from Amos chapter 9, and saw its fulfillment in what they were discussing. God would keep for himself a remnant, not just from among the Jews, but a remnant made up of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

I do not want to diminish the importance of all of the previously mentioned witnesses to the truth, but as for any doctrine to be true, it has to pass the test of scripture. Scripture alone is sufficient evidence to what is true and what is not true, but because there can be so many different interpretations of scripture, based upon what a person has been taught, these other elements help us to have discernment about how to properly, and accurately, interpret, and apply the word of God.

Whenever someone introduces us to a doctrine that does not seem exactly right, we should always respectfully ask, "Show me that in the bible." All we really want to do is to know the truth: right? The bible is our source of absolute truth. In a world of relative truth, political correctness, and godlessness, we are blessed to have the word of God so that we can know what to believe, and how to live.

The result of the missionaries' trip to Jerusalem was that the church agreed that Jesus died for the gentiles, and they were saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the same as the Jews. Once they had the discernment they needed, they spread the truth to the other churches, that God had indeed opened the gospel to the Gentiles. But in their letter, they urged the gentiles to abstain from certain practices that were considered to be morally corrupt. We understand, today, that God's word promotes sexual purity, and condemns any perversion of what God has established: one man one woman in a marriage relationship for a lifetime. Things polluted by idols, strangled animals, and drinking blood, are less common concerns in our world today, but all of these were associated with pagan worship in biblical times. The principle for the church today is to have fidelity in our faith, and to avoid any appearance of evil, or godlessness.

While salvation is a matter of God's grace, something that we can neither earn nor deserve, our commitment to Christ comes with a commitment to God's moral standards, expressed in the way we live, and how we treat others. When we are truly born again, we cannot live as we once did. Since God has forgiven us of our sins, we have an obligation to try to live in victory over sin, to the glory of God, and as a witness to the world that faith Jesus really makes a difference in a person's life.

Along with Paul and Barnabas, the church sent others to share their decision with the churches. A man named Silas was one of them, and is important, as he will be Paul's partner on his second missionary journey. The church in Antioch received the decision with joy, and was encouraged by the findings. God blessed the church at Antioch as they focused on the preaching and teaching of God's word.

Here at HHBC, we focus all of our efforts at teaching, preaching, and ministry, on the contextual word of God. This is the biblical model for the church. I am sure that on some issues of doctrine we have not yet arrived at a full understanding of the perfect truth, but that is our goal. The doctrines that we hold dear are those truths that God has developed in our hearts as convictions, and we stand upon those convictions, and the truth of God's word, no matter what the world around us might say. It isn't always easy, but the truth is always the truth. The core of the truth we proclaim is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. He died for our sins, but arose from the grave. He offers forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who will believe. If you need help to know how to come to Jesus in faith, we will be happy to answer your questions.