

Never The Same Again

(Acts 15:4-19)

⁴ And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. ⁵ But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. ⁶ And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. ⁷ And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. ⁸ And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; ⁹ And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

¹² Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. ¹³ And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: ¹⁴ Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, ¹⁶ After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: ¹⁷ That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. ¹⁸ Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. ¹⁹ Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

I want to talk to you this morning about change-- Specifically about this idea of our ability to relate to and engage the culture of the world we are a part of— How is the church supposed to deal with it?

Well, as far as I can see it there are a couple of kinds of churches- Book of Revelation does a real good job of outlining the different kinds of churches:

1. The church that hides

The apostle John calls it the dead church or the loveless church- This is the church that in essence has gone underground. There's always a lot of talk about the dangers of the world, and a lot of talk about how we need to be separate and set apart from the world. These things are true, but the church that hides preaches those things in a way that is out of balance with the truth.

Most of the sermons in these churches are about how the world just keeps getting worse and worse and how heaven is the only way the church will be able to escape. The church that hides seems like a very spiritual place when you visit it, but when you stay around for a while, it starts to smell bad. Like a pool of water where fresh water is never added. New faces and new souls are rarely added to the church that hides and so it kind of smells bad and it is a very unhealthy spiritual atmosphere. Nothing going on.

2. The church that conforms

This is the church that engages the culture and likes it so much that they decide to be just like it. This is the type of church that will say, "You want us to accept homosexuality", No problem. We will hang your banner out front and put an openly gay pastor in the pulpit. Everything the culture says is ok is ok with the conforming church. The standards for the church become whatever the standards of the culture the church is a part of. John calls this church the compromising church.

3. The feel good church

This is the church that draws you in with theatrics or is constantly preaching on prosperity. They tell you that all is right with the world as long as you keep on giving but never touch the truth in scripture. The pastors refuse to preach on hell, immorality, homosexuality, or any sin for that matter. In fact most of them will tell you that you can get to heaven if you are a good person and do some good works here and there.

If you watch most of the preachers in these churches they walk around the stage holding their Bibles and quote scripture, and I use that term loosely, because they never open their bibles. It is obvious as well that the congregations don't know the word because some of the scriptures they claim to quote are completely false.

I heard one pastor quote a scripture that said God helps those who help themselves, while asking for money I might add, which is nowhere in the Bible.

3. The Overcoming Church

This is a faithful church and I hope describes our church. John says in Revelation 3:8 that God says this about this type of church; *⁸ I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.*

Why did he say that “Because this type of church kept Gods command to persevere and to fulfill what He calls us to do.”

Persevere means to -- to persist at doing something even though there is opposition and discouragement— Being the overcoming church is not gonna’ be easy- you are faithful because you kept on going even though it was tough- This is the church that God is calling us to be—

It’s not gonna be easy for us to engage the culture of the world today or the lost in it. I get it, we face opposition on the outside and sometimes we get opposition on the inside. From our families, friends, and sometimes other believers that tell you it is much safer and easier to not go out there and try.

But let me tell you that the opposition we get on the inside is almost always about change. It is a question of change that brought Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James together in the scriptures that we read. I am going to touch on a couple of things with you.

The scriptures that we read are a record of the very first church council. It was not at all about theology it was to answer this question. Should the church adapt itself to the new cultures it was engaging, or should the new cultures adapt themselves to the culture of the church? The whole question was not about morality or doctrine, it was about change, would the church engage the culture or not.

The second part of that is when we convert someone do they have to do things exactly the way the church thinks they should? Did Gentiles need to do it the Jewish way in order to be saved?-- For us—Is there one sacred culture that we have to preserve, one sacred way of doing things, that we must do forever and ever amen!- The answer as we can see now as we go through it is - NO!

Verses 7-10 said; why are you making it hard on the Gentiles- why are you putting yokes on their necks- why are you weighing them down with stuff that isn't important. Basically, don't get hung up on your traditions but teach them about Jesus and what He did for them.

Now my primary point is not necessarily about the way we reach our world, even though that is important- I'm talking to you about our willingness to forget tradition and accept change. Our willingness to engage our culture.

What James is ultimately saying in these scriptures is that the church was not to remain the same. The church had to adapt and forsake tradition and reach people where they were.

The Pharisees, the legalists wanted everyone to worship and live the same way that they did. They said that there is only one way to be Christian and it's our way.

James didn't just say that their way was the only way- He said that kind of attitude was a contradiction to the mission of the church-

This first church council set the church up as a pliable and adaptive movement. The church was already experiencing growth, as we have read throughout Acts, but now the church is exploding with growth. It was from this point that the church became the church that has been changing the world for the last two thousand years.

The church that we are a part of was established on the promise of change and hope. Hearts would be changed, families would be changed, cities would be changed, the entire history of humanity would be changed by those who were a part of this movement of God. I want to see this change here, don't you?

When we are changing, and when we are adapting, should be cause for celebration. Far too many times in the church when change comes it bothers people' makes them mad even at the simple things. Like, I can't believe that that visitor sat in my chair. I mean come on, we are supposed to be different than the world around us. As the song says, "they will know we are Christians by our love", not by our worldly attitude. Right?

Let me put it this way, "If we are unwilling to move with the wind of God , we will be moved by the whirlwind of Satan"

Guys, we need to be moved by the wind of God. We need to journey into God's future. We need to adapt, meet people where they are and lead them to a relationship with Christ. We need to throw out traditions and accept people for who they are.

We are going to have to face the dangers, fears, obstacles, and challenges. We need to stand in the middle of our world and call sinners to God.

That's what I'm calling us to do as a church.

The same God that changed our hearts and changes the world around us calls the church to change. When we refuse to change, we refuse to obey.

I don't want to water it down anymore- here's what's really going on.

The church is God's agent of change through which his power is revealed- God showed his power in Elijah's day by sending fire from heaven- his equivalent now is His church- that's how his power is revealed—

I don't want to stand before Him on that day and have to answer to why didn't you lead your people to change? Why didn't you forsake tradition and face your fears and get out there and reach the lost?

Guys, trust me, if you get out there and do it ... You will never be the same again!