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Acts 15:22-35

Outward Church: A Gracious Counterculture

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I wrote this sermon last week on Thursday, the day after the clash at the capitol. You probably watched the news and saw the pictures of journalists and politicians taking cover. I think the image I was most startled by was of the barricaded door into the House Chamber with the five agents with their guns drawn. The glass was broken and in another picture you could see another's man's face on the other side of the doorway.

These images and memories got me thinking about the world where Paul, Peter, Barnabas, and the other Christians lived. I think there are some similarities. The New Testament took place in a time of tension and conflict. They lived under Rome's control. Rome was tolerant and incredibly intolerant at the same time. If you worshipped their gods and emperor, they allowed you to worship your gods too. You could believe whatever you wanted as long as you played lip-service to what they believed. They showed some leniency to the Jews, depending on the emperor, but were quick to take away their freedoms.

Rome reminds me of our more liberal culture. You can believe whatever you want, all you have to say is the words, "My truth." "This is true for me, but I wouldn't want to impose my truth on your beliefs." The only absolute truth is that there is no absolute truth, which is a self-contradiction. This perspective leads to alienation and isolation of any who disagree. Rome and many of the Greeks Paul encounters on his missionary journeys were both tolerant and quite intolerant of other beliefs.

But there was also a huge segment of the population that was intolerant not because of their liberalism, but because of their conservatism. In the New Testament we read about the zealots, violent insurrectionists who wanted to restore Judea to an independent statehood. How about the religious leaders in Jerusalem who stone Stephen and try to kill the Apostle Paul? They are just trying to preserve their religious traditions, their culture, their nation. They're zealous for God and his laws, or so they think.

Then we encounter Christians. Christians were different than everyone else. They didn't fall into the trap of "us" vs. "them" thinking. Instead, they established a gracious counterculture, someplace entirely different than anything else the world had seen. Christians established churches where liberal Romans, enlightened Greeks, and conservative Jews worshipped the one true God and had community.

The Church - A Gracious Counterculture

There is a moment in the early church's history when we could have divided into factions, conservative vs. liberal, but we don't. A group of Pharisaical believers, claiming to be sent from James, Jesus' brother, the leader of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:11), travel to Antioch in Northern Syria. Jerusalem was an older more conservative church full of believers who lived and walked with Jesus. This delegation claims the church sent them, even though they did not (Acts 15:24). They go and the wreck havoc at Antioch.

This young church at Antioch was sending out missionaries all over the world. They were trying new things. They were rather liberal in the way they did church, it didn't matter if you were Jew or Gentile. The Pharisees group argue that Peter shouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore, maybe because it's causing Jews in Jerusalem to not take Christianity seriously (Gal 2:11-12). At this point, the whole church could have imploded. They could have formed one faction of conservative Jews who required circumcision to join their

ranks. The other faction could have formed from liberal Antioch who are out there on mission. Instead of self-destructing, the church keeps the peace and stays unified. How did they do it? How can we do it today?

The church works it out by meeting up in Jerusalem for a council to decide the issue, whether or not Gentiles need to become circumcised and obey the law to become Christians. Peter gets up and says that what we need is grace. Grace is the gift of God's forgiveness and love. Grace unites the church.

Acts 15:11 (ESV)

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Peter is clear that we are saved by grace, not by circumcision, not by cultural trappings, not by obeying the law, but by grace. That grace helps them form a community that reacts differently to conflict than Rome or the Greeks or the rest of the Jews. Instead of condemning the believing Pharisees (Paul certainly opposes them in Galatians 2), in Acts they all agree to send a letter to Antioch. That letter says they are sorry for the pain the group claiming to be from James caused them (v24), and that they do not have to get circumcised to become Christians, but they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from animal strangulation, all things having to do with pagan worship, and also abstain from sexual immorality, which God prohibits. It also includes an encouragement. Keep the peace and you'll do well.

As the church, we're to create a gracious counterculture. Last week we didn't see that in our country. In fact, we saw the opposite of that as protesters carried Bibles, picked signs that say, "Jesus Saves," and they carried the Christian Flag into the capitol building itself. The Christian flag, a red-cross on a blue square, and white banner. Violent insurrectionists are the opposite of the gracious counterculture we're called to create. That's not true Christianity. So how are we going to do it? We don't have to all agree on who should be President or the best pathway forward during Covid or what ice-cream flavor is the best. But as the church we do need to model what peace and unity look like in a fragmented and divided world.

In today's passage, we find **four characteristics of a gracious counterculture**. A gracious counterculture is characterized by (2 "f"s and 2 "g"s) 1) faith in the Spirit, 2) forbearance, 3) gospel loyalty, and 4) gratitude.

1) faith in the Spirit

After Peter's speech, James gives a solution. Of course the Gentiles are saved by grace, but let's have them refrain from certain activities. Then v22 says, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." I like the phrase "it seemed good." They heard James speak, they recognized the truth, and they stepped forward in faith. Later it says they trusted the Holy Spirit; v28 says, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." The Holy Spirit confirmed what they were supposed to do.

The church community was characterized by faith, not by fear. They believed the Spirit was steering the ship and that he was not going to steer them into an iceberg. They knew the Spirit would lead them where they should go, so they walked by faith. That's completely countercultural. Our world takes a bubble bath in fear. People are constantly afraid of what's under the surface of this agenda or that. Are you falling prey to that fear? Fear sure makes it difficult to love our neighbors. It's hard to love our local police officer, or politician, or activist neighbor if we are afraid of them. It's hard to love our neighbor because of covid.

During covid I've struggled with how to love my frontline. You all know I do CrossFit. They're still open and I still go. I've struggled with fear. What if I get Covid? What if I spread it? I've thought about quitting, but I see the Lord doing things in the relationships I have there. If I quit, I won't be able to share the love of Christ with them. I'll also get really chubby on my pandemic diet. So I wear a mask, I wash my hands, I disinfect, and I pray. I pray that God will move, and I try to walk by faith, not foolishly, but also not by fear.

So far he has protected me. I don't share this story to try and convince you to join a gym, but wherever you are, to walk by faith in the Spirit. Don't be afraid. It's hard to form a gracious counterculture out of fear.

A gracious counterculture is characterized by faith and...

2) forbearance

I love the word forbearance. It's the idea of bearing with one another, despite difficulties. It's different than tolerance. Tolerance is putting up with someone you disagree with. Forbearance requires you to cancel a debt they owe. You have to be gracious to them, to give them something they don't deserve. Paul says:

Colossians 3:13 (ESV)

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Remember how I talked about "Grace wins!" two weeks ago? I said that James even shows grace to the believing Pharisees by making some cultural compromises. Don't eat food polluted by idols, or blood, or strangled animals. James is helping the believers find "common ground." The believers are following the minimum requirements for being considered a God-fearing Jew, which hopefully puts some of the believing Pharisees' minds and hearts at ease (Tyndale).

How can we bear with those around us? How can we find common ground as a church community? I'm proud to say I saw us trying to do this last semester as we worked through our Race, Class, and the Kingdom of God study series. We did not all agree. We talked about some really hard things and it was... hard. But we also found some common ground of wanting to make Cornerstone a place where those from other cultures feel welcome. I actually think we found the most common ground down at 10 Kirk St. in Lowell at the Living Waters Center of Hope. While we might not agree how best to build more diversity at Cornerstone, we agreed serving the population in downtown Lowell is something we could all get behind. This required us to bear with one another, to work it out, to try new things, and to show each other grace.

A gracious counterculture is characterized by 1) faith in the Spirit, 2) forbearance (bear with one another)...

3) gospel loyalty

Remember how Peter said we're all saved by grace? The majority of believers at Jerusalem are unwilling to put the heavy weight of the law on the backs of the Gentiles. The majority of the believers sense the Holy Spirit's leading to recognize the gospel freedom the Gentiles have in Christ. That being said, it's not an easy issue. How to treat the Gentiles comes up over and over again throughout the New Testament. It's a struggle, and the church has to learn how to remain loyal to the gospel.

We don't know if the believing Pharisees walked away from the Christian community or stayed members of it. But if they did stay, they had to put gospel loyalty above party loyalty (Phil 1:27). As we think about what is going on in our world with all the division and strife, we too have to put gospel loyalty above party loyalty. If we are united in the gospel, it helps us find unity and harmony despite our cultural or political differences.

I listened to youtube video this week where one of the speakers talked about showing up to college to play on the Harvard crimson football team. He said how his parents dropped him off in front of the dorms and he didn't know where to go. But then other teammates came out, and made room for him. It was because they all wore crimson. They all wore the same colors. They all identified as one. We also all wear crimson too. We wear the crimson blood of Christ. That crimson blood has washed away our sins. As Christians, we need to identify with that crimson banner, no other allegiance but the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Maybe you don't wear crimson, but you want to. You want to be forgiven of your sins and receive eternal life. Well there's plenty of room in the team. Repent of your sins and believe in Christ Jesus, the star quarterback who laid down his life for his team. But then three days later Jesus rose again from the grave, offering forgiveness, grace, and a new community to any who will seek him.

The good news is that crimson is for all of creation. The gospel is personal as it addresses my sins, but it's enormous as it addresses us as a people and our world. The gospel changes us at our core and changes our cosmos. Gospel loyalty is not a call to only talk about the gospel and nothing else, but to faithfully work through how the gospel redeems all things.

A gracious counterculture is characterized by 1) faith in the Spirit, 2) forbearance (bearing with one another), 3) gospel loyalty, and...

4) gratitude

Look how the Gentile believers respond when they hear the decision. Paul, Barnabas, and the other believers deliver the Jerusalem council's letter to the believers at Antioch, and they rejoice. These believers are so joyful that they do not have to become culturally Jewish to be saved, and are happy to love each other by doing what it asks. V31 says, "And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. They rejoice. They party. They are grateful. My mentor told me that "joy is gratitude." When we are thankful we are joyful and when we are joyful we are thankful. They are thankful for the gospel and a gracious counterculture.

In a world marred by division and strife, how might we focus on what we have, instead of worrying about what we don't have or what we might lose? We can be glad that we are free to worship. We can be glad that we have a church family. We can be glad that we are saved by God's grace, not by our own good deeds. We can be glad that we can give up our Saturday mornings to feed the downtown Lowell community. We can be glad the ways God has gifted each one of us to love him and serve each other.

As a community, we have so much to thank God for. We are a part of a kingdom we can never lose. The world quakes because it is part of a kingdom that will one day fall. And as Christians, if we are putting our hope in that kingdom, we miss that we are members of another kingdom, Christ's kingdom. Christ's kingdom is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." (1 Pet 3:3 ESV) No one can take this kingdom from those who belong to Jesus (John 10:28-29).

Have you ever been to the beach and built a sandcastle? Winter is a great time for the beach. Last time we were at the beach Elijah kept knocking down my sandcastles. I took a bucket full of sand, tipped it upside-down, then put a stick on the top like a flag. Then Elijah smooshed it. Have you ever seen one of those big, complex, beautiful sandcastles that must have taken an entire day to build? Whether the sandcastle is Elijah sized, or as big as me, it always washes away. We are living in a sandcastle kingdom, all the authorities and power structures in this world will wash away. We have an eternal kingdom coming handcrafted by an artisan carpenter. No one will ever take Christ's kingdom away from us. Christ's kingdom is imperishable and eternal. When we walk by faith, show forbearance, or speak the gospel, we build a little bit of that kingdom in a sandcastle world.

A gracious counterculture is characterized by faith, forbearance, gospel loyalty, and gratitude.

So let's be a gracious counterculture. Let's do it in gestures of kindness, by praying for each other faithfully, by living out of faith in the Spirit, and by remembering Christ's love and sacrifice for us. What's one way you can model a gracious counterculture this week? How can we do it as a church? Let's pray.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (ESV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. How do those around you respond to conflict, both Christians and non-Christians?
2. How do you respond when things go wrong in your world?
3. What does it mean to form a gracious counterculture as the church?
4. What's wrong with letting fear motivate us? Fear, after all, is a powerful motivator.
5. What's better about faith? How does it help us live and serve?
6. What is forbearance and how can we express it with others in the church?
7. What is the gospel? Is it just the message of personal salvation, or is there more?
8. How might you practice gospel loyalty this week?
9. What's the connection between gratitude and joy?
10. What type of castle are you building?

Sources

Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2d; Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 366 (Acts 15:19-20).