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# Necessary Arguments

What is it that makes you angry?

By answering this question, we begin to discover what it is we love, because when something we love is threatened, we get angry.

Steve Garber, the author of *The Fabric of Faithfulness* and a professor at the University of Virginia, used a phrase with his children which I have found helpful with mine and with myself. When his children used to shed tears over spilled milk or not getting their way or some other trivial matter, he would say, "Save those tears." He meant that tears are precious and should be reserved for things that really matter.

That is the example we see in these leaders of the early Church. Surely there were other disagreements among Christians before this. And there were other pressing matters, like persecution and death which may have warranted a gathering. But we never read of one until now. No other disagreement and no amount of persecution provoked an urgent meeting at Jerusalem requiring arduous travel before this one. Why? Because nothing is as important as the defense of the Gospel. We could summarize everything the Apostles have to say about interpersonal conflicts between Christians with these words, "Grow up and get over it in forgiveness!" We could summarize everything the Apostles have to say about persecution this way, "Rejoice that the Lord has counted you worthy to suffer for his name!" However, when the Gospel is in danger of compromise either by something's being added to it or subtracted from it, the Apostles say by their example, "Drop everything, make whatever sacrifices necessary, get together everyone possible and reaffirm the pure Gospel which is to "believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved" (11).

At the first sign that the Gospel was being compromised, the Church took action and so must we. This passage shows us four ways we must respond.

## Sermon Outline:

### I. Immediately (Acts 15:1-4)

We must take action immediately when we suspect that the Gospel is being compromised. When the Church discerned that something was being added to salvation by grace alone, the leadership sprang into action immediately.

#### A. Vigilance (1,3,4)

In order to detect error the Church had to be vigilant. We must listen very carefully to all teaching and ask if anything is being added to or subtracted from salvation by grace alone. So what were the signs that the Gospel was being compromised? The red flag for Paul and Barnabas was the requirement of something in addition to

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grace for salvation. The teachers from Judea were insisting that these new Gentile believers get circumcised and obey the ceremonial dietary laws of Judaism (cm. Ga. 2:3,4). In essence, they were saying that in order to have salvation or fellowship with Jewish Christians, these Gentile converts had to become circumcised.

## **B. Fervor (2)**

We must also respond with fervor, , both for the sake of the individual preaching a false gospel and for those they may lead astray.

In Galatians 1:9 Paul says, “As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” The Greek word for “accursed” here is anathema. Literally, Paul says that if anyone preaches a false gospel, let him go to Hell.

Again, in Galatians 2:11, Paul opposes Peter himself, because “he stood condemned.” Peter, one of the men who walked with Jesus, Paul says, stood condemned because he was.

Finally, in Galatians 5:12 Paul says of those who try to add circumcision as a condition for gospel, I wish they would go all the way and “emasculate themselves.”

At a previous church I pastored, we had an individual from Trinidad join us and play his drums in praise to God as part of our worship. Shortly afterward, I received a letter from one of the members of our congregation in which she stated that those drums made her feel that she was “in the pit of Hell.” I called her up for a meeting, and when she affirmed that she still felt this way I told her that the only thing that was from the pit of Hell was her attitude.

After the 2016 election, a friend of mine stated that anyone who had voted in a certain way could not be a Christian. I did not like the way the election panned out either, but it is possible for Christians to disagree over matters of conscience. I told my friend that he was committing the Galatian heresy.

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I don't enjoy these types of conversations, but out of love for our brothers and sisters, they are ones we must have, because anyone who adds anything to the gospel stands condemned. I remain good friends with both of these individuals to this day.

We may find these responses incredibly sharp, but they show us just how serious a matter it is when the central message of Christianity – the gospel – is threatened.

## **II. Deliberately (Acts 15:5-11)**

However, notice that Paul and Barnabas—even though they were identified as Apostles—did not act as vigilantes. They took these concerns to the Church leadership. Acts 15 is a very important chapter for Presbyterians because we find in it several of the core principles of our church government.

### **A. Appeal (2)**

For one it demonstrates the privilege of appeal. When Paul and Barnabas heard about this false teaching, they appealed to a gathering of apostles and elders from all the churches planted thus far. Every member in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has the privilege of appealing his or her concerns to the next highest court of the Church. When a member is concerned that something is awry and hinders the faithful execution of the Great Commission he may appeal to his Session. If he is not satisfied with his Session, he may appeal to his Presbytery. And if he is not satisfied with his Presbytery's response, he may appeal to the General Assembly.

### **B. Plurality (6)**

This text also demonstrates the principle of plurality. Even the Apostles did not make a decision on this issue individually. They submitted their decision to the gathering of Apostles and elders and the decision was communicated to the churches from the group, not individuals. No one person in Presbyterianism has ultimate authority. There is only authority when elders are gathered together in a properly called meeting. That is why we refer to decisions being made by the Session. "Session" refers to being seated; therefore, the elders only make authoritative decisions when they are seated together in a meeting.

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**C. Submission (2,6,12)**

Another principle lived out in this passage is that of mutual submission. Each leader submitted himself to the others to listen to their perspective and abide by whatever decision the group made. Every ruling elder, deacon, and minister must answer affirmatively this question at his ordination, “Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?”

**D. Debate (7)**

Finally, this passage shows the importance of debate in order to reach consensus. These leaders put forth their altering perspectives. Each one was heard and at least the appearance is that each was heard in order and with respect. At the end of the day, the group made a decision and no dissent is recorded. That is remarkable given that Peter, James, and the Pharisees seemed to have been of one mind at some point. And their perspective was counter to that of Paul and Barnabas. However, after spirited but civil debate each recognized that the Holy Spirit had directed them toward their decision and they submitted to it, though perhaps there may have been individual disappointment.

**III. Biblically (Acts 15:12-22)**

Whatever decision we make on any aspect of church life must be rooted in Scripture. A man I once worked with would always ask others who made a statement or proposed a decision where they found support for it in the Bible. He was not trying to be antagonistic but to train us to ground everything we did in scripture. This principle is especially helpful in circumstances regarding preference. When we seek to impose our personal preference on others, we must be forced to ask “where is that in the Bible?”

**A. Providence (7-11)**

Sometimes what is biblical is discovered first by providential experience. That was the case with Peter. Apparently corrected by Paul’s confrontation, Peter testified to what he saw at the home of Cornelius. Cornelius was the first Gentile in redemptive history who was declared to be a child of God without first becoming a Jew. Yes, he worshiped in the Jewish synagogue as a God-fearer but he had never become a proselyte by getting circumcised or keeping the sacrifices. And Peter never added

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that requirement. The only condition Peter gives to Cornelius for the forgiveness of sins is belief in Jesus Christ (10:43). As soon as Peter spoke those words, God confirmed that such was the case by means of signs and wonders. In his speech before the Jerusalem Council, Peter makes the case even more strongly by saying that no one in Jewish history was able to please God by his law-keeping because no one could do it perfectly (v.10). The only way someone can be saved is by receiving grace as a gift from God (11). Peter then says something that is especially gracious and humble in v.11, that it is by grace that Jews are saved, just as the Gentiles are. There is no more hint that the Gentiles are second-class citizens. He says Jews must be saved in the same way Gentiles are.

### **B. Proof (12-22)**

So far, Peter has spoken from his own experience, though in chapter 10 he said that all the prophets had taught the same (v.43). Some in the assembly could have said, “That is only Peter’s opinion” or “This is a novel and heretical teaching.” So James quickly follows with a quote from the prophet Amos who lived about 800 years before the birth of Christ. Through Amos, God told his people that the sign that the resurrected Christ was David’s promised greater Son would be the salvation of the Gentiles without any other conditions except belief in Christ (cf. 2:25-36; 13:23,32-37). In other words, the Bible proves that it was always God’s intention to save the Gentiles and put them on a par with the Jews on the basis of faith alone.

What follows this quote from Scripture is James’ opinion which becomes the pastoral advice of the council. While he says that Scripture demands that the Gentiles not be circumcised as a condition of salvation, he says it is his “judgment” that they comply with some of the Jewish scruples out of respect. These are not biblical demands, nor are they conditions of salvation. Rather they are opportunities to show respect and deference to their Jewish brethren. Christians are free to limit their freedom out of love for weaker believers. Therefore, James and the council ask the Gentiles to refrain from eating meat offered to idols, to conform their interactions between the sexes to Jewish scruples, and to eat meat that is prepared according to Jewish custom. The early Church provides us a good pattern not only for doing all things biblically, but also willingly limiting our freedom when we detect that it is perceived to

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be unloving by other brothers and sisters. To live in that way is to promote the Gospel which is at its core a message of reconciliation between God and his people.

#### **IV. Pastorally (Acts 15:23-35)**

Finally, I want you to notice that this decision was conveyed to the churches in a personal and pastoral way. Everything gained in that discussion could have been undone without gentle, pastoral dealing. It is never sufficient to speak just the truth. The truth must be spoken in love.

##### **A. Manner (22-23)**

To deal with a matter pastorally requires dealing with it personally. There is no substitution for talking to someone about a difficult issue in person. A phone call is better than a letter or email and a personal visit is best of all. The letter the leaders wrote was gracious enough, but these men decided to take it to the Antioch church in person. My friends, if you have an issue with someone or the church, deal with it personally. First, ask yourself if this is a matter that could compromise or hinder the progress of the Gospel in some way. If it isn't, you might consider dropping it altogether. But if you think that it could fester and arrest the work of the Gospel in your own life, then deal with it, but do so personally. God could have sent you a letter telling you the Lamb had been slain from the foundation of the world and you were saved. But he came in the flesh and lived among us to accomplish our redemption in our history and in our world. Imitate that same kind of incarnational love.

##### **B. Message**

To deal with a matter pastorally also requires opening your mouth and speaking graciously. Notice what this letter said and what impact it and the accompanying sermons had. Look at the warmth and concern expressed: "some . . . disturbed you, troubling your minds" (24). Look at the expression of friendship in v.25. Look at the concern to unburden of unnecessary requirements for salvation in v.28.

What was the result? The people were glad and encouraged (31). Then the prophets encouraged some more (32). The brothers' warmth drew warmth from the Antiochenes who sent them back with the blessing of peace (33). And Paul and Barnabas stayed with them to continue to encourage them from the Word in an incarnational way (34).

That is what encouragement does for people. A church where encouragement is given liberally is a church where love thrives. And when a church is characterized by encouragement, those rare occasions when sin must be confronted are much more fruitful because the person being corrected knows that it comes out of love. The word translated "encouragement" (*parakaleo*) is a common one in Acts and it occurs frequently (21 times). There are two main words for "dispute" (*stasis*, cm. 15:2) or "disagreement" (*parozusmos*, cm. 15:39). Those only occur once each in reference to interpersonal relationships in the Church. That says that there was a lot of encouraging going on and not a lot of rebuking or disputing. This shows us that we must be light on dispute and heavy on encouragement.

We might summarize it this way: "save those tears" for when the gospel is threatened; otherwise, encourage.

Some years ago, I read a story that occurred in the life of Dr. Fred Craddock. He was a Methodist preaching professor at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta and is now retired.

He was once invited to give lectures on preaching at Winnipeg, Manitoba in Canada. It was in the Fall so he asked how he should dress and they said that the weather would be mild, all he would need was a windbreaker. However, when Craddock arrived, there was a blizzard. In fact, the blizzard was so severe, the man who was his contact called him and said that not only were the lectures cancelled, but he also would not be able to come and pick him up from his hotel because of the snow. He did, however, direct Craddock to a

small cafe in the bus depot that might be open just a couple blocks from his hotel.

Craddock put on his windbreaker and braved the cold to get to the small cafe. As he entered the cafe, the bells jingling on the door as it opened and closed, he saw that it was packed with people. The people at the counter all moved down to make room for one more.

A gruff man approached Craddock at his seat and said, “what do you want?”

“Could I have a menu?” Craddock replied.

“We don't have a menu. All we have is soup,” the man answered.

“I'll have soup then,” Craddock said.

The soup came out. It was grey and kind of murky, so Craddock just used it to warm his hands.

Soon after, a woman came in who was as badly dressed for the cold as Craddock. The patrons at the counter moved down to make room for her and the gruff man asked her what she wanted.

“I'll just have a glass of water,” the woman said.

“Only paying customers are allowed in here,” the gruff man said coldly.

The woman didn't have any money to buy soup, so she simply asked if she could be allowed to have a glass of water and to get some warmth.

“Get out,” the man replied. “Only paying customers are allowed in here.”



As the women turned to leave, all the patrons in the restaurant put down their spoons, got up, and began to leave as well.

The gruff man realized what was happening and said, “Okay, okay, everybody calm down. She can have her water. Just sit down and everybody calm down.”

A little later, after the woman had left, Craddock asked the man next to him who she was.

“I don't know,” he replied. “All I know is that if she ain't welcome here, ain't nobody welcome here.”

Craddock says that suddenly that grey soup began to resemble something much different to him. As he realized how everyone in the restaurant was eating the same thing, he said it started to resemble the Lord's Supper, a meal where everyone is welcome under only one condition: faith in Jesus Christ.

The gospel promises salvation to all who believe, no conditions added. That means you belong here, and if you ain't welcome here, I ain't welcome here either, and none of us is welcome, because the only condition for salvation and fellowship with other believers is faith in Jesus.