

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on September 25, 2022

OPENING THE DOORS

Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

Acts 15: 19-20

As many of you know, I grew up in the suburbs of New York City. A kosher bakery in Brooklyn had one of the most memorable ad campaigns of my youth. This campaign was in print, on television and on billboards. It included pictures such as an older Native American or a young Chinese boy or a child dressed in a choir robe. Around the picture was the caption that read, "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's." The message was clear that Levy's rye bread was for everyone regardless of background or culture.

This ad campaign reminds me of the first great change that confronted the Christian movement. The Church had to learn how to open the doors of the church to the Gentiles. They struggled with the question of whether Jesus was for everybody or only Jews. They pondered the question, "Do you have to become Jewish to be a follower of Jesus?"

This may seem like a strange question. But remember Jesus was born a Jew. Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day as was the custom. This marked him as part of the covenant with Abraham. They took him to the temple several times for the proper observances of Jewish holy days.

Jesus was raised in a Jewish home in Galilee. He would have attended the synagogue in that town. During his earthly ministry he spent almost all his time teaching fellow Jews. He framed his life and message from the Old Testament. In many ways he was a Jewish Rabbi giving new insight to the Torah.

All the disciples of Jesus were Jewish. Peter, James and John all sought to be devout followers of Mosaic Law.

All of the men and women in the Upper Room on Pentecost were Jewish. They were gathered in that Upper Room to observe a Jewish festival. Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, is the second of the three major festivals with both historical and agricultural significance. It commemorates the time when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple. Historically, it also celebrates the giving of the Torah.

Paul was not only Jewish but a Pharisee, which meant he was part of the party in Judaism that was most concerned with observing and following the Law of Moses.

Given their background and training, it is not surprising that these first followers of Jesus understood Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. They had heard how the Old Testament had prophesied about the coming of a Messiah who would restore the Jewish people to their rightful place as God's chosen people. Many had expected the Messiah to be a military ruler who would use force, but Jesus had taught about the kingdom of God based on love. He

talked about a kingdom not of this world. He talked about being forgiven and the gift of eternal life.

While the understanding of Messiah had changed, the followers of Jesus still considered the good news of Jesus to be for fellow Jews. Therefore, when we read the Book of Acts, when the followers of Jesus travel to a new city to tell the story of Jesus they almost always go first to the synagogue. They proclaimed that our Messiah has come.

While on these missionary journeys something strange began to happen. Gentiles started to be attracted to the story of Jesus. As apostles traveled to Asia Minor, Egypt and east and told of Jesus' love – it was not only Jews who wanted to follow Christ. People with many different religious and cultural backgrounds wanted to know more about Jesus.

They soon wanted to be fully part of this new movement. Yet many of the first leaders of the church saw themselves as part of Judaism. They were Jews who knew the Messiah had come. All of these men and women who wanted to be part of the nascent Christian community raised a very difficult question.

Did a person have to first become a Jew in order to become a follower of Jesus?

Becoming a Jew in order to follow Jesus was not appealing to most of the Gentiles. For it would mean:

Males would have to be circumcised.

All would have to follow all the dietary laws of kosher.

They would need to observe all the Jewish Holy Days.

This was not attractive to Gentiles for many reasons:

There was the discomfort of circumcision.

Keeping kosher would create a social barrier with their non-Jewish family.

The Gentiles believed Jesus came to give grace and forgiveness not a new set of rules.

The leaders of the Christian movement were divided on this issue. Some continued to insist that the Jesus movement was Jewish and the way to become a follower of Jesus was to become Jewish. Others like Paul and Peter believed that Jesus came for all. Indeed, Peter had a conversion experience on this issue. If you recall the story from Acts in which Peter had a vision in which a sheet came down from heaven with animals that the Jews considered ritualistically unclean. God told him to kill them and eat. This was a symbolic message to Peter that he was to accept the Gentile Cornelius into the Christian Community.

In the early days each community dealt with this problem differently. In some places, Gentiles were forced to become Jewish; in others they were welcomed as they were. But the differences came to a head in Antioch. Antioch was one of the most mixed Jewish and Gentile Christian Churches. Word of their openness spread and people came from Judea and told the Gentiles that "Unless you are circumcised you cannot be saved." That ticked off many people as you can imagine and so Paul and Barnabas were sent to headquarters in Jerusalem to work this out.

Therefore, the first important Church council was held in Jerusalem in about 50AD to address just one question, "Do you have to be Jewish to love Jesus?"

The answer decided on was no. It is interesting that the decision is not made by Peter or Paul but rather James who seems to have been the most important leader. In Eugene Peterson's translation James says: **So here is my decision: We're not going to unnecessarily burden non-Jewish people who turn to the Master. We will write them a letter and tell them, "Be careful to not get involved in activities connected with idols, to guard the morality of sex and marriage, to not serve food offensive to Jewish Christians."**

The Council of Jerusalem allowed Gentiles to become a full part of the Christian Community without becoming Jewish. James tells both sides to tolerate one other. Jewish Christians are not to demand observance of the Gentile brothers and sisters and Gentiles are not to do things that are offensive to their Jewish friends.

It is interesting that the focus is so much on food. Just as today, there were many gatherings of Christians that involved meals. It was eating together that knit the community together. If Kosher were required then Gentiles could not be part of the community and conversely if Gentiles started serving forbidden food all the time, Jews could not attend.

James tells all to be sensitive to each other's feelings that the community might thrive. James believes that following Jesus is more important than our cultural traditions.

You might ask why spend all this time on the Council of Jerusalem. What relevance does it have for us today?

First the obvious meaning is that you and I do not have to be Jewish in order to be a good follower of Jesus. The Council of Jerusalem helped the Christian movement grow beyond being merely a sect of Judaism. Men and women could begin to interpret the faith in terms of their own culture. Soon the so-called apologists would interpret the gospel in terms of Greek Philosophy.

This event also has meaning for us today. Those early Christians struggled with the question of what is core to the faith and what is just a cultural convention. For you see the spread of Christianity beyond Judaism was the first of many examples of the good news of Jesus facing a new cultural landscape. When Christians seek to be faithful in a new cultural environment there will always be questions about what is core and what is merely human convention.

In the last forty years we have lived through vast cultural shifts. Almost every tradition of western civilization has been called into question. These cultural changes have caused a lot of conflict within the Christian Church. These conflicts range from the seemingly insignificant to the profound.

When I was a child growing up observing the people in my home church, it was clear that to worship, God required men to wear a tie and women a hat. This reflected more formal expectations of dress in the culture. Over the last several decades as patterns in the larger culture became less formal, there were all kinds of disagreements as people started to worship

in a variety of clothes. There were harsh comments by proponents of formality and informality. What is hard to remember today is how for some formal dress was connected with faithfulness.

Think of what has been called by some the worship wars of the last forty years. The worship wars reflect the variety of tastes in music and worship style between people. All too often people did not allow for personal tastes but sought to frame the issues around right and wrong. Instead of looking for core values, they absolutized their personal cultural preferences.

Another area of great cultural change concerns human relationships. There has been a great shift in our society in how families are formed. The practices around dating and when people marry, what ethnicities marry and a whole host of issues are in a time of flux. This forces us to ponder what traditions are rooted in the Gospel and which are just human conventions.

When the culture changes, Christians are forced to struggle to reinterpret and understand the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is not easy.

The answers are not always clear.

It always invites conflict between Christians and in churches.

We are living in an age of increased pluralism. We encounter increasing numbers of people who come from non-western cultures. They will be attracted to the good news of Jesus. This will cause us again and again to have to answer what practices and customs that we follow are core parts of our faith and which can be reinterpreted.

In these times of change we should remember two lessons from the Council of Jerusalem.

First, show tolerance for your fellow Christians and do not seek to be offensive to each other. Don't always insist on your own way. Our sisters and brothers may come to different conclusions on a specific issue – they are still your fellow Christian.

Secondly, always put Jesus first. Those first Jewish Christians came to realize that what was important was following the Risen Christ. We are not to let our own human conventions stand in the way of sharing the good news.

We can learn to open the doors of the church to people of all cultures. For you don't have to be a good Jew or a good American or a good anything first in order to love and follow Jesus.