

The Breath of God | *Keeping in Step with the Life-giving Spirit*

"The Mission of the Spirit"

6.9.13

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Acts 15.1-21

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.⁸ "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.¹⁰ "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."¹² All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.¹³ After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.¹⁴ "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.¹⁵ "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,¹⁶ 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'¹⁸ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO.¹⁹ "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.²¹ "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

We started this series right after Easter and we saw in the first chapter of this earliest book of Christian Church History (The Book of Acts), we saw the risen Jesus Christ telling His followers to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father.

And **then** in chapter two, that promise is fulfilled and the Holy Spirit comes down, the very presence of God and the heart of God is poured out...And the words that Peter uses to explain that moment (***the Day of Pentecost and the miraculous speaking in other languages...sound of wind...flames over people's heads***)...**the words Peter uses** to explain all this FORESHADOW a big change that will be worked out in the rest of this book: something universal and NOT LIMITED to one ethnic group or age group or gender is going to take place. "Old men, young men, sons and daughters, the great and the small... the Spirit is poured out on ALL PEOPLE..." We don't know at the start what that's going to look like but it starts in the first chapters and we want to know...

Today we come to the core/center of the book; it's the halfway point and it's the main idea or thesis of this history book. The Spirit of God was concentrated in Israel and in Jerusalem but now He's going OUT – to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the Earth.

And now we're seeing what that looks like...it's wonderful AND... it's uncomfortable! There are growing pains and difficulties and disagreements and reorientations; God is doing a new thing that these early Christians had grossly underestimated.

THIS chapter shows the Spirit on the move, on a mission like we've never seen and it's really instructive to the Church today if we are at ALL interested in moving with God and in participating in the Spirit's mission in the modern world.

Let's look at it: 1) Growing Pains 2) The Big Idea ...that we always forget 3) Moving With the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is propelling the early followers of Jesus Christ OUTWARD...and He is overcoming a number of significant cultural barriers. Samaritans and even Pagan Gentiles are believing the message and **are uniting** with this young movement.

Paul and Barnabas are missionaries, both from a Jewish background but they are members of culturally diverse congregation in Antioch, Syria. There are Jewish and Gentile Christians in this church in Antioch. And at certain points, this Antioch church would be visited by Jewish Christians from Jerusalem...and MOSTLY the Jewish Christians were thrilled with what was going on in this diverse congregation in Antioch...but...not all the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem (the mother-ship!) not all the Jewish

Christians from Jerusalem were so sure about this mix of Christians, some Jewish and some Gentile. And some were saying, "Look! If we're gonna consider these Gentiles to be the true children of Abraham (like we are) well... they have to really convert to be full-fledged Jewish people and they have to do what converts to Judaism have ALWAYS done, i.e. get circumcised and keep the law of Moses...like we do!"

But Paul and Barnabas had a problem with that; they did not believe that the Spirit was moving in that direction. They believed these Gentile believers in Jesus Christ were really FULLY accepted by God the same way Paul and Barnabas were accepted by God i.e. NOT by being Jewish or being circumcised or by being compliant with the Law of Moses BUT BY GRACE! And they thought that to demand these Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the Jewish food regulations would REALLY confuse everyone and really obscure the Good News of Jesus Christ!

And they couldn't come to a compromise – for Paul and Barnabas it was either/or: either being right with God is a gift or it's something we deserve (by having the right ethnicity or being obedient. And neither side of the debate would budge...or could!

So...they appealed to the higher court. The church in Antioch (multi-cultural, multi-racial) they said, "all you guys have to go to the mother ship and get all the Christian leaders together and bring us back a ruling...a doctrine...Are the followers of Jesus Christ a branch of Judaism or is the Spirit doing something different?"

So, off they go. And **on their 300 mile trip** to meet with all these Christian leaders in Jerusalem, they visited a bunch of Christian congregations and these young churches were all thrilled that so many Gentiles were believing the Good News.

And they get to Jerusalem (the mother ship) and all these leaders, apostles and elders come together and Peter makes a speech. "Guys, we have seen that God wants the Gentiles to know Him! I didn't get it and I didn't believe it but God hit me in the head with a frying-pan (Acts 10; Gal 2.11ff) enough times that I think I'm finally getting it!...People are joined to God NOT by being good (because **NO one** is good enough!) but by faith – **by receiving God's free gift!** Let's not make these Gentiles do what **we ourselves don't even do**...I hope were all clear about the fact (and here Peter gives the bottom line; v. 11) **"But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."**

And everyone goes silent! It's as if this bedrock, bottom-line, basic idea – THE Big Idea of Christianity has been forgotten by everyone (even the leaders of the Christian Church) and when Peter puts it out there,

everyone's mouth drops open and they have this "Ah-ha!"-moment...Like they're saying to themselves, **"What in the WORLD were we thinking?!... We were all once VERY clear on the fact that Jesus Christ lived the perfect human life of love and obedience and we were hiding behind HIM...but somehow we forgot about that Big Idea and we began hiding behind our ethnicity, our Jewishness, our heritage, our obedience...and if we're honest we will all admit that our obedience is nothing to brag about! What were we thinking?!"** (Silence...)

Now, what is so amazing about this is that it's only about 20 years after the life of Jesus Christ was accomplished. It's only about 50 AD! And it's not like they were poorly taught! Jesus Christ Himself WAS their Teacher!

So what does this tell us? Only that the default setting of the human heart is so strongly, **so stubbornly set on the idea that getting right with God is a matter of OUR effort NOT GOD'S GRACE.** It's so deeply ingrained in us that as long as we're trying harder than our neighbor, we MUST be ok... If these men, so close to the actual events (that save the church – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ) if they could in that short a time, forget the Big Idea of Christianity how much MORE PRONE are we?...AND what about the people out *there*? What do you *they* know about Christianity?

This week I was reading Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians. I did a search on the words I've **heard** attributed to Luther, "We must preach the Gospel to ourselves every day because we forget the Gospel every day." And I came to a blog or message board where someone asked, "I can't find where Luther **wrote** that – does anyone know whether he actually said it and where? And is it true that real Christians can forget the Gospel?"

And someone answers in these words:

"It is hard to imagine that a truly born-again person, who lives his/her life consciously in relationship with God, would be in danger of forgetting the Gospel. Perhaps some aspects of the Gospel might be neglected, if not reasserted occasionally.

I would think that a true Christian has a settled conviction and awareness of the Gospel that informs all of his/her other thoughts about everything else, day by day. If someone told me that he/she forgets the Gospel every day, I would assume that that person (had) not yet comprehended or embraced it in a saving fashion."

Really? Would you say that about the Apostle Peter? He very clearly forgot the Gospel in Galatians ch. 2 and Paul had to confront Peter in the congregation at Antioch. And more than just forget it...Peter... "THE

ROCK" wasn't believing it. And probably that lapse in Peter's faith took place before this Council in Jerusalem and maybe that's why he's finally so clear **and so clearly ON Paul's side.**

And after Peter stands with Paul, "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." (and everyone goes silent) then James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ gets up and reinforces the whole teaching of grace and of the Holy Spirit's mission to go OUT and bring grace to all nationalities and James does it by appealing to the OT...to the Prophet Amos. That's the section in capital letters in your bulletin.

James' point is that the Prophets were looking forward to Israel's reconstruction – "the tent of David rebuilt". And so Jesus Christ insists there be 12 Apostles – **heads of the new tribes**, as it were, and they GO now ... OUT from the Temple (2.46) and out of Jerusalem, *"SO THAT the rest of mankind may seek the Lord and all the nations that are called by My name."*

The Apostles and leaders in Jerusalem had hearts like ours – they were messed up just like we are – they kept forgetting the basic idea that God saves us and we don't save ourselves. Not by being in this ethnic group or that, not by being circumcised or not, not by our weak/anemic obedience that NEVER really measures up even in the best of us – THE ONLY WAY TO PLEASE GOD IS TO BE PERFECTLY GOOD AND OBEDIENT AND LOVING AND THE ONLY PERSON WHO EVER LIVED THAT WAY IS JESUS CHRIST. And Jesus Christ trades records with anyone who believes Him, who trusts Him, (v.10, 11: "cleansing their hearts by faith...and saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ").

Bottom line – in the way we live and speak and think and in the way we make decisions, even the most "well-disciplined" of us neglect to see and be thrilled by the grace of God in Jesus Christ and we need daily, dramatic reminders. AND THEREFORE – the crux of true spirituality consists of constantly reinforcing the Gospel (screwing it INTO our souls) and in constant application of the Gospel – working it in and working it out (the implications of grace to every facet of our relationships and callings and lives).

Let me give you a few ways to do that practically, a few ways this passage directs us to move with the Spirit: 1) We have to get rid of the idea that true spirituality is either vital and exciting and practical OR doctrinal/dogmatic and rational – truth is it's both and this passage really stresses that.

There are times when we have to stop and ask, "How does the Gospel apply here – what 's the rational implication of grace?" For them, it was, "Must the Gentiles be circumcised and then keep the law of Moses in order to be considered the true children of Abraham? We need a doctrine? We need to know what God has written in the Prophets and need to know the consensus of the Church on this – how did

our fathers and mothers in the faith understand this?" And it was WHILE doing the Spirit's mission that this need for theology and dogma came up.

Dorothy Sayer (a contemporary of C.S. Lewis) wrote that the choice is NOT between doctrine and excitement – she said the doctrine IS the excitement! The real choice is between doctrine and disaster – she wrote:

"The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man - and the dogma is the drama...This is the dogma we find so dull – this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero. If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting?"

When we fail to keep this dogma, this story at the center, that's when our faith becomes bland and boring and just run-of-the-mill spirituality! And the real adventure is in applying this thinking to race relations and marriage and our jobs and our neighboring and Syria and our sense of humor and our understanding of time and friendship and everything...because this dogma, this drama really does change everything!

2) We all run the risk of cultural elitism. Whenever we aren't captivated by the grace of God in Jesus Christ we begin to think that our kind of people are better than "them". That's what was going on in Antioch and that's why the Gospel IS the great antidote to prejudice and self-righteousness. If you're clear on the fact that God accepts you despite your culture and your credentials but ONLY by His thrilling love in Jesus Christ, if you're getting that, you **can't** look down on people.

3) What should we make of these particular rules that were imposed on the Gentile believers? Well, "You don't have to be circumcised or keep the whole law of Moses but DO abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood." I THINK what these all have in common is that pagans saw these as shortcuts to getting spiritual power. Either by using **idols/magic or** by re-enacting a creative act with temple prostitute **or** by eating a strangled animal with the "*pneuma*" (the spirit or air)trapped inside it or the blood – because there's life and vitality in the blood and ***if you do these things you get spiritual power.***

And James is saying, "**Now**, we all agree – Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians alike –that we get power by the Holy Spirit and by grace but **NOT** by shortcuts...SO don't offend your Jewish brothers and sisters who have been warned about this practice. Let's all live by grace and the power of the Holy Spirit.

4) The Church in South Florida is facing a new and exciting situation – lots of cultures coming together and we have a mission here...in many ways similar to the one facing the early church....***SO, let's ask***

the Spirit to search us and see if our insisting on cultural forms whether musical or manners or dress or stuff "we just KNOW is better"... ask if it's POSSIBLE we're giving too much weight to these things (as these ancient believers were doing with circumcision) and in so doing MAY be setting up obstacles to a new generation... hindering them from entering the Kingdom **instead of carrying out the mission of the Spirit.**