

Who Wins a Church Fight?

Acts 15 (various)

First Presbyterian Church

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Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

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I'm a bit of a church nerd.

Maybe you have figured that out by now.

Here is a case in point: One of the things I enjoy doing is going back and reading old church records...especially the minutes from old Session meetings. I recognize that some might consider such a practice to be torture, but it's my idea of a good time.

Here's one thing I have discovered: The minutes of a church Session meeting only tell part of the story. I've been to some l-o-n-g Session meetings in my time. I'm talking three-or-four hour meetings...*tedious*, soul-crushing meetings with agendas that were overloaded and with Elders who seemed to love to hear themselves talk.

And then, magically, the next month, all of that tedium gets boiled down into a two-page report in the minutes. "All in favor of approving the minutes of last month's meeting please say 'aye'. Opposed 'nay.' So ordered." How easy is that?? Makes you wonder why in the world you spend four hours in a room talking when you could have just written a two-page report to begin with!

But I enjoy reading that stuff! In my pleasure reading of Session minutes, there is one phrase that always makes me chuckle: "Discussion ensued." **That** is how you get four hours into two-pages. "Discussion ensued." The minutes never say how long the discussion was that ensued. They never lay out the arguments – pro or con – that made that discussion drag on and on. It just sounds so benign – "discussion ensued" – and then the minutes usually tell you whether the motion that generated that discussion passed or failed. It's that easy.

Except it's not.

Not in the church.

And it never has been.

Sometimes the things the church fights about are silly. The color of the carpet in the sanctuary. A \$200 line-item in a million-dollar budget. Deciding whether or not to keep the old ice machine in the church kitchen. These are all church fights I have witnessed. But other times the church fights about things that are important. And those are the church fights that are the hardest...because they matter. Those kind of church fights are the hardest because people who by all accounts are faithful, loving, committed disciples end up in different places when it comes to understanding God's will.

The scripture we heard this morning tells the story about one of those fights. It was a big one. Should the church admit people who didn't follow Jewish law into membership? Were the people who the Old Testament called "unclean" permitted to be a part of the church – just the way they were? That was the question.

Don't forget – in the earliest church, every Christian was also a practicing Jew. Just like Jesus. And there were rules to follow – what to eat, what not to eat. What to wear, what not to wear. Boys were to be circumcised on the eighth day of their life. Those were the rules.

In that church, if a person who was not Jewish – the word the Bible uses to describe such people is "Gentiles" – if a Gentile wanted to join the church, they could – but they would have to follow the rules: about what to eat, what to wear, and – for men – about circumcision.

But beginning in Acts chapter 8 (which Katelyn read) – and then moving on through chapters 10 and 11 – and, finally, culminating with Acts chapter 15 – that early church was faced with a decision about whether to include Gentiles into the community of faith even if they didn't follow the traditional rules.

The church didn't seek out this fight. They were confronted with it.

This movement that started with Jesus' death and resurrection that became the church had begun to spread – and the people who were attracted to this church quickly moved beyond the boundaries of who

had traditionally been considered to be God's people. It was a confusing time for the church. Paul and Barnabas were clear that including the Gentiles was what God intended for the church. But there were others – leaders in the church – who disagreed.

So they went to Jerusalem – to the early church's version of a four-hour Session meeting – to appeal to the apostles and the to elders. And, to paraphrase, in Acts 15:6-7, we read (what sounds to me an awful lot like Session meeting minutes):

*The apostles and the elders met to consider this matter.
Discussion ensued.*

We know the outcome of this church fight. The Jerusalem Council decided that it was okay to bend what had been the rules to allow Gentiles to become full members of the church. That's what the minutes show.

But how close was the vote?

You don't get the sense that it was unanimous.

What did it feel like afterwards?

Was their celebration? Did some people stand up and storm out of the meeting?

The minutes of the meeting don't tell the whole story. But I have to think that the aftermath of this earliest of church meetings is similar to what happens in churches today.

When faced with a difficult decision – when passions run high – when faithful people disagree about important matters...including how to interpret the will of God and the meaning of Scripture – and a decision is made – there are a variety of reactions:

- Some people rejoice.
- Some people leave, because they feel the church has abandoned them.
- Some people make it uncomfortable for those who were opposed to change to still feel like they are a part of the community.

- Some people reach out in fellowship to those who are disappointed.
- Some people end up changing their minds.
- Some people don't change their minds, but they resolve to stay connected to the church.

I think it was the same then as it is now.

Yet, here is the thing: no matter the reaction – God expects the church to tend to its mission: to call people into relationship with Christ, to serve the least, the lost, and the left-out, to strengthen disciples for their life of faith, to worship.

It's messy, isn't it?

Being the church is messy – because the church is made up of people.

For as long as there has been a church there has been a temptation to believe that the church would be better if we could all just get along and agree on the same things and avoid these arguments that don't do anything but divide us.

If we could just agree then the church would be more faithful.

I need for someone to tell me where that church exists.

A few months ago the pastor and author Lillian Daniel wrote a blog that addressed this temptation. I learned of this blog through a sermon I heard last week¹.

Daniel writes to those who say that they are “spiritual but not religious” because they feel like the church is hypocritical or because they feel that the church has lost its way.

“She describes the [temptation] of wanting to be the church without being part of the church, [the temptation] wanting to have Jesus without his troublesome band of followers.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Chris Currie, Pastor of FPC Shreveport. The quote below is Chris' description of Daniel's blog.

But our problem is that Jesus does not want us unless he has us with all those who we are sure have missed the mark. Rather than just a relationship with me, he wants a relationship with all of us, a community that includes many more than we got to choose, where even the smallest most insignificant creatures are welcome, where the sparrow finds a home and the swallow a nest for herself.”

Or as Lillian Daniel puts it: “people explain to me that without church, they are traveling light, without all the Christian baggage, but what is the baggage but other people, people who might actually be some of the best road companions that there are.”

We might think the journey would be easier if we could just get our companions to all agree – but how long would that trip last?

A beautiful – and, yes, holy characteristic of the church is that we are messy. We stumble and trip along the road toward faithfulness. A lot of times we get it right. Sometimes we get it wrong. A lot of times, we pull in the same direction. Sometimes, though, in opposites. But we do it together. And more what we do – what makes the church God’s holy instrument is who we are.

Next Sunday night the Session of our church will have a big meeting. It’s not the Jerusalem Council – but it is important.

For forty years, the Presbyterian Church has been wrestling, arguing, studying, and praying about matters of human sexuality.

For the past nine months, triggered by our denomination’s new language that requires individual churches to interpret their views on marriage and the US Supreme Court ruling, we have engaged in conversation, study, listening, and prayer as we prepare to make a decision about our church’s wedding policy.

Next Sunday the Session will vote.

Next month, the minutes of the Session meeting will read: “The motion was made. Discussion ensued.”

These kinds of votes – these kinds of arguments – these kinds of decisions...they aren't about winners and losers.

Every possible outcome is messy.

If the Session changes our wedding policy some will rejoice –
But others will be hurt – because they understand the Scripture to be clearly against this change.

If the Session votes not to change our wedding policy some will rejoice –
But others will be hurt – because they understand Scripture to be clearly in support of inclusion.

If the Session votes to defer the decision some will rejoice –
But others will be hurt – because they feel that it is time the church answer the question before us.

Who wins in a vote like that?

It's not – I suggest – anyone who is responsible for casting a ballot – yes or no.

It's not any of us who wrote a letter to the Session sharing our views.

It's not those whose opinion is reflected in the majority.

When it comes to the important, messy, difficult decisions that face the people whom God calls together to be the church – the “winners” are those we serve after a decision has been made; the hungry we feed, the students we tutor, the family who receives care in the midst of grief.

The “winners” in a contentious church vote or fight are the children who watch and learn what it means for us to live in Christian community – as we model humility and forbearance and love.

The “winners” are the people not yet in these pews – but who are hungry for good news and the knowledge that before they have to do anything, they are loved by God.

By a gracious God whose truth is so big that it overwhelms even our best attempts to understand.

