

Series: "Church the Way It's Supposed to Be"

Sermon #13

"Some Things Are Worth Fighting For"

Acts 15

Introduction: I have come to learn that there are some things that are worth fighting for. We should fight for our families, we should fight for our future, and there may come times when we should fight for our friends.

However, if there was ever anything worth fighting for it should be our faith. We should stand toe-to-toe with liberal theologians, or the devil himself, when it comes to such matters as the inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the blood atonement for sin, and the fact that Jesus Christ is the ONLY way to Heaven.

Today, we are bombarded with religious ideologies such as Inclusivism and Pluralism. Inclusivism states that since Jesus died for everyone, then everyone will be saved; thus, no one will go to hell. If everyone is not saved, and people do go to hell, then Jesus' death was a failure.

Pluralism is based on the premise that there are multiple, or a plurality of ways for a person to get to Heaven. It teaches that Jesus Christ is "A" way, in fact a good way; but, He is not the ONLY way to Heaven.

Pluralism advocates that we can all be traveling down different roads, but, at the end of the way, all roads will dead end in the same place called Heaven.

Yet, the only problem with those beliefs is that they have crept out of the pit of Hell itself, with no Biblical basis whatsoever. Furthermore, anyone who advocates such thinking doesn't have to worry about the roads to Heaven, because they aren't on THE road to Heaven.

Another battle that has trickled its way down through the years is what we often refer to as a "Works Based Salvation." This ideology infers that it is not grace alone that saves, but grace plus works.

The interesting thing about this battle is that it was being fought in Acts 15. The gospel has spread from Jerusalem, in Acts 1-7, to Judea and Samaria, in Acts 8-9, to the Gentiles or the "uttermost part" of the world, in Acts 10.

Yet, in Acts 15, the message of the gospel of grace stands at a major crisis. Thus, the early apostles, disciples and Christians learned firsthand that some things are worth fighting for.

The Dispute (15:1-5)

The Defense (15:6-18)

- Peter reviewed the past (vv. 6-11)
- Paul and Barnabas reported on the present (v. 12)
- James related it all to the future (vv. 13-18)

The Decision (15:19-35)

- First... it strengthened the unity of the church
- Second... it helped the church present a united witness to the lost Jews
- Third... it brought blessing to other churches as the letter was shared

1. The Dispute (15:1-5)

It all started when some legalistic Jewish teachers came to Antioch and taught that the Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. These men were associated with the Jerusalem congregation but not authorized by it (Acts 15:24). Identified with the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), these teachers were "false brethren" who wanted to rob both Jewish and Gentile believers of their liberty in Christ (Gal. 2:1-10; 5:1ff.). It is not surprising that there were people in the Jerusalem church who were strong advocates of the law of Moses but ignorant of the relationship between law and grace. These people were Jews who had been trained to respect and obey the law of Moses, and after all, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews had not yet been written! There was a large group of priests in the

Jerusalem assembly (Acts 6:7), as well as people who still followed some of the Old Testament practices (see Acts 21:20–26). It was a time of transition, and such times are always difficult. What were these legalists actually doing and why were they so dangerous? They were attempting to mix law and grace and to pour the new wine into the ancient brittle wineskins (Luke 5:36–39). They were stitching up the rent veil (Luke 23:45) and blocking the new and living way to God that Jesus had opened when He died on the cross (Heb. 10:19–25). They were rebuilding the wall between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus had torn down on the cross (Eph. 2:14–16). They were putting the heavy Jewish yoke on Gentile shoulders (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1) and asking the church to move out of the sunlight into the shadows (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 10:1). They were saying, “A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian! It is not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses!” Several important issues are involved here, not the least of which is the work of Christ on the cross as declared in the message of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1–8; Heb. 10:1–18). God pronounces a solemn anathema on anyone who preaches any other gospel than the gospel of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ His Son (Gal. 1:1–9).

When any religious leader says, “Unless you belong to our group, you cannot be saved!” or, “Unless you participate in our ceremonies and keep our rules, you cannot be saved!” he is adding to the gospel and denying the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians to make it clear that salvation is wholly by God’s grace, through faith in Christ, *plus nothing!* Another issue involved was the nature of the church’s missionary program. If these legalists (we call them “the Judaizers”) were correct, then Paul and Barnabas had been all wrong in their ministry. Along with preaching the gospel, they should have been teaching the Gentiles how to live as good Jews. No wonder Paul and Barnabas debated and disputed with these false teachers (Acts 15:2, 7)! The Antioch believers were being “troubled” and “subverted” (Acts 15:24), and this same confusion and disruption would soon spread to the Gentile churches Paul and Barnabas had founded. This was a declaration of war that Paul and Barnabas could not ignore. God gave Paul a revelation instructing him to take the whole matter to the Jerusalem church leaders (Gal. 2:2), and to this the Antioch assembly agreed (“they” in Acts 15:2). The gathering was not a “church council” in the denominational sense, but rather a meeting of the leaders who heard the various groups and then made their decision. Though the “mother church” in Jerusalem did have great influence, each local church was autonomous.

2. The Defense (15:6–18)

It appears that at least four different meetings were involved in this strategic conference: (1) a public welcome to Paul and his associates, Acts 15:4; (2) a private meeting of Paul and the key leaders, Galatians 2:2; (3) a second public meeting at which the Judaizers presented their case, Acts 15:5–6 and Galatians 2:3–5; and (4) the public discussion described in Acts 15:6ff. In this public discussion, four key leaders presented the case for keeping the doors of grace open to the lost Gentiles.

Peter reviewed the past (vv. 6–11). We get the impression that Peter sat patiently while the disputing (“questioning”) was going on, waiting for the Spirit to direct him. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Prov. 18:13). Peter reminded the church of four important ministries that God had performed for the Gentiles, ministries in which he had played an important part. First, God made a choice that Peter should preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7). Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom to Peter (Matt. 16:19), and he had used them to open the door of faith to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17), and the Gentiles (Acts 10). The apostles and brethren in Judea had censured Peter for visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, but he had satisfactorily defended himself (Acts 11:1–18). Note that Peter made it clear that Cornelius and his household were saved by hearing and believing, not by obeying the law of Moses. Second, God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles to bear witness that they truly were born again (Acts 15:8). Only God can see the human heart; so, if these people had not been saved, God would never have given them the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). But they did not receive the Spirit by keeping the law, but by believing God’s Word (Acts 10:43–46; see Gal. 3:2). Peter’s message was “whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43 nkjv), not “whoever believes and obeys the law of Moses.” Third, God erased a difference (Acts 15:9, 11). For centuries, God had put a difference between Jews and Gentiles, and it was the task of the Jewish religious leaders to protect and maintain that difference (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23). Jesus taught that the Jewish dietary laws had nothing to do with inner holiness (Mark 7:1–23), and Peter had learned that lesson again when he had that vision on the housetop in Joppa (Acts 10:1ff.). Ever since the work of Christ on Calvary, God has made no difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as sin (Rom. 3:9, 22) or salvation (Rom. 10:9–13) are concerned. Sinners can have their hearts purified only by faith in Christ; salvation is not by keeping the law

(Acts 15:9). We would expect Peter to conclude his defense by saying, "They [the Gentiles] shall be saved even as we Jews," but he said just the reverse! "We [Jews] shall be saved, even as they!" God's fourth ministry—and this was Peter's strongest statement—was the removing of the yoke of the law (Acts 15:10). The law was indeed a yoke that burdened the Jewish nation, but that yoke has been taken away by Jesus Christ (see Matt. 11:28–30; Gal. 5:1ff.; Col. 2:14–17). After all, the law was given to the Jewish nation to protect them from the evils of the Gentile world and prepare them to bring the Messiah into the world (Gal. 4:1–7). The law cannot purify the sinner's heart (Gal. 2:21), impart the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2), or give eternal life (Gal. 3:21). What the law could not do, God did through His own Son (Rom. 8:1–4). Those who have trusted Christ have the righteousness of God's law in their hearts and, through the Spirit, obey His will. They are not motivated by fear, but by love, for "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:8–10).

Paul and Barnabas reported on the present (v. 12). Peter's witness made a great impact on the congregation because they sat in silence after he was finished. Then Paul and Barnabas stood up and told the group what God had done among the Gentiles through their witness. Dr. Luke devoted only one summary sentence to their report since he had already given it in detail in Acts 13–14. Paul and Barnabas were greatly respected by the church (see Acts 15:25–26), and their testimony carried a great deal of weight. Their emphasis was on the miracles that God had enabled them to perform among the Gentiles. These miracles were proof that God was working with them (Mark 16:20; Acts 15:4) and that they were God's chosen messengers (Rom. 15:18–19; Heb. 2:24). "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" (Gal. 3:5 niv). They had preached grace, not law, and God had honored this message. If you will review the record of the first missionary journey (Acts 13–14), you will see that the emphasis is on what God did in response to men's faith. See Acts 13:8, 12, 39, 41, 48; 14:1, 22–23, 27. Note also the emphasis on grace (Acts 13:43; 14:3, 26). God opened for the Gentiles "the door of faith," not "the door of law." For that matter the Antioch church, which commissioned Paul and Barnabas, was founded by people who "believed and turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21) and experienced the grace of God (Acts 11:23). They were saved the same way sinners are saved today, "by grace, through faith" (Eph. 2:8–9). Both Peter and Paul received from God special visions directing them to go to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1ff.; 22:21). However, it was Paul whom God set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles

(Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:6–10; Eph. 3:1–12). If Gentile sinners had to obey the law of Moses in order to be saved, then why did God give Paul the gospel of grace and send him off to the Gentiles? God could just as well have sent Peter! Peter reviewed God's ministries to the Gentiles in the past, and Paul and Barnabas reported on God's work among the Gentiles in that present day. James was the final speaker, and he focused on the future.

James related it all to the future (vv. 13–18). James was a brother to Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Gal. 1:19) and the writer of the epistle of James. He and his brethren were not believers in Christ until after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14). James had strong leanings toward the law (there are at least ten references to law in his epistle), so he was most acceptable to the legalistic party in the Jerusalem church. The key idea in James' speech is *agreement*. First, he expressed his full agreement with Peter that God was saving the Gentiles by grace. It must have startled the Judaizers when James called these saved Gentiles "a people for his [God's] name," because for centuries the Jews had carried that honorable title (see Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 28:10). Today, God is graciously calling out a people, the church, from both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the Greek word for "church" (*ekklesia*) means "a called-out assembly" (*kaleo* = to call; *ek* = out). But if they are called out, then their salvation is all of grace and not through the keeping of the law! The Judaizers did not understand how the Gentiles and the Jews related to each other in the church, or how the church fit into God's promise to establish a kingdom for Israel. The Old Testament declared both the salvation of the Gentiles (Isa. 2:2; 11:10) and the future establishing of a glorious kingdom for Israel (Isa. 11–12; 35; 60), but it did not explain how they related to each other. The legalists in the church were jealous for both the future glory of Israel and the past glory of Moses and the law. It seemed to them that their acceptance of the Gentiles as "spiritual equals" jeopardized the future of Israel. We today have a better grasp of this truth because Paul explained it in Ephesians 2–3 and Romans 9–11. Saved Jews and Gentiles are both members of the same body and "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The truth about the church, the body of Christ, was a "mystery" (a sacred secret) hidden in past ages and revealed to the church by the Spirit. God's "mystery program" for the church does not cancel His great "prophecy program" for Israel. Paul makes it clear in Romans 9–11 that there is a future for Israel and that God will keep His "kingdom promises" to His people. James stated that the prophets also agreed with this conclusion, and he cited Amos 9:11–12 to prove his point. Note that he did not state that what Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had said was a

fulfillment of this prophecy. He said that what Amos wrote *agreed with their testimony*. A careful reading of Amos 9:8–15 reveals that the prophet is describing events in the end times, when God will regather His people Israel to their land and bless them abundantly. If we “spiritualize” these promises, we rob them of their plain meaning and James’ argument falls apart. Amos also prophesied that the fallen house (“tent”) of David would be raised up and God would fulfill His covenant with David that a king would sit on his throne (see 2 Sam. 7:25–29). This future King, of course, will be Jesus Christ the Son of David (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Isa. 9:6–7; Luke 1:32), who will reign over Israel during the kingdom. In fact, the only Jew alive today who can prove His genealogy and defend His kingship is Jesus Christ! God revealed these truths gradually to His people, but His plan had been settled from the beginning. Neither the cross nor the church were afterthoughts with God (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; Eph. 1:4). The Judaizers thought that Israel had to “rise” in her glorious kingdom before the Gentiles could be saved, but God revealed that it was through Israel’s “fall” that the Gentiles would find salvation (Rom. 11:11–16). At the time of the Jerusalem Conference, David’s house and throne indeed were fallen, but they would be restored one day and the kingdom established.

3. The Decision (15:19–35)

The leaders and the whole church (Acts 15:22), directed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), made a twofold decision: a doctrinal decision about salvation, and a practical decision about how to live the Christian life. The doctrinal decision we have already examined. The church concluded that Jews and Gentiles are all sinners before God and can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. There is one need, and there is but one gospel to meet that need (Gal. 1:6–12). God has today but one program: He is calling out a people for His name. Israel is set aside but not cast away (Rom. 11:1ff.), and when God’s program for the church is completed, He will begin to fulfill His kingdom promises to the Jews. But all doctrine must lead to duty. James emphasized this in his epistle (James 2:14–26), and so did Paul in his letters. It is not enough for us simply to accept a biblical truth; we must apply it personally in everyday life. Church problems are not solved by passing resolutions, but by practicing the revelations God gives us from His Word. James advised the church to write to the Gentile believers and share the decisions of the conference. This letter asked for obedience to two *commands* and a willingness to agree to two personal *concessions*. The two commands were

that the believers avoid idolatry and immorality, sins that were especially prevalent among the Gentiles (see 1 Cor. 8–10). The two concessions were that they willingly abstain from eating blood and meat from animals that had died by strangulation. The two commands do not create any special problems, for idolatry and immorality have always been wrong in God’s sight, both for Jews and Gentiles. But what about the two concessions concerning food? Keep in mind that the early church did a great deal of eating together and practicing of hospitality. Most churches met in homes, and some assemblies held a “love feast” in conjunction with the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34). It was probably not much different from our own potluck dinners. If the Gentile believers ate food that the Jewish believers considered “unclean,” this would cause division in the church. Paul dealt clearly with this whole problem in Romans 14–15. The prohibition against eating blood was actually given by God before the time of the law (Gen. 9:4), and it was repeated by Moses (Lev. 17:11–14; Deut. 12:23). If an animal is killed by strangulation, some of the blood will remain in the body and make the meat unfit for Jews to eat. Hence, the admonition against strangulation. “Kosher” meat is meat that comes from clean animals that have been killed properly so that the blood has been totally drained from the body. It is beautiful to see that this letter expressed the loving unity of people who had once been debating with each other and defending opposing views. The legalistic Jews willingly gave up insisting that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, and the Gentiles willingly accepted a change in their eating habits. It was a loving compromise that did not in any way affect the truth of the gospel. As every married person and parent knows, there are times in a home when compromise is wrong, but there are also times when compromise is right. Wise Samuel Johnson said, “Life cannot subsist in society but by reciprocal concessions.” The person who is always right, and who insists on having his or her own way, is difficult to live with happily. What did this decision accomplish in a practical way? At least three things.

First, it strengthened the unity of the church and kept it from splitting into two extreme “law” and “grace” groups. President Eisenhower called the right kind of compromise “all of the usable surface. The extremes, right or left, are in the gutters.” Again, this is not *doctrinal* compromise, for that is always wrong (Jude 3). Rather, it is learning to give and take in the practical arrangements of life so that people can live and work together in love and harmony.

Second, this decision made it possible for the church to present a united witness to the lost Jews (Acts 15:21). For the most part, the church was still identified with the Jewish synagogue, and it is likely that in some cities, entire synagogue congregations believed on Jesus Christ—Jews, Gentile proselytes, and Gentile “God-fearers” together. If the Gentile believers abused their freedom in Christ and ate meat containing blood, this would offend both the saved Jews and their unsaved friends whom they were trying to win to Christ. It was simply a matter of not being a stumbling block to the weak or to the lost (Rom. 14:13–21).

Third, this decision brought blessing as the letter was shared with the various Gentile congregations. Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas, took the good news to Antioch, and the church rejoiced and was encouraged because they did not have to carry the burdensome yoke of the law (Acts 15:30–31). On his second missionary journey, Paul shared the letter with the churches he had founded on his first missionary journey. The result was a strengthening of the churches’ faith and an increase of their number (Acts 16:5). We today can learn a great deal from this difficult experience of the early church. To begin with, problems and differences are opportunities for growth just as much as temptations for dissension and division. Churches need to work together and take time to listen, love, and learn. How many hurtful fights and splits could have been avoided if only some of God’s people had given the Spirit time to speak and to work.

1. EXPOSE MAN'S Work of RELIGION!

Anyone who has been married any length of time knows what it means to have a dispute. I think of one fellow who said, "I get the last word in every argument. But, anything that I say after that begins a new argument."

A couple of men were having a "man's night out," when one man noticed the late hour. He said, "I've got to get home." His friend said, "What are you talking about, it's still early?" The man said, "You don't understand. If I don't get home now, my wife will become historical."

His friend said, "Don't you mean hysterical?" The man said, "No, I mean historical. She will start bringing up every thing I have done wrong in the past 30 years."

The truth of the matter is that disputes are not just reserved for marriage, but many churches have them as well. Such is the case in Acts 15. There is a dispute over the basic fundamentals of the faith, and this dispute, at this time, totally ensnared the faith of these early believers.

This dispute was started because of man's work of religion, and the disciples were obligated to expose it. In their fight, they discovered:

A) The BASIS of Religion

The entire basis of this dispute is described in verse 1. ***"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."***

In other words, this whole dispute started when some legalistic Jewish teachers came to Antioch and taught that in order for the Gentiles to be saved, they had to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

Most scholars date this Jerusalem conference somewhere around A. D. 48. At this time, the primary development was the spread of the Christian faith to the Gentiles.

At first, all believers were Jewish. 3000 Jews were converted at Pentecost, in Acts 2. Another 2000 were converted at the Temple in Acts 3. And by the

time of Stephen's death, many believe that the Jerusalem church had exploded to some 10-12,000 members, all of whom were Jewish.

However, after the death of Stephen the door of salvation swung open to the Gentiles. By the time the church was established in Antioch, a great number of Gentiles had come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

This presented a vexing problem to the conservative Jewish Christians, because before long, if things continued, there would be more Gentile believers than Jewish believers.

Thus, these Jewish teachers came up with a fix-all solution: Gentiles should only be admitted to the church on terms similar to those required of proselytes to Judaism.

In other words, their teaching advocated that in order for a Gentile to become a Christian, they must be circumcised, and assume the obligation to keep the Mosaic Law, just like an orthodox Jew.

Up until this point the message of the disciples was salvation by grace through faith. It was the same message that had been preached from Pentecost to Antioch. However, now that message was being mixed with salvation by grace through faith plus works. And those 2 do not mix.

These Jewish teachers were basically saying, "We can live with your teachings of grace, but only if you will live with our teachings of grace plus circumcision, or grace plus works."

R. Kent Hughes states that the message of the Jewish teachers was that, *"If Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become a Hebrew first. How else could he know the full meaning and purpose of God? The Pharisee Christians banded together to make sure that no one slipped by Mount Sinai on the way to Mount Calvary."* [1]

Yet, if this conference was held in A. D. 48, today some 1958 years later, this same teaching is prevalent among many religious circles. There are churches today that teach such false doctrines as 'baptismal regeneration,' or salvation through the "sacraments."

I know many Baptists who advocate a "Works Based Salvation." You would never get them to admit it, much less see it; but, they place so much emphasis on works that they are basically saying, "You get saved by grace, but you stay saved by works, because if a person is really saved they will follow the list of 'Do's' and 'Don'ts.'"

Because I was raised in it, I know what I am talking about. I know preachers, and churches, to this day, who basically say that if a man is saved he will wear his hair 6 inches above his collar, no jewelry, no facial hair and no television.

If a woman is saved she will wear her hair to the sky, her dress to the ground, and if she wears pants, or makeup, she is a borderline apostate.

Recently, someone asked me, "Pastor, is it a sin for a woman to wear make-up?" I answered, "Ma'am, it's a sin for some women not to wear make-up!"

The only problem is that long hair, short hair, dresses, pants, or make-up will not get a person into heaven; nor, will it keep a person out of Heaven. This was the hand that the early believers were dealt when it came to the fundamental doctrines of grace, and the hand is still being played today.

With the basis of religion comes:

B) The BURDEN of Religion

Apparently, this new teaching created great waves of doubt in Gentile minds, because James refers to it in verse 24, "**certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment.**"

The word "subverting" literally means, "To pack up baggage." In other words, this new teaching of "grace plus circumcision" simply added heavy, unnecessary baggage to the faith of these believers. That is what religion does every single time.

I love Warren Wiersbe's commentary, "*These legalists were attempting to mix Law and grace and to pour new wine into the ancient wineskins. They were stitching up the rent veil, and blocking the new and living way to God opened*

up by Jesus' death on the Cross. They were rebuilding a wall between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus had already torn down through His death. They were putting the heavy Jewish yoke on weak Gentile shoulders, and asking the church to move out of the sunlight into the shadows." [2]

Simply put, the platform upon which these legalistic Judaizers were standing was that **a Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian.** And, the way that a Gentile becomes a Jew is by following the tenets of the Jewish law.

This new wave of religion enraged Paul and Barnabas, to the point that they left Antioch to go back to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders, and straighten out the situation.

But, in verse 5, when they arrived in Jerusalem, "**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.**"

Ironically enough, this same battle, between Law and grace, would be fought by the apostle Paul for a number of years. As a result, by the time we come to the book of Galatians, the battle is at its height, as Paul refutes the damnable doctrine of the Judaizers who sought to "**frustrate the grace of God.**"

He drops the bombshell on these teachers in Galatians 1: 9, "**If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, LET HIM BE ACCURSED.**"

Thus, you can rest assured that whenever someone stands up and says things like, "Unless you belong to our group, or unless you participate in the sacraments, and ceremonies of our church, you cannot be saved;" you can write the word "Anathema" over their head.

They are accursed because they are preaching a message that cannot be and will not be supported by the gospel of grace found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Remember this: if a person is wrong about Jesus, they will be wrong about everything else! Why? Because it is not Jesus plus anything; it is not Jesus minus anything, IT IS JUST JESUS!

Exposing man's work of religion was something worth fighting for then, and it's still something worth fighting for now. And, in order to expose man's work of religion, we must:

2. EXPOUND GOD'S Work of REDEMPTION!

I want to share something with you that cause my stomach to turn when I read it. On November 3, 2006, Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori was installed as the first female presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church USA.

However, that is not the most shocking part. In an Associated Press interview, Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori stated that, *"that Christians should not say that Jesus is the only way to God."* She disagrees with the idea that salvation comes only through trusting in Jesus Christ, but instead salvation comes as the *"healing of all Creation through holy living."* She concludes, *"If we insist we know the one way to God, we've put God in a very small box."* [3]

However, what she forgot to mention by the "very small box," is that **IT IS GOD'S BOX!** He is the One who made the rules of the game, and the rules state that Jesus is ***"the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man cometh to the Father but by me!"***

Man's work of religion was simply "adding baggage" to the faith of these new believers. These Gentiles had been saved by grace, but they were being taught that to really be saved, they didn't just have to come to Jesus; they had to become a Jew.

Thus, a decision had to be made. Either Peter, Paul, Barnabas or James build their house on the sand, and succumb to this divisive and deceptive doctrine; or, they stand on the Rock of Ages.

Paul and Barnabas come back to hold the Jerusalem conference to clear up the waters that had been muddied, and make a decision that involved 2 fundamental truths.

First of all, they made a decision as to:

A) What is REQUIRED for Salvation

The Jerusalem conference convenes as Peter takes the stage to give his apologetic defense of the faith. In his statement, recorded in verses 7-11, Peter outlines that the work of salvation is, first and foremost, **a work of God.**

Peter says in verses 7-9, ***"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. [8] And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; [9] And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."***

Peter had taken the "keys of the kingdom," given to him in Matthew 16 by the Lord Jesus and he opened the door of faith to the Jews, as well as the Gentiles.

He testifies of the work he had seen God do in *"purifying their hearts by faith."* Whose hearts? The hearts of both Jews and Gentiles, because God had *"put no difference between them."*

In his own way, Peter was reiterating the divine statement of Jonah during his stay in the Whale-A-Day Inn, in Jonah 2: 9, ***"SALVATION IS OF THE LORD."***

In other words, salvation could not be acquired, attained or achieved through circumcision, or any other man-made religious work. Salvation is not a work man can do for God, but it is a work God can only do for man. Religion is man's attempt to get to God; but, salvation is God's attempt to get to man.

If someone could buy salvation, how much would be enough? If someone could earn salvation, how much would they have to do? The answer to those questions is that there is no answer. Salvation is a work of God.

And, because it is a work of God, it must be **a work of grace.** In verse 10, Peter accuses these false teachers of ***"putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples"*** that no one was ***"able to bear."***

Then, he drops the bombshell to silence the critics in verse 11. ***“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.”***

In other words, what is required for salvation? The answer is ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! Everything has already been taken care of, and provided for by the work of God, and the work of grace. For a person to be saved, they don't need to try, THEY JUST NEED TO TRUST!

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about? He asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's grace free and unconditional. [4]

A poet can take a scrap piece of paper, write a few words on it, call it a poem and make it worth hundreds of dollars: that's Skill. An artist can take a \$5 piece of canvas, paint a breathtaking picture, call it art, and make it worth thousands of dollars: that's Art.

A financier can take a bankrupt company, restructure it and make it worth millions of dollars, that's Genius. But, **only God can take a good-for-nothing, hell-bound, hell-deserving sinner, wash them in His blood, and make them a brand new creature in Christ, that's GRACE!**

If you want to try to work your way to Heaven, then go ahead; but, you will never make it. In fact, if you are hoping that someday your good will

outweigh your bad because of how you kept the law, then you better make certain that you have kept the whole law.

Why? Because in James 2: 10, we learn that if we ***“offend in one point,”*** of the law, we are ***“guilty of all.”*** In other words, if a person has simply told a “little white lie”, then they have violated the entire legal system of Heaven.

The law is God's *“schoolmaster”* to *“bring us to Christ.”* The law numbers our sin. The law lists our sin. The law reveals our sin. The law demands payment and punishment for our sin.

But, that's where grace comes in. We were standing on the devil's auction block, and the bid was confirmed that we must pay the price of eternal destruction and damnation.

All of the sudden a voice shouted from the back, “I'll buy them!” The auctioneer asks, “With what?” The voice exclaims, “With the ‘precious blood of the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.’ They don't desire it, they don't demand it, and they don't deserve it; but, I'll do it anyway.”

*Hallelujah, What a Savior
That can take a poor, lost sinner;
Lift him from the miry clay
And set him free.*

*I will ever tell the story
Shouting, 'Glory! Glory! Glory!'
Hallelujah, Jesus ransomed me!*

Once the disciples establish what is required for salvation, they reveal:

B) What is RECEIVED from Salvation

After Peter's testimony, James takes the stage, and gives his own assessment in verses 11-21. Peter reviewed the past, and James related it all to the future. He drew various Old Testament quotes from Amos, Jeremiah and Isaiah to prove that the way of salvation was simply a fulfillment of what the prophets had foretold.

Once Peter and James established what was required for salvation, they then shared what was received from salvation. First, came **Liberation**.

James concludes, in verses **19-20**, ***“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: [20] But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.”***

In other words, no further burden would be placed on the Gentiles; and, no further requirement would be added for them to be saved. Gentiles would not have to become Jews to be saved; they would have to come to Jesus to be saved.

He concludes, in verse **26** that, ***“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”*** In other words, the work of God, and the work of grace was a liberating work, without man-made codes and creeds.

Ladies and gentlemen, we were in bondage before we were saved, why would we, who have been set free, want to go back and be slaves to religion? We don't have to be blinded to sin, burdened with sin, or bound by sin, because ***“if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”***

Salvation is not a 'Do.' Salvation is not a 'Don't.' Salvation is a **D-O-N-E!** God doesn't play the game, "Deal or No Deal," because as far as God is concerned salvation is the best deal because it's a DONE DEAL!

Not only did they receive liberation, but also **Separation**. We read in verse **29**, ***“That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.”***

This new found liberty did not give them the right to live however they desired to live. Rather, they were to take their liberation and allow it cause separation from that which could defile them, lest they become a *“stumbling block”* to the faith.

Thank God, we have been set free by God's grace; but, our freedom is not a liberty to sin, but a LICENSE TO SERVE! Just because we are free doesn't give

us the right to live "footloose and fancy free," to do whatever we desire to do.

In fact, a person who lives in liberation to the point that there is no separation is a person who does not know the glorious work of salvation!

Those of us who are saved have been ***“bought with a price.”*** We are ***“not our own,”*** but we are to ***“glorify God”*** with whatever we do, think, or say. We are a ***“chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people.”*** We are to ***“come out from among”*** the world, and ***“be separate, saith the Lord.”***

It's like the mother who took a batch of homemade applesauce and a batch of homemade cottage cheese to a church social. As long as she was doing the dipping, everything was fine. The trouble started when she left her little boy in charge. He used the same spoon for both, and it wasn't long before there was so much applesauce in the cottage cheese, and so much cottage cheese in the applesauce that you couldn't tell which was which.

Yet, today, there are a lot of people who are a little too worldly to be Christians, and a little too Christian to be worldly that it's hard to make a distinction between the two.

Let me suffice it to say that a liberated Christian ought to live like a separated Christian. Our dress, our demeanor; our talk, our thoughts; our conversation, our conduct; our appetites, our attitudes ought to reflect the fact that God Himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, gets His mail at the address of our lives.

Whether it is the clothes we wear, the places we go, the programs we watch, or the music we listen; we ought to dress in such a way, talk in such a way, act in such a way, and live in such a way that there is no doubt in anyone's mind that we are a blood-bought, Heaven born, Heaven bound child of God.

And, with of the matter of liberation and separation comes the matter of **Celebration**. Once these Gentiles believers were enlightened to the glorious truths of salvation, and that no further burden would be placed on them, it called for a time of celebration.

The decision had been made, and the Jerusalem conference convenes. Paul and Barnabas bring the decision back to Antioch and we read in verses 30-31, ***"So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: [31] Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation."***

In other words, to know that they had been liberated, and were to live separated, called for the matter to be celebrated. They *"rejoiced for the consolation"* of knowing that the work of salvation was complete, but the work of sanctification would continue.

For a number of years, Paul Anderson was known as "The Strongest Man in the World." He had biceps like coconuts. He was once asked, "Were you ever a 97-pound weakling?" He said, "Yes, when I was 4-years old." His testimony was clear and strong, "If the strongest man in the world needs Jesus, so do you!"

He spoke once at a Week of Champions rally. After the week, the next Sunday, a young man walked the aisle to publicly confess Christ as his Savior. The pastor discovered that he was converted the night Paul Anderson gave his testimony. The pastor asked, "What was it that Mr. Anderson said that touched your heart?" The man said, "It wasn't what Paul Anderson said, it was George Wilson that touched my heart."

George Wilson? The pastor couldn't remember which athlete George Wilson was. Then, he remembered that George Wilson was a paraplegic in a wheelchair who gave his testimony during a time of open sharing on the last night. He wasn't even part of the official program. But, he spoke of the joy of the Lord with a face shining like the chandelier of a diamond. The young student said to the pastor, "When I saw the happy expression on the face of George Wilson, I thought that if God could do that for a man in a wheelchair, perhaps He could do that for me!"

Billy Sunday was right when he said, *"Don't look as if your religion hurts you, because gloomy Christians are a false advertisement of the Gospel."*

We have been experienced liberation. We should exemplify separation. And that should cause us to express celebration. We, who were ***"dead in trespasses and sin"*** have been ***"quickened together"*** with Christ, and been made to ***"sit in heavenly places."***

With religion, we tried our best to get to God; but, through redemption, God stepped down and came to us. He didn't tell us about the way; He didn't show us to the way; and, He didn't send us on our way; He said, "I am the Way!"

That is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We ought to shout it, we ought to share it, and we ought to show it, because that is something worth fighting for!

Endnotes

- 1) Acts: The Church Afire, R. Kent Hughes, pg. 197.
 - 2) *"Be Daring,"* Acts 13-28, Warren Wiersbe, pg. 22.
 - 3) Crosswalk, Religion News Summaries, Nov. 3. 2006.
 - 4) *"What's So Amazing About Grace?"* Philip Yancey, pg. 45.
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