

May 2 2021

Council at Jerusalem

Acts 15:1-18

As the church started to grow and expand it began to develop a need to identify itself. To put it bluntly, they were having an identity crisis. They began to ask themselves the question, what is it that makes a Christian a Christian? More importantly, what are the requirements for salvation?

The ones still causing trouble are the Pharisees who have become Christians. They are the certain men in verse one. They are advocating circumcision as a requirement of salvation for Christians. These Pharisees are very conservative Jewish Christians. Actually they are advocating that all Christians must first become Jewish and then Christians later. This kind of thinking would make Christianity a sub sect of Judaism. So what makes a Christian a Christian?

Paul and Barnabas did not require circumcision among the Gentile converts. They did require it among Jewish converts. Paul did require it of Timothy after the Council of Jerusalem. Timothy's mother was Jewish and his dad was a Gentile. Jews trace their religion through their mothers. So Timothy was a Jew. The Pharisees within Christianity wanted a discussion on this issue and talked Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem and get an answer for them. They also wanted them to champion their cause.

We are given an insight into the structure of the early church. The answer and direction does not come from one person, but from a council of apostles and elders. Similar to our synod today. Peter is the one who speaks with authority on this issue as the bishop of Antioch. Peter emphasizes that God acknowledges the sincere faith of the Gentiles hearts at Cornelius's house, by giving them the Holy Spirit. God is the one who purifies their hearts from all defilement. Acts 10: 47-48. God makes no distinction between races in offering the gifts of salvation in Christ. Then why should the church. In Christ the old covenants have been fulfilled. The new covenant was made at the Last Supper by Christ. If you are clinging to the old covenants then you do not believe fully in the new one made by Christ. His body was broken for all and His blood was shed for all.

James the brother of Our Lord and bishop of Jerusalem seems to have the last word. He quotes the prophet Amos 9:11-12. The word agree in Greek is *sumphoneo*. This is where we get the word symphony. James is saying, that there decision is in symphony with what God said in Amos. It is in harmony and thus the work of God. Circumcision is not required of men becoming Christians. Circumcision was part of the old covenant with Abraham. That was fulfilled as Jesus's resurrection. Jesus gave us a new covenant to guide the church and to give us salvation. The identity crisis seemed to be solved. Christians are new creations because of Christ's resurrection. We have been given a new covenant that takes priority.

Unfortunately we still suffer identity crisis due to our insecurities. We divide the Body of Christ by denominations. It would be marvelous if we could just focus on being Christian. Then the walls and barriers of denominations would come down and dissolve. This is not an issue

exclusive to us. The Moslems and Jews suffer the same fate but in a different context. It is something that we all should be working on. To just be a good Christian or Jew or Moslem. When we meet Our Lord, He won't ask if we were Lutheran, Catholic or Anglican. He is going to ask how fiercely we loved. Did we feed the hungry, cloth the naked and visit the sick or imprisoned?

Now on to the Synod Convention of last weekend. The Synod convention speaker on Saturday morning was Andrew Root. He spoke on the church in the secular world. As I thought about the title, the church has always been in the secular world. Then Paul's words came to me, that we are to be in the world, but not of it. There is an interesting tension that exists between the church and the world. I feel that this tension is needed to keep the balance between the two. If the balance swings too much toward the church, we see revolutions like the French and Russian. Yet when it swings the other way we see societies commit horrible atrocities like those in Germany in the thirties and forties. The church needs to be the moral compass for society. If it hadn't lost it, itself.

Root presented a group called the Purple Mountains. They sounded like a cross between Johnny Cash and Leonard Cohen. The song he played was called Margaritas at the mall. He was trying to draw the correlation that some churches have embraced the secular world and become mall like. You can get everything there. Just like at the mall. Imagine if the Starbucks kiosk in the church basement served margaritas after services. Wow, what a church. Trust me they do exist, even in Winnipeg.

As I listened to the lyrics of this song, I realized how dark and despairing it was. I do encourage you to search it out in your spare time. I thought that the church should be the one offering hope here. Despair is the greatest weapon of the enemy. Yet if the church is so engulfed into the secular world how could it even offer hope. The line that hit me the hardest was, "No word from God".

This individual was looking for God to speak and offer him guidance in his dark moment. If the church was part of this dark secular world, how could it. As Christians we know that God speaks the loudest in silence. I am thinking of Elijah. That out of despair and chaos God creates some of His best work. Think about Genesis. I also thought, has this generation forgotten how to listen to God. The same God who is everywhere and fills all things with His energy and essence. The church teaches these things, but those in society need to listen and learn from us.

The sad thing about this song was that the singer would later take his own life. The pain in creativity is truly amazing. This is an example of creativity channeled by pain and expressed in song.

It is ironic that we are still talking about identity and roles.

I am grateful that we were able to gather and pray for the past eight weeks. That we were able to celebrate Easter together and have communion. This was truly a time of grace. God bless and take care,
Pastor D