

If I asked you what the most important beliefs are for Christians, I bet you could rattle a whole list off. And I asked you how a Christian should or shouldn't act, I bet you could make a whole list of those things as well. But I have a secret to tell you, I bet if we all compared our lists, they wouldn't be identical.

There's a saying that most preachers have a handful of topics that they preach on one way or another again and again and again. Friends, fair warning, this is one of those topics for me. We can all be faithful, passionate believers and not agree about absolutely everything about the faith.

Case in point - the early church.

Often people herald the Book of Acts as being the epitome of what the church today should be. They lift up all of the folks being saved and new churches being planted and say “we should go back to Acts again.” Except in doing so, there tends to be a very selective reading of the Book of Acts that cuts out all of the hard parts.

I shared with you a few weeks ago one of those hard parts - the believers from different regions arguing about whose widows were being treated better. Now today, it is the *leaders* of the church who are having a pretty significant disagreement - this time about circumcision.

Paul had previously been sent out with the blessings of the church of Jerusalem to go and take the Good News to the gentiles. It was Paul's call upon his life that he received from the resurrected Christ along the road to Damascus. At that time, the church in Jerusalem, was sort of like the central hub, with James being the most influential leader, even if we hear about Peter a bit more.

So Paul has went and done what he was commissioned to do. Spread the Good News. Form communities of faith. Teach and preach about Jesus. And he had wide success. While he didn't limit his sharing of the Gospel to just gentiles, going to synagogues to teach to the Jews as well, by this point he has helped several new faith communities be birthed into being that are chiefly composed of gentiles - or non-Jewish people.

Now he is back in Jerusalem and there is a snag. A disagreement. People were going to the folks Paul had taught about the faith and saying that they weren't *really* believers unless they are circumcised.

A few months back, while working our way through the book of Genesis, I started to read circumcision in a different way. We may have heard before that it was a sign of the covenant, this outward action that confirmed God's promise through Abraham, but all I could find myself thinking was what trust! Sure, Abraham had to trust God to have circumcision performed on his body, but everyone else must have deeply trusted Abraham. His countless male servants who were all circumcised by Abraham's hand. His son, Ishmael, who by no means was a little boy at this point. And Sarah. Could you image that conversation when Abraham got back from this holy and profound experience with God? So God told me to cut off the foreskin of every male as a sign of God's promise. Yet, it would seem that everyone was willing to follow Abraham's lead, because they knew him and trusted him.

Now here are these folks essentially going and stirring up discontent with these new believers. Folks that the new Christians don't have a relationship with, that is ultimately confusing them and has the potential to harm their relationship with Paul.

So now Paul got into a “sharp disagreement” along with Barnabas with these folks who are teaching these new things and confusing the new believers. Then they packed their bags and

headed to Jerusalem to have it out with the church there, this central hub of teaching about the faith.

In some ways it would be really easy to try to make this disagreement too simple. On one hand, you have these folks who are about tradition. And what tradition is that? There tradition - the tradition of Moses. Up until this point, Christianity wasn't really a different religion so much as a different part or teaching or sect of Judaism. So the traditionalists are saying of course you need to be circumcised. You can't be Jewish if you aren't circumcised and if you aren't Jewish you can't be a follower of Jesus.

On the other side of this simplistic understanding would be the people who are trying to take the Good News to a new group of people, to raise up disciples of Jesus in an innovative way. This would be where Paul and Barnabas would fall.

But here's the thing - if we just look at the simplistic understanding we miss the fact that the early church *already had this disagreement*. Back in Acts, chapter 11, with one of their own. Peter had this vision from God about what was clean versus unclean that led to him going into the house of a Gentile and baptizing him. When Peter was called to account some of these same folks ended up saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

So the argument isn't really about the thing it seems to be about. It isn't about who is traditional vs. innovative. It isn't about who follows what laws and who doesn't. It about something bigger under the surface. The thing beyond the thing.

You know what I mean, don't you? Have you ever found yourself in an argument with someone about one thing, only to find that it is really about this complete other thing. Sometimes we can name that thing, and other times we can't, but it is the true thing we are disagreeing about.

And for Paul and the church in Jerusalem, that thing, is who belongs. Who gets to be part of this Jesus movement that has now exploded beyond the first disciples. Who is welcome in the family of God?

And friends, we are still here 2,000 years later having different versions of that same argument. Who belongs in the family of God. Who are the folks who we break bread with, and not just any bread, but the bread around the communion table. Who are the people who bear the same name as us, Christian, even if we don't agree with them on everything?

The folks at that discussion that day were able to break it down to what was the most important thing - the grace of the Lord Jesus that saves us. The most essential thing.

There is this quote that is often mis-attributed to John Wesley, but is still wise, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." In other words, what is the most essential thing? The grace of Jesus Christ. The life-saving, life-changing grace of Jesus Christ.

And what do we do with all the rest? Well the early church said, we don't need to put the burden of some of these other things on the gentile believers, they don't have to be Jewish, they don't have to be like us in order to be a believer. So circumcision isn't one of those most important things. But here is a list of what is. A really short list.

Friends, we don't need to go back to the book of Acts in order to be the church, but we can learn what it means to be the church, even when we disagree, from the people in the book of Acts. What might God be speaking to us today, in and through them? Amen.