

Looking Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror When Good People Disagree



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For those who have been following our Prayer Chain you will have heard that this has been a dangerous week for one of our missionaries, Ken Bayer. Ken is one of the missionaries that we as a church personally support who is serving in Brazil, and who is the founder of the Chain of Love Orphanage. Chain of love is a place where kids from the street or who have horrible home situations are placed in a group home led by caring Christian couples. Over the years they have helped 100's of kids, saving their lives, offering them a future and in the process many have found faith. The other day as Ken came home he was accosted at gun point by 2 robbers. As they forced him to sit on the front step they began to try to force the front door open while Ken's wife was inside the house. When the man turned his head, Ken who isn't that patient of a man, leapt at him, wrestled him to the ground and in the struggle the 9 mm pistol the robber held went off. The bullet entered Ken's abdomen and somehow exited through Ken's thigh. On seeing the blood spreading across Ken's shirt the thieves fled. Miraculously, the bullet did not pierce Ken's stomach and no bones or vital veins were hit. And he is doing fine. Now you need to know that this is not the first time Ken has been robbed or shot at. But thank God he is home doing fine.

Just for a moment, think what it would be like for Ken to come home from this missionary term and tell us about this story, tell us about how many kid's lives had been changed and how numerous people have found faith in Jesus in the church they have planted (which is growing in numbers). Then after sharing all the great things that God had been doing, to have someone stand up at the back of our church and make this statement. *"Ken as wonderful as it is to hear what God has been doing, you need to know that unless all the men who have become Christians are circumcised they are not real Christians and all that you*

have done is worthless". I'll bet that would break Ken's heart. If you turn to Acts 15 you will see that is exactly what happened as Paul and Barnabas made their report to this 'sending church' at Antioch.

Setting

As you will remember on their 1st Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas traveled south to the Island of Cyprus, then north through Perga to Antioch in Pisidia, to Iconium, Lystra (where Paul was stoned and left for dead on the side of the road) and then to Derbe. Finally they traveled back along the same route ending up in Antioch. Acts 14:27 Just think of the stories they told that night. It would have been a night full of celebration and wonder of how God had opened the door to a new people group, Gentiles, you and me. Do you remember we talked about the fact that often the devil loves to somehow bring discouragement against us, right in the midst of our joy. Well, it wasn't long until something came that took the bounce out of Paul's step. Now look at Acts 15:1,2 notice what is said here. They were teaching that unless men who accepted Jesus into their lives were circumcised, *they cannot be saved*. It would seem that this teaching was embraced by many of the Jewish Christians at Antioch, and that at the same time (48 AD) the same teaching was affecting the churches Paul and Barnabas had just planted in the southern Galatia area. Gal. 1:6,7 But look at who had been sucked into this belief (Gal. 2:11-14). Do you catch that last comment? It is given almost with a groan *'Peter and even my partner Barnabas got drawn into the belief that in order to be a true Christian you had to be a believer in Jesus PLUS as a man, be circumcised*. Can you imagine how hard it would make sharing the gospel today? We would share the 4 spiritual laws with someone and have them pray to accept Jesus into their heart and then we would say *'I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that Jesus is your*

Saviour, the bad news is you have an appointment with the Dr. on Monday to have a little cosmetic surgery, and it is really going to hurt”.

Setting Behind the Setting

Where does this idea come from? It has its roots in the Old Testament when in Gen. 17:1,11 God said “*Abraham we need to make promises to each other, I will be your God, I will bless you and the generations to follow you, but I want you to do something that will be a reminder (like a wedding ring) that you are my follower, and circumcision will be that sign*”. It is a strange request isn't it? But I think the idea was that even in something as private and mundane as going to the washroom God wanted Abraham to be reminded that he had made promises to be a follower of God. And to be blunt, it was also a time when temple prostitution was a part of many religions of the day. God demanded of his people that they were to be solely faithful to their wives and that they were to stay away from temple prostitutes. So the men knew if they did decide to be involved with a temple prostitute in the temple of some other god that the minute they got naked the prostitute would say ‘*Oh I see your Jewish, I thought your God was Yahweh and you couldn't do this?*’. It was a way of reminding a man daily that he was a follower of the one and only true God. (I can just hear someone asking you tomorrow at work what your Pastor spoke about at church on Sunday and you will have to reply, circumcision. Sorry).

Here is the point. Historically in order to be a Jew as a man, you needed to be circumcised and some felt that it only made sense that if you were a Gentile and wanted to join a Jewish Christian church you needed to be Baptized and Circumcised. What was happening here was that a small group of narrow minded Jewish Christians saw Christianity as fulfillment of the Jewish faith. Jesus was

the JEWISH Messiah so while these Jewish Christians had made the huge step of believing that Gentiles could be saved, they were still just 2nd class citizens so they had to be grafted to the Jewish tree of faith. That meant they needed to be circumcised, keep all the Jewish laws and customs, in essence become Gentile Jews. James, Jesus' brother and the head of the church in Jerusalem agreed with this. Even Barnabas who had seen lives transformed by the power of Jesus alone started thinking this way.

What was at stake?

Paul knew that if this happened then Christianity would remain a small offshoot sect of Judaism. It would not touch the masses of the world for Jesus. He knew that if he added circumcision to salvation that most men would not line up to be saved. For it is one thing to be circumcised as a infant, it is a different matter to be circumcised as an adult. This would have cut off the future of Christianity to the people groups of the world.

What does it say about how we should do life together as believers?

Acts 15:2,5-10

i) The Need To Do Business Together

In Gal. 2:12 it says they '*came from James*'. Sometimes we think the New Testament church leaders had it all together. If you look at Gal. 2:12 you will see that these Pharisees who became Christians came from the church where James the Just was their pastor (Jesus' brother, the one who history tells us had calluses on his knees from the long hours he spent on his knees in prayer). Now I am not completely blaming him, but it would seem that when he saw these hardliners within the church pushing to add lots of rules to the Gentile believers

he would rather keep peace (at least at the beginning) than discipline these Christians who loved to place laws/rules/do's and don'ts on other followers of Jesus.

If you study this passage you need to see that when issues arise in churches that people from different backgrounds and perspectives are bound to have conflicts. So we shouldn't be so surprised when Christians have disagreements, but when we do, we need to remember to:

1) Be willing to express our opinions openly, fully, and by the way, graciously.

The problem is that often because it takes so much energy to express our ideas and feelings can get hurt, so we often forget *"that we need to dial the rhetoric down a notch, speak graciously, and remember those we are speaking to are our friends and brothers/sisters in Christ who love the Lord as much as we do"*. One person has said that Christians are often a lot like porcupines, we need each other, but we needle each other. So we need to speak truth with love and generosity without loaded words.

2) We need to be open to listen to each other. Notice in this passage they took turns sharing what they felt was right. III: On one occasion Mark Twain and Winston Churchill met at a dinner in London. When they went out for a smoke together everyone who knew them, and how they both like to talk, wondered who would dominate the conversation. Most thought because Mark Twain was older he would do the most talking. When they returned, when asked, Churchill said enthusiastically *'yes, we had a great chat'*. When Mark Twain was asked, he replied *'At least I had a good smoke'*, implying that Churchill had done all the talking. We need to learn to listen to each other.

3) They took into account what God had been doing. Acts 15:6-11 They didn't just go back to church tradition and how they had done things in the past, instead they looked around at what they had seen God doing among them.

4) They made a decision and stuck to it. Acts 15:19-21 James the Bishop of Jerusalem realized as painful as it was to make a decision, for some would be upset with him, to not make a decision in the long run would cause more pain. So they decided and agreed together that this is what they would do.

ii) Not taking extremes

This is a great case study for us to look at because it epitomizes a tendency we see among us as Christians to vacillate to the extremes concerning our freedoms in Christ and our propensity to take those freedoms too far.

1. Freedom: Here is the picture: One day Paul and Barnabas are walking through a market discussing what Jesus meant when he said Jn. 8:36 *"if the son sets you free you are free indeed"* as it applies to what they heard happened to Peter on the roof top in Joppa when the sheet from heaven came down and it contained all kinds of 'non-Kosher' foods and God said *"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean"* (Acts 10:15). And Barnabas spies a pork roast on a BBQ spit in the market. And he nudges Paul and says God made them, have a bite". And Paul says *"No way, I would never"*, and then he reaches out as a good Jewish boy and takes a bite of pork. And he says 'wow, freedom is wonderful'. Many of us, in the church have grown up not being allowed to go to a movie, attend a football game on Sunday and feeling guilty if God blessed us with the resources to buy a good car or go on a nice holiday. And the keeping of all the

rules broke our spirits and Christianity seemed to steal joy from our lives. Some Christians are never happier than when they are sad and their lives are straight jacketed by rules. This passage would remind us that Jesus said "*I have come to give you life, and give it abundantly*"(Jn. 10:10). Our Christianity was designed by God to make life exciting, full, free.

ii) License: However, if you turn to I Cor. 6:19-20 you will see that the opposite was happening here. When Paul told the Corinthians that God wanted to set them free they believed it was free to do whatever they felt like doing sexually because they could ask for forgiveness later. It is the idea that I have seen at a Christian high school that 'Because we are all Christians here and we won't cause any non-believer to stumble we can do whatever we want and use whatever language we want'. It is the idea that because we are all Christians at this party we can drink as much as we want. Or because we are both Christians I can say whatever I want to you because you have to be forgiving to me. We need to remember that 'Freedom at times needs fences'.

We need to somehow, at the same time celebrate and live with our freedoms in Christ and yet the understanding that as Christians God expects that we live in such a way that he can be proud of our lifestyle and choices and that others see Jesus in our actions.

II: How does it Apply to us today?

Let's look at what they decided at the end of their discussion. **Acts 15:19-21**

What does it say about inclusion?

This summer I was invited to a free day of golf. When I arrived they gave me a free cart, a bucket of balls for the driving range, a meal chit for lunch, then a lady kept driving around in her golf coffee wagon offering us free pepsi and chocolate bars, and at supper there was a steak meal plus prizes. From the moment I arrived, here is the beautiful thing, the whole day it was all about me and I loved it. It is very easy to see church, this church, as our church, and it's primary reason for existence to be me/mine, not those who don't regularly attend here.

A number of years ago a situation arose in a church we served in where finances were getting tight due to an increase of many different needs stemming from a large influx of many needy people. At the church meeting a women actually stood up and said *"it is no wonder we are having financial trouble in the church, look at the kind of people Dave is bringing into the church"*. At that moment I witnessed something I had never seen before. My wife stood up, threw down her pen and said *"Excusssse mmee..."* And tour a strip off this lady and said *'how dare you speak that way about the people God is saving and bringing into our church'*. When she finished people clapped, but I gave her space until she calmed down.

It is so easy to want the church to run like a private country club. If we are honest we want the church to be warm, caring, and first meeting our needs and the needs of those we love. That isn't that strange because we live with

ourselves, our situations all day long in our heads. And because of that, it isn't that we want to be selfish, but simply out of knowing what we need/want it is easy to let our wants rise to the surface. Our call is to care for the world. Our Mission Statement is to *Know Jesus and to Touch the World*. I know that in our hearts we want to do that very thing. But I think at times we need to stop and remind ourselves what is on the line if we forget our calling. It is like in this passage, if we put our needs/the way we are used to doing things in front of the needs of others, others will not get to Jesus, and not only miss his care in their lives, but they will go to Hell. And so we need to remember how crucial it is to be inclusive in what we believe, especially as it affects how we function as a church. We need to ask, are there Baptist traditions/theology_which make it hard to become integrated into the community of Brentview? Is there ways we do friendship which make it harder to become part of the circle of care in the church? If there is, then just like 1st Baptist Jerusalem we need to look at them through the eyes of Jesus, with the biblical goal of Inclusion in mind.

What does it say about our love life?

What I find amazing is that James gave 3 simple rules. #1 is about making sure others are being included, #3 as we will see, is making sure fellowship happens, and #2 speaks about our sex life. Why, because in Paul's day, as in our day, too many people hold Pierre Trudeau's view of sexuality, which was '*what happens in a bedroom between 2 consenting adults is no ones business but theirs*'. The only problem is that it isn't true. For our sexuality is God's business and it can affect many people around us. It can affect our children and spouse, if it is an affair, it can affect our witness as Christians, and it can affect our future as individuals. But sadly many Christians have bought the idea that sex is something that is just physical and has no real lasting affect on our lives or the

lives of those around us. So I hear of Christian couples living together, Christians thinking it's ok to have a one night stand, and so on. This passage says the very opposite. It says when James gave instruction about how to live correctly, the #2 on the list (so it is a big deal to God) was to make sure that your sexuality, your sexual behaviour is in line with what God teaches. Because not only will it have a profound impact on how you live your life (how your life will unfold), but it will have a profound impact on your witness as a follower of Christ. If you are single live purely, if you are married live rightly and passionately only with your spouse. Why? Because as you do this, your life will be blessed, your joy will increase, and your witness will be the kind of witness Jesus needs in your life.

What does it say about fellowship?

Why were the 2 dietary rules put forward by James? Because he believed that Christian fellowship, time spent together over a meal, time spent in each others house were values that needed to be protected. He believed that if a community of believers didn't spend time eating meals together or in each others homes they really couldn't grow deeper as believers. So he said, concerning food offered to idols (we know that the idols aren't real, so they couldn't contaminate the food, and we know that the meat offered to idols was sold for the lowest price in town because idols rarely touch food offered to them) and that meat should not be from strangled animals (for we believe that the life is in the blood, this was important because it was through Jesus' blood that we are given new spiritual life). So if you serve these 2 types of food to your Jewish friend it will make them feel uncomfortable in your house. So can you please not serve these 2 foods when they are present? For the Kingdom sake we want you in each others homes, and sharing meals, sharing life together. So please keep these rules.

So in a passage which seems to be focusing on the topic of circumcision, God has been challenging us concerning i) how we do business together when we are forced to face issues that need to be moved from disagreement toward *'what God would have us do'*, ii) to attempting to balance our freedoms in Christ with where we need to understand 'at times our freedom needs fences' for our sake/gospel's sake, and finally iii) that we need to be inclusive – sexually pure and have a passion to be creators of community relationships.

Free: For a long time I have wondered why Paul was so hard on Jn. Mark and didn't invite him to join them on their next missionary journey. Here is the question. How did the Pharisaic Christians in Jerusalem find out that Paul was not demanding circumcision of the new believers? I say this because even before Paul and Barnabas arrived back in Antioch it would seem that those who wanted to add circumcision as part of the 'package deal' of salvation had already headed north to correct the 'poor teaching' Paul had been giving. It would seem to me that the only way this could happen would have been if when John Mark wooed out and left Paul and Barnabas as they traveled from Perga to Antioch in Pisidia and went back to Jerusalem that John Mark told this narrow minded group what Paul was doing. That means that later as Paul refused to take John Mark on the 2nd Missionary journey the reason behind his refusal may have been because John Mark had bailed on them and gone home on their first missionary journey, but also because much of the problem they had to deal with concerning the argument around the circumcision of Gentiles found its initial impetus when Mark spoke unwisely on his return to Jerusalem.

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