

## **There's No Fight Like a Church Fight**

Acts 10:44-11:18, 15:1-21

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A couple of years ago, two churches in Kentucky town that sat across the street from each other started to fight. It wasn't between the churches' members. The fight was played out on their church signs, just like the one that sits out in front of Zumbro.

Our Lady of Martyrs Catholic Church displayed a sign one day that said, "All dogs go to heaven". Beulah Cumberland Presbyterian Church rebutted, "Only humans go to heaven. Read the Bible." And the fight was on.

Our Lady put up another message that read, "God loves all his creations. Dogs included." The Presbyterians were now clearly annoyed by replying, "Dogs don't have souls. This is not open for debate."

Things seemed to be getting a little heated so the Catholics decided to lighten things up a bit with a sign that read, "Catholic dogs go to heaven. Presbyterian dogs can talk to their pastor."

Apparently the Presbyterians weren't amused because they shot back with, "Converting to Catholicism does not magically grant your dog a soul." Now it seemed that the Catholics were just having fun and continued to provoke their Presbyterian neighbors, "Free dogs' souls with conversion!" the next sign proclaimed.

The Presbyterians wouldn't relent on their case to keep dogs in their place, "Dogs are animals. There aren't any rocks in heaven either."

The Catholics served up the last word, “All rocks go to Heaven.”

We can't tell for sure if these churches were really serious about this dispute, but it wouldn't surprise me if this were rooted in some kind of real antagonism.

Considering that the church is made up of people, it can be expected that there will be squabbles and disagreements about what is required to be part of the church.

This is at the very heart of the debate in this portion of Acts. Up to this point, the disciples have been encouraged by how the Holy Spirit has been bringing fellow Jews to follow the Way of Jesus. Now the Holy Spirit is testing the limits of faith in the leaders of the early church by bringing Gentiles to faith in Jesus. The early church is left wondering, “Can a person really be part of the church without first being circumcised and following the law of Moses?” This was not only Jewish custom, it was theological. Circumcision and the Law of Moses was a source of identity within the faith community. It signified that they belonged to the God of Israel. So when Gentiles starting coming into the church, the question before the Jews who were part of the church was, “How will we know they belong?” The Jews' concern was one of inclusion rather than exclusion. Jesus was certainly an important part of the early church, but they didn't see Jesus as a new way to live in faithfulness to God. They saw Jesus as the continuation of God's promises to Israel. So when the Holy Spirit is found in the Gentiles, it is outside of any experience the early church has had before.

It's safe to say they were thinking, “We've never done it this way before.” Yet, it didn't seem like they could go back. It started with Peter and his vision while praying in Joppa. Let's look at Acts 11:5-12 on pg. 895 in your pew Bibles, (Read verses). Peter wanted to

buckle down and hold on to what he thought he knew would please God, but God was doing a new thing. Peter's previous faithfulness to the Law would no longer be enough if he were to fulfill his call as an apostle. Peter had a conversion experience. He was seeing with new eyes the power of God at work in his life and in the life of the Jesus community. There was no longer a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. But just because he had this experience didn't mean it would be easy to convince others in his community of the same thing.

New ideas and new ways of doing things are bound to stir up debate, even conflict. Over the centuries the church has debated all kinds of things: music styles, women's ordination, slavery, communion, pastors, pew cushions, church kitchens, racism and as we know well; sexuality. Often these debates weren't solved over night, and some still aren't resolved. Yet the church lives on. The only thing is that how we have these debates and arguments makes a difference in how we serve God and how outsiders see the church.

If you ask many young adults today who aren't in the church why they aren't; you may hear responses like, "the church is full of hypocrites", "church doesn't address what's going on in my life", or "all the church does is fight". Though we who are on the inside know that these responses may seem a bit unfair, their perspective is still valid, if not true at times. And if we're honest with each other and ourselves, I don't think I'd be speaking out of turn by saying that we feel this way sometimes. But, if we believe that the church exists for people who are not here, then we won't simply dismiss these thoughts. And if people who aren't here think that the church doesn't have anything really important to fight for, then maybe we aren't picking the right battles. Or maybe we are not always arguing in a way that honors all the people God loves.

That's where I think Acts has much to offer the church. Look ahead in your Bibles to Acts chapter 15. After there seems to be relative peace in welcoming the Gentiles, unease creeps in again as more and more Gentiles accept Jesus as Lord. Many in Jerusalem are stuck on how things have always been done. They challenge whether Paul and Silas are really being faithful by sharing the story of Jesus without circumcision. And now a church council meeting has been called to address this issue. Peter and James, Paul and Barnabas, some of the Pharisees who have now joined in the way of Jesus - they are all there. Look at verses 5-11 on page 899 (Read verses). The Pharisees make their points based on historical precedent and the perspective that following Jesus is still a part of the Jewish faith. On the other hand, Peter argues from his very recent experience that still has him wondering about it, yet he is convinced that God is doing a new thing.

Later, James takes his turn arguing from the point of Scripture by referring to the Old Testament prophet Amos. (Read vv. 15:15-18) He goes on to hammer out a compromise that would set the terms for how both Jewish and Gentile Christians could live together in fellowship. (vv. 15:19-21)

The debate was intense. After all, the future of the church was riding on what happened at this meeting. Yet, unlike today's political echo chambers, the disciples did not try to destroy one another's character. They did not regard each other as the enemy. Rather, they listened carefully to the personal experiences of God's activity among them. They took into consideration the historical covenant relationship with God to God's people. They dug into what Scripture had to say about what they were experiencing to find a faithful way forward.

It wasn't easy, and in the end people had to let go of some of the things that were dearest to them. When the early Christians accepted Gentiles it changed the course of human history. I think it is easy 2000 years into this journey with Jesus to see ourselves as the Jews, the insiders, those who want to keep things as they have been and make outsiders conform to our ways. But we have to remember, we are the Gentiles. Without God's clear promise and concern for us, and a passion for the gospel that burned in the hearts of Peter and Paul, we simply would not be here worshiping Jesus today. We are the recipients of God's free and undeserved grace. And this kind of grace is a major theme for our God.

That's what's scary about what happened in this church fight...God set the church loose without any clearly defined boundaries or rules. The church became a permission giving body, a hospitable body where people could grow and change and be changed by a life giving relationship with Jesus. And that's also what's so exciting about being a part of the church. We might encounter God in ways we didn't expect. God might call you in a new ministry here like preparing a weekend's worth of food for school children in need, maybe God will lead you to all dig into our Bibles more and discover what God has been doing for centuries, maybe God will call us to serve downtown in ways that we've not even thought of before. Maybe God will call you to change professions and seek a career that gives you deeper sense of purpose and joy. Maybe God will call us to add worship opportunities that connect with people who are not yet here.

This is messy work. Being the church takes energy and there's bound to be some disagreement along the way. We certainly don't want to fight about everything, but there are some things worth discussing in the open, with Scripture to guide us and our experiences of God to inform us. Like the early church, it's important to determine what is worth fighting about, and perhaps take a note from them about how best to include

people in the church. We don't have to have all the answers. I am convinced that if we are to succeed in navigating conflict that God will need to lead us. God is faithful. God will accomplish in us what God wills, so long as we are willing to listen and work it out together. Amen.