

Acts | *The Incendiary Fellowship*

Clarifying the Gospel

Acts 15:1-11, 22-29

6.4.17

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." ⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, ²³ and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. ²⁴ "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, ²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

This is the history of the earliest days of Christianity, The Acts of the Apostles... and we've seen how the message is spreading very rapidly...from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (1.8).

As the news of the Resurrected Man spreads, churches are being established. The FIRST churches were all Jewish people who recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah... and NOW, others are recognizing Him as well... the TITLE given to these non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ is found in vv. 8 and 9: "them". There's "US and THEM" (you see it clearly in Peter's closing argument, vv. 8 & 9).

And for “us AND them” to be in the same congregation would soon prove to be... difficult. Because “US” eats Kosher and “THEM” eats...anything/everything! And what happens at the Home Group when there’s shrimp cocktail...and pulled pork?

Up to NOW, everything had been very organic and spontaneous/exciting; we’re moving with the Spirit and grace...it’s fresh and free and easy, from the heart ...but NOW we need...guidelines...need rules of some sort...need definition...need doctrine.

Is this going to BE the death of Christianity and the birth of organized religion? When doctrine comes IN will the Spirit go OUT? That’s the question.

THAT’S the topic of today’s sermon – the demand for AND the danger of definition... why spiritual teaching or doctrine is needed...even though it can be a real problem. How does the Gospel (basic message of Christianity) how does the Gospel allow us to remain in a tension where definition/doctrine is life-giving and not life-draining? Let’s look at:

- 1) The Doctrine-Tension Described
- 2) The Doctrine Itself
- 3) How the Doctrine Energizes the Tension

Let me first describe what is for MANY people OUTSIDE the church (and some within too!) let’s describe what for most people today is OBVIOUS and that is that doctrine/teaching/definition stinks...it’s what’s WRONG with organized religion.

For one thing, when you impose definition on words and when you define teachings it will automatically exclude people. AND quickly the power of exclusion is wielded by those in charge...it’s used as a weapon. The fear of exclusion is used to keep people in line.

That was a charge made by the 19th and 20th C philosophers like Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. AND you might be surprised to know that the Bible agrees with these atheistic philosophers. St. Paul warned against doctrinal speculation (1 Tim 1.3-7). And Jesus Christ scolded the clergymen/theologians of His day for using technical/doctrinaire language (Mark 7.11) and for making a lot of rules focused on minutiae that missed the MAJOR THEMES of God’s teaching (Matt 23.2-3, 23 et al) and He recognized the tendency to confuse knowledge of the facts about godliness with godliness itself. AND of course that can happen in ANY field... just because you know the stats on Kevin Durant of LeBron James doesn’t mean you can play basketball... but you may be intimidating to people who don’t know the numbers.

And this can happen in any field but IT IS especially prevalent in religion and spirituality. Seminary graduates just think that because they have a lot of facts, they therefore know God better than the people in the pew... It was happening in this very passage: people with intricate knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures using it to keep others in line. “If we’re going to consider these Gentiles as true children of Abraham, they must have the mark in their flesh that the children of Abraham have always had!”

Point is: experts can USE their expertise to intimidate other people but it's no guarantee that they even experience what they've read. You may read TEN books on Winston Churchill but you still don't know him in the way his daughter knew him even though she may never have read a book about him.

Butalso... like so many teachings in the Bible, we have to say, "On the other hand..." because so many truths taught in the Bible are really only held in a tension. So with definition/doctrine – on one hand, it's dangerous and on the other hand it's demanded – we NEED definition and teaching.

Many years ago a woman wanted to meet with me to say she was asked to teach Sunday School to third graders here at St Andrews but the curriculum was full of facts and teaching...doctrine. I asked if she thought it was over their heads – no...just that, "I don't want to give them doctrine – what they really NEED is Jesus."

And while I DO understand that concern, my reply was, "Well, what Jesus do they NEED? Is Jesus a 'spirit-guide' or a prophet or is He God but only masquerading as a human...is He half-god and half-man like the myth of Hercules?"

AND what do we mean when we say children/adults "NEED" Jesus? Do they need an example or a friend or...something MORE – someone to represent them, to live obediently like we DON'T and to DIE in our place? See if we don't define our terms than language is meaningless... I might as well say that I am a poached-egg... but as soon as we make statements, like people need a Savior – THAT is a definition...or doctrine. And it's really impossible to avoid. Even the saying, "Children DON'T need doctrine" IS a doctrine.

And that's it...knowing a person (any person) requires that you know ABOUT the person. Churchill's daughter may never have read a book about him but she DID know ABOUT HIM...knew all kinds of facts about him that even the best biographers missed.

So, knowing God is NOT only intellectual but it's not LESS than intellectual... It requires definition...and that's the problem... because we can use that knowledge to feel good about ourselves and even to look down on others. Doctrine: demanded/dangerous.

So...what does this important episode show us about how to live in this tension?

Well...here...a doctrine is being hammered out and DEFINED...and the doctrine itself, if it is BELIEVED, it empowers the believer to live within the tension. Let me try to explain myself.

I've used this illustration before but it bears repeating. After the 9-11 attacks in 2001, it was easy to find articles criticizing/warning against any religion or ideology of any kind that could be

described as “Fundamentalist” and Kathy Keller at Redeemer Pres in NYC, she asked, “Well doesn't that depend on WHAT the fundamental IS in whatever religion/ideology we are discussing?”

And she used the GENIUS example of the Amish. Everyone would describe the Amish as fundamentalists but their fundamental teaching is love and peace and non-resistance under any conditions...and no one is afraid that fundamentalist Amish people are going to do acts of terrorism!

Why? Because of their fundamental doctrine!

So what IS the fundamental of the Christian movement that emerged at this Jerusalem Council only 20 short years after the Resurrection of Jesus?

Well, this is the center of this book... the doctrinal epicenter, they call a convocation – “Send us elders from all the churches to represent the disparate congregations – elders from each local church.”

We need definition because (v. 2) there was “great dissension and debate”. And the basic question was, “Unless the Gentile men undergo this ritual of circumcision, they can't really be called sons of Abraham...and can't really be saved...right?”

It was the question of justification: how is a person made right in the sight of God?” And after “much debate” among the apostles and elders, Peter makes the closing argument (last time we hear from him in this book – goes out with a bang!). He says, “Look, brothers and sisters, the US/THEM thing has been eliminated by God Himself. The distinction between Jew and Gentile NO LONGER MAKES SENSE – we are all the same! We are all guilty of breaking God's Law (the Jews break what they KNOW and the Gentiles break what they DON'T KNOW) but we ALL break it and are TOTALLY UNABLE to justify ourselves! Self justification is IMPOSSIBLE for circumcised Jews and for uncircumcised Gentiles alike!”

“BUT” (maybe the crux of the whole book) v.11 “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

The next verse (not included) says, “All the people kept silent...” It was sinking in. They heard Paul and Barnabas tell how so many Gentiles were believing in Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ the true Seed of Abraham...and God was PROVING their inclusion by signs and wonders – what HE did NOT they!

And this is the moment of definition. “We did NOTHING to get God to like us! It wasn't our Jewishness, our eating habits, our obedience to the Law of Moses (let's face it guys – we didn't even really obey it!). We are NO BETTER than the Gentiles! In fact we're even worse! We can't self-justify!”

“We need a Savior to do what WE cannot do – a truly righteous Man to live obediently FOR us...and to die under the weight of the justice we deserve... We need it just like THEY need it – in fact let’s quit calling THEM... “THEM” – let’s just call everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, ‘brother and sister’”.

That was the fundamental at the epicenter of this whole book. All people are failures, unable to justify ourselves by OUR obedience (circumcision won’t erase our sins!) and all people who believe in Jesus Christ are justified by HIS obedience, His sacrifice and His victory over death and condemnation.

And THAT fundamental abolishes self-righteousness and destroys our tendency to use knowledge to hurt people and lord ourselves over people... it keeps us in the tension so we both NEED definition/doctrine and we can’t USE our doctrinal knowledge to feel superior to anyone (because we don’t need to!) THIS IS THE ONE DOCTRINE THAT IF YOU REALLY GET IT CANNOT MAKE YOU DOCTINAIRE – in fact it makes you deferential, polite, respectful and even loving toward those with whom you disagree!

The story ends with the elders and apostles at this conference writing a letter of apology to the Gentile believers in Jesus Christ, “Hey, sorry brothers and sisters! We messed up! We unwittingly made you think you were ALMOST right with God! OUR BAD! If you believe in Jesus Christ you are right with God – that’s the ONLY way WE ARE RIGHT WITH GOD! We contributed NOTHING – not our Jewishness, not a piece of severed skin...nothing. Jesus Christ did it all – and WE and YOU did nothing!”

“We do want to ask that you stop trying to get spirit-power from eating the life-force of animals or having ritualized sex with temple prostitutes. We promise to quit trying to justify OURSELVES by our circumcision and YOU quit trying to justify YOURSELVES by animism and superstition – LET’S ALL REJOICE TOGETHER IN THE SAME SOURCE OF PEACE WITH GOD AND SPIRIT POWER which is Jesus Christ.”

See they don’t say, “Ahhh! Doctrine doesn’t matter, let’s not judge... let’s not define...let’s not exclude!”

NO! They stick to their fundamental...the total rejection of self-justification and the complete reliance on what Jesus Christ did for His guilty and cherished people.

That’s what enabled them to circulate this humbling apology to those they had always despised but who NOW have become family.

The Communion

This whole topic of doctrine is still a kind of challenge because...as I say...it's a tension. We have to hold to BOTH poles – we need it AND it is dangerous. When it's used the wrong way, when people are doctrinaire, it hurts people and turns them off of the Gospel, which is a serious offence.

Another pitfall is that defining our terms and getting doctrinal clarity...doesn't always translate into real life... BUT THIS doctrine we're discussing today, justification, CAN and SHOULD...and MUST affect our relationships because...it's very practical.

For example, David Zahl in a Christianity Today article shows how really destructive self-justification is for a MARRIAGE, but it can be applied to any relationship.

When one partner (in the relationship) is intent on defending himself/herself (or both!) it "can choke the life out of love."

And the psychologists he quotes (not Christians I don't THINK), they see how our basic human project of self-justification really damages relationships; speaking of marriages that go bad, they write (quote):

"From our standpoint, therefore, misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences, and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love; self-justification is."

But you see, the fundamental of the Christian life enables us to say, "Wait a minute! I don't justify myself – Jesus does! He already DID it...I'm secure with God and He sees me as if I am as RIGHTEOUS as Jesus Christ – the Savior's goodness is attributed to me... and my guilt was attributed to Him!"

And when I am believing that, I can stop having to be right all the time with my wife or friends or co-workers... I can admit to wrongs...and even be inquisitive about my wrongs...can laugh at myself... can (like the early apostles and elders) CAN WRITE LETTERS where I admit my faults...even circulate the letters!

Being justified by Jesus Christ is liberating... if ONLY when in the heat of the moment, I can bring it in to my thinking... IF ONLY THAT FUNDAMENTAL is central in my thinking/heart/motives.

That's why we're here...to receive...to be nourished on our JUSTIFIER.... So come and say, "Lord Jesus, give Yourself to me now... NOW and the next time I feel compelled to defend myself... be my righteousness NOW and when I feel the need to assert how good I am..."

Let's come now...voice that prayer in your own words and then let's come believing in our Justifier who gives Himself to all who repent and believe.