**Acts 15:1-21**

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” **2** 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 the apostles and the elders about this question. **3** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. **4**  When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. **5** But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.” **6**  The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. **7** And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. **8** And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, **9** and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. **10** Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? **11** But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” **12** And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

**“Christ In Conflict”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Let us pray, “Thanks be to You, our heavenly Father, because You have called us into the Church of Your Son, Jesus Christ, and have begotten us again unto a lively hope through the Gospel. Keep us steadfast in the faith, that we may remain living stones in this Your spiritual temple to our last day, and cause us always to rejoice over Your salvation. Amen.” Today is the first of a few Minor festivals we seek to celebrate during the summer months. St. Peter and Paul are as ancient as you can get when it comes to celebrating life in the New Testament Church. These two apostles also help to remove the delusion that their times were uncomplicated or without conflict among Christians.

Many still long for that golden age of an untroubled church. Yet, the truth remains that Christ hides His glorious good news. Rather than the works of men, all must live by faith alone in Him. Herman Sasse brings this reality to light, “The church has always been-even in the days of Peter and Paul-a large group of poor sinners. All decisions of faith were rendered by sinful men, capable of error” (The Lonely Way Vol. II 35). Just because they were sinners does not mean there was a better Savior at work by the promise of His Word. This is what our times once again need to hear and believe. “Blessed are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face, who exult in your name all the day and in your righteousness are exalted” Psalms 89:15-16. There is room enough for all when resting upon Christ and His Word of salvation.

Room for the uncircumcised was hard to believe for early Jewish Christians. It might seem to our ears as if they were “majoring in the minors” as some way. They were sweating the small stuff or making a mountain out of a molehill, but this issue was anything from small. Those who rose up against Gentile Christians were emphatic to state, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” St. Paul and Barnabas addressed the matter head on creating much disagreement and debate. It came to a point where the whole church ended up meeting in Jerusalem to handle the conflict. Debate erupted again there without room for comprise. It was either a “yes” or “no” kind of answer concerning the Gospel. Either a person was righteousness by the work of Jesus Christ or circumcision meant works of the Law were required for salvation.

Of course, Peter and Paul knew long before any debate broke out over circumcision how God made room for the both of them. The zeal of Peter was fleeting before the cross of His Savior and Lord. Works and strength of man would not win the day, but lead to despair denying Christ three times. Likewise, Paul was an upstanding Pharisee seeing no fault in his actions of persecuting Christians. Blinded by the Law there was no limit to righteousness that looked so right in the eyes of men. Peter and Paul knew everything alone rested on Christ. St. Paul noted who stood behind the Gospel glorifying His Church, “…for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles…” Christ sent Peter off to “feed my sheep” with His Word of salvation just as Paul was “a chosen instrument” to give life in His saving Name.

Power was not the basis for making a decision on circumcision neither the convenience of compromise for it only corrupts what is good. Room for this council centered on the grace God gives to sinners. Peter declared, “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” The visible mark of circumcision could not replace the promise already given by baptism into Christ. As different as everything appeared before men, Peter made it clear that God saw things differently by His way of salvation. “…He made no distinction between us and them having cleansed their heart by faith.” Obedience to the Law was a burden with little blessing. The Jewish Christians fell short no matter how well they dressed it up and all the generations before them did the same. Jesus was the answer for all not circumcision to the Law, but life lived by faith in His Name. As He proclaimed, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” Matthew 11:29.

How do we seek to make decisions today in light of the Gospel? Is it by forceful tactics to get what we want? Is it by a rule of keeping people happy? Both are foolish. Both have a false foundation. Luther makes the case, “Therefore councils are neither here nor there. If they establish the teachings of men, they lose all value…Our adversaries will fall short of proving that a council has the Holy Spirit and takes the place of all Christendom, as they prate and pretend, unless they speak Scripture and God’s Word” (Plass 1002:3176). In other words, there is no special power in voting, but only the voice of the Gospel is firm foundation for all by God’s Word. What is in the majority today can be in the minority tomorrow. Forgiveness and truth won by Jesus sets us free. Dare we be enslaved to a dead hope of men that will fail or a fictitious lie by the Devil ripe for our age? As St. Paul states, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” Ephesians 2:8-9. Boasting belongs alone to Jesus and His Word.

Room for you and others rests in Christ with love prevailing from Him. The undeserved favor of God for baptized Gentiles turned into a great blessing for Jewish Christians. Rather than a license for selfishness, the unreserved love of Christ turned hearts to service. Reservation to the Law gave way to the redeeming work of God. Rather than force, Christ paved the way of love for all by His cross. St. Paul declared, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” Galatians 5:6. This love for others rests not on conditions of men, but in what comes from God pouring out His love to us by His Word and Sacrament. Christ builds the church on nothing but the promise worked by His sacrifice. Hell itself trembles at such love from God for it puts to shame sin, death, and the Devil.

There is going to be debate and conflict in the Church. It will be this way until Christ comes again. This should be no more shocking than the strife and struggle that happens so easily in married life. The key is how the discord resolves to be a sound decision. Does it fall upon Christ and His saving Word or something else that is sure to fail in the hands of sinners? St. Peter and Paul at the first apostolic council offered an answer of righteousness alone by faith in Jesus. Far from simple and carefree, a happy outcome for the Church is hard work, longsuffering, time consuming, and demands dedication among the baptized. There is room enough for all when resting upon Christ and His Word of salvation. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.