

The Watershed Moment

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[0 : 00] I wonder if you think that we live in a united country, despite the name of our country. Are we faced day by day with a sense of togetherness and cohesion?

Perhaps when you put the news on, for example. Or rather, confronted by a sense of discord and friction. Louis Theroux, the documentary maker, made the following comment.

He said, we're at a moment in time where culturally we're at odds with one another. There's a lot of rage, a lot of disagreement about a certain sort of wedge cultural issues.

And he's really referring here to the so-called culture wars, which I'm not really going to comment on particularly, but just simply acknowledge that that is part of our sort of social context at the moment.

If you're not sure what the culture wars are, another journalist has informally described them as those things we shout at each other about on Twitter. And so it might not be a good idea to spend too much time on Twitter.

[1 : 14] But this is a reference to some of the fractions in society that we see around us. And that is to say nothing of the political disagreements that divide us. Or geographical ones.

Are you from the east or the west? Are you from the north or the south? And of course, the age-old class divisions that also exist. Well, when it comes to the ancient world, and when I say the ancient world, I'm referring to the days of the New Testament.

One New Testament scholar has said that the great divisions in society were those between male and female, slave and free, and Jew and Gentile.

And from the Jews' point of view, the greatest of these three was the division between Jew and Gentile. Or between Jew and non-Jew. And so to explain the point a little bit further, John Stott has said that Israel forgot her vocation and twisted her privilege into a sense of favoritism.

So that even though Israel was intended to be a light to the nations, that gradually over time it actually became a sense of superiority. However, the Gentiles were no better because they looked down on the Jew.

[2 : 26] And so, for example, they may have regarded the Jews' Sabbath as their lazy day. And so to disregard one group as the circumcised or the uncircumcised is not really a reference to somebody's medical history, but rather a dismissive term of sneering, perhaps.

And so for a Jew to regard a Gentile as the uncircumcised is really to say the unclean. And it's against this sort of grand historical background of division that the great move of God we see in the book of Acts takes place, which is intended to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles.

And the point of this is not to say that the Jew cannot be saved, but rather that the Gentile can now be saved together with the Jew and out of the two to make one new man, as Ephesians chapter 2 puts it.

But as this was happening, there was, ironically, a certain amount of conflict happening through this movement towards unity.

Because a Jewish person might naturally ask, well, what are we to do with our festivals? And what about our clothing requirements? And what about our food regulations?

[3 : 50] And the most sort of symbolic of all of these distinctions, circumcision, what is to be done with that? Well, that's all by way of background to sort of set us up for what unfolds in this chapter.

We're considering Acts 15, a watershed moment. And we're going to consider, firstly, conflict in Antioch. Secondly, debate in Jerusalem.

And then finally, we'll come to our watershed moment. So conflict in Antioch, then. We've had read to us these Pharisees have come down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

And we remember that Antioch is the place where there are many Gentile believers. And we don't need to rummage around inside this passage and look hard to find where the conflict is or where the problem is.

It's stated for us nice and clearly in verse 1. Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, say the party of the Pharisees, you cannot be saved.

[4 : 58] Now, why is this a controversial thing to say? It's controversial for two reasons. Firstly, because it concerns salvation. And secondly, because it concerns authority.

So in terms of salvation, the question is, do we obey the requirements of the law and are thereby saved? Or are we saved by trusting in Jesus alone without the works of the law?

It's quite simple. But this isn't just a technical theological question. This is a question with implications for our lives. Because if we think that our works contribute to or lead towards our salvation, then there are two likelihoods.

The first one is we'll think that we have fulfilled all of these requirements and will therefore become self-righteous. And Jesus met many self-righteous people in his ministry.

The other possibility is actually you feel overburdened by all of these requirements. It's too much. I can't do it all. And a crushing sense of guilt and inadequacy.

[6 : 09] However, if you believe that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone, all of this potential self-righteousness or a feeling of being burdened is replaced with freedom and confidence.

Because it depends on Jesus Christ and what he has done. So this is why the issue of salvation is very important. It's about salvation. And it's also about how that in turn affects our lives.

The second reason it's controversial is it relates to authority. This party of the Pharisees have come down from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the apostles were. And these people have spent time walking and talking with Jesus.

And they could compare everything that was done and said with all that Jesus had done and said.

And so there's a particular authority with the apostles. And so if these men have come from Jerusalem, the question is, is this what the apostles think?

What's going on in Jerusalem? Jerusalem. So we've got this problem here of salvation and authority. Now last week you considered Galatia, I think, chapter 14 of the book of Acts.

[7 : 19] And there we see that Paul and Barnabas go through Iconium and Lystra and Derbe. And it looks very much like that after Paul and Barnabas have retraced their steps and come back to Antioch where they started off, that actually somebody has come along behind them.

And they've come along to all these different little churches that they've established. And they've said, well, everything that Paul said is all well and good. But you need to be circumcised as well.

And that's why Paul then writes his letter. And we can read about that in Galatians. And Galatians is such a big book. How can we comment on all of it? But I want to edit out, as it were, five words from verse 21 of chapter 2 where Paul says, if you go back to the law, Christ died for no purpose.

Which seems pretty striking. So let's remind ourselves for a moment why did Jesus die? Jesus died as an atonement for our sin.

And what this atonement accomplishes is our cleansing and the removal of our sin from us. And this means that we can then be reconciled to God.

[8 : 30] We can be restored to fellowship with God by the removal of our sin. And this is done through the death of Jesus. God cleans us up and brings us into his presence.

And it's not something I do, nor can I do. But these Pharisees think that this is a means to introduce the Gentiles into the same covenant relationship that they have.

And so they think that Jesus is a doorway, a gateway into Judaism. So as far as they're concerned, it's believe in Jesus and obey the law.

Believe in Jesus and adopt the festivals. Believe in Jesus and make our sacrifices. Believe in Jesus and follow our eating customs. Believe in Jesus and believe in Jesus and be circumcised.

Now perhaps on some basic level, this faith in Jesus is about making us, if not an ethnic Jew, as far as they're concerned. But rather, because no one can change their ethnicity, but rather a cultural Jew.

[9 : 34] And then be saved. And so we see in verse 2, and the English Standard Version puts it, that there was no small dissension and debate.

It's kind of an understated way of putting it. The NIV puts it, there was a sharp debate. And the New Living Translation says that there was a vehement argument.

You know, we get a sense that voices were raised. We get a sense that the atmosphere turned ugly. So that really brings us on to the debate in Jerusalem.

Before we get to that, let's just notice some of the details on the way. We read that Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is in the hills. They're going to see the apostles, as we talked about before. The men with a unique authority. They make about a 360-mile journey.

[10:37] And they stop off at various churches along the way, in Phoenicia and Samaria. So this is probably no less than a three- or four-week journey.

As we often find in the Book of Acts, chunky periods of time elapse. And we don't get a sense of that unless we pay close attention. Now they come to Jerusalem.

And then there's a long debate, verse 6. And the basic topic for discussion is whether the Gentiles must submit to the Old Testament law.

And there are two basic features of this debate and discussion. And they really are testimony and scripture. So we're going to consider these two points.

And the first testimony that is offered comes from Peter. And this happens between verses 7 and verses 11. And at this point, Peter reflects on his experience when he visited Cornelius' house.

[11:40] And you may remember that Cornelius, this little episode, happens in chapter 10. So if you weren't here for chapter 10, I'm just going to give the quickest of reviews of that.

There's a lot of material, so it's probably worthwhile anyway. So you may remember that there was Cornelius. He's an Italian centurion. And he's in Caesarea, which is sort of on the seaboard there on the west coast of Israel.

Not too clear, perhaps, but that's roughly where it is. And he is told to summon Peter. Now, Peter is nearby in another town called Joppa.

And he's preparing his lunch. And he gets a pretty ugly surprise, because whilst he's preparing his lunch, he sees a vision. And in the vision, there is a sheet.

And in the sheet, there are some unclean animals, unclean by the standards of the Old Testament law. And this comes down, and a voice says to him, rise, kill, and eat. And Peter objects to this, because he's never eaten anything unclean in his life before.

[12:44] But the voice replies, what God has made clean, do not call common. And this happens three times. And just when he's trying to figure out what this means, the men from Cornelius' house turn up and say, can you come to Cornelius' house and speak to the people there?

So Peter, because of the vision, decides to go. And even though Cornelius is a Gentile, because of the vision again, he thinks it's okay to go into the house of a Gentile. The kind of slight wrestling in his mind there, reminding us of the cultural background we've just been thinking, and whether a Jew would go into a Gentile's house.

There's a crowd gathered, and he preaches. And he preaches the message he's been preaching everywhere. Jesus went about doing good and healing people. He was crucified, and then he was resurrected to life.

And now he stands as the judge of the living and the dead. And then he comes to these words. Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.

And it is just at this point in his address that belief in Jesus Christ brings the forgiveness of sins, that the Holy Spirit falls upon them. And I'm assuming that there are tongues that take place at this part, because when Peter is relaying this episode later in chapter 11, we read that Peter said that what happened to the Gentiles is exactly what happened to us at the beginning.

[14:10] This is the Gentile Pentecost. And so Peter goes on to say, If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I to stand in God's way?

And so we notice that Peter preaches to the Gentiles. They believe, and that is evident by what he sees. And therefore we can conclude that God has accepted the Gentiles on account of faith in Jesus Christ.

So this is Peter's testimony. The second testimony comes from Paul and Barnabas. And it's quite nice to notice some of the details here.

Take a look at verse 12. We notice that when Paul and Barnabas come to speak, it says that the assembly fell silent. And they describe in detail, verse 3, what happened.

So they go to Phoenicia and Samaria, and they've described in detail what has happened amongst the Gentiles. We must imagine that they described in detail in Jerusalem as well.

[15 : 24] And the assembly falls silent to listen to the first and greatest missionary report. This isn't the sort of missionary report which you might regard as an optional extra. Well, it's just the missionary report tonight.

Perhaps we won't go. This one's got everything. Paul and Barnabas turn up in Cyprus. And there there's the Roman leader of the entire island hears about them and wants to hear this gospel message.

But this Roman leader has got a false prophet as a sidekick. So whilst Paul's trying to explain the gospel to him, this guy's trying to stop Sergius Paulus, his name, from hearing.

Now, Paul ultimately becomes frustrated. And he rebukes this false prophet, and he goes temporarily blind. And on account of this miracle and the word of God, Sergius Paulus believes. Well, you're telling me that the Roman leader of the entire island of Cyprus believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, a Gentile? Well, yeah, that's what happened.

[16 : 28] No wonder they all fell silent. And then they go on to Iconium. I met with Graham Shanks, your pastor here, about 10 days ago to talk about Acts.

And we talked a little bit about the role of miracles in the book of Acts. And Graham used the alliteration of miracle and message, you know, going together. And it's certainly true in chapter 14 and verse 3 in Iconium.

We've got a different alliteration, but it's the same meaning. There's witness and there's word. The people preach the word of God, and God witnesses to the truthfulness and the authenticity of that word through the miracles.

And so the miracles serve to illuminate the person of Jesus Christ and to grant authenticity to this message. So what's the point here? What is the point we're trying to make?

Firstly, when it comes to Peter, God coordinated this meeting between Peter and Cornelius. Peter wouldn't have gone otherwise. And the Holy Spirit turns up to demonstrate God's acceptance of the Gentiles.

[17 : 34] In terms of Paul and Barnabas, there's miracles to authenticate the gospel. And this demonstrates, again, that God is at work amongst the Gentiles. So whether it's Peter and the Holy Spirit or whether it's Paul and the miracles, what we notice is that God is at work amongst the Gentiles.

And he is accepting people on account of their faith, their trust in him. So Peter says in verse 8, God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. And then concerning Paul, they related what signs and wonders God had done. The point is rightly made, I think, that the act is indeed the act of the Holy Spirit, not the act of the apostles.

Because the text actually says this is what God has done. And so in terms of applying this, and to be specific, God has opened the door, and it is on account of faith in Jesus Christ, and not by the works of the law.

And that is the point that they're making. Now, as a quick point of application here, I wonder if any of you are interested in apologetics. I wonder whether you quite like to debate questions, and maybe even like to be given a reason to believe, you know, rather than just being told to believe.

[18 : 59] There's something pretty interesting happening through these chapters here. Consider Peter for a moment. He had to be told to go to the Gentiles, and he was surprised when God accepted them.

And then take Paul. Paul used to persecute the Christians. He used to throw them in prison. And yet he becomes the person who takes the gospel to the nations.

How was the gospel going to go global when those who were responsible for preaching it didn't even have a vision for the idea? How do we explain the growth of the church?

How do we explain the fact that we're sat here 2,000 years later? There's only one explanation, and the scripture is clear. God is in this. This is something that God has done.

And I find that very compelling. The second point is that we notice that neither Peter nor Paul launch a kind of a discipleship explored course.

[20 : 04] Nothing wrong with discipleship explored. What I mean by that is a Jewish equivalent. You know, they didn't say, right guys, here we are at Iconium. We've got a limited amount of time.

We're going to do a crash course 10 nights a week. And we're going to go through 10 really important points here. Number one, circumcision. Okay, now you've believed in Jesus. Okay, get out your Torah. Flick through. Chapter 17, Abraham, circumcision. Turn to Exodus. Moses. No, no, there's none of that.

That is not what is happening. And so Peter says in verse 9, He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

How reassuring. He made no distinction between them, between us and them, but by faith. And then verse 11, But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

[21 : 10] You don't need to become a cultural Jew to be saved. And this is the effect of the gospel. Now this has implications for us today too.

In the area of mission, certainly. But also our church, our Christian fellowship. I once had the opportunity to worship together with some Bangladeshi Christians in Bangladesh. And they were there to worship the Lord. And they did worship the Lord with sincerity. But there were certain features of their worship which were different. And so the shoes were taken off at the door, perhaps like you might have seen at the mosque, although I think that's normal in that part of the world anyway.

The women sat on one side of the church and the men sat on the other. And the women had their head covered. It was quite New Testament in a certain way. The instruments that were used to worship were traditional Bangladeshi instruments.

And the songs were unfamiliar to me. They were in a kind of a local tune. And of course, we don't need to become culturally British to be a Christian.

[22 : 28] There are certain cultural trappings in terms of how we do things, which kind of demonstrates that the gospel has found a home in the UK, having been here so long.

But fundamentally, we don't need to change our cultural identity to become a Christian. An Indonesian, for example, imagine a scenario where some Chinese turned up in Indonesia to spread the gospel.

And those Indonesians believe they wouldn't need to become culturally Chinese in order to become Christians. An Australian doesn't need to become American. A Brazilian doesn't need to become European.

And the reason that the gospel has gone global is because it doesn't belong to any one culture. There is no distinction. Only faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, the second part of the debate in Jerusalem concerns scripture. And we notice this in verse 16 and verse 17.

[23 : 33] And we notice that scripture is used to measure these experiences. So it's not just a case of Peter and Paul turning up and saying, this is what's happened. They actually use what God has revealed in his word to measure it against these things and to see if they are legitimate.

And verse 16 and 17 are a mixture, really, of Old Testament verses, which gives us the impression that they were probably quoting all kinds of Old Testament scriptures to see what God had to say about accepting the Gentiles.

And what we notice is that there's a relationship between scripture and between their experience, the witness of the prophets and the witness of the apostles.

And this mixture of Old Testament quotes makes the point that the Gentiles will be built into God's restoration project for humanity so that all ethnicities might belong to him.

And indeed, this has always been God's plan. So let's turn finally to this watershed moment.

[24 : 40] And we notice this here in verse 19 where James comes out with a judgment. Therefore, my judgment is that. And he carries on. This is James' conviction, his decision based upon everything that has been shared in terms of experiences and God's word.

And we're faced with quite a curious turn of events here. Because after having spent so much time thinking about whether circumcision and the works of the law should be required of Gentiles, all of a sudden we discover that the Gentiles who have turned to God should abstain from eating blood, things polluted by idols, and sexual immorality.

Hasn't the debate in Jerusalem so far been about getting rid, about ridding the Gentiles of the need to adopt Jewish customs? Well, yes, it seems that way.

So what's the difference between the previous discussion and what James suddenly announces here? The difference is that in the first case, the assertion that you must be circumcised to be saved puts salvation as the central issue.

What they're saying is you must do this in order to be saved. But when it comes to this decision that follows by James here, no one is saying if you believe in Jesus, you should abide by our food customs to be saved.

[26 : 04] It's not about salvation. Rather, the issue now is that Jew and Gentile are sharing fellowship together. Why not make it easier for the Jews, these Jewish brothers and sisters, who, as verse 21 says, have had Moses read to them for ancient generations?

These traditions and customs have become so normal for them, it's actually quite difficult for them to break away from them. And so this isn't an issue of salvation.

This is an issue of being considerate towards this group of people. So what makes this a watershed moment is firstly that salvation by faith in Christ alone is nailed down, as it were, what makes you a Christian.

But the second significant point is that the ethos of this Christian community is to be one of love and thoughtfulness for the different groupings within this international gathering of Christians.

And this sense of thoughtfulness and consideration is in order that we might come together and have this fellowship. Now, I mentioned a moment ago that the power of the gospel to go global was that faith in Jesus belongs to no one cultural tradition.

[27 : 32] In fact, if you do a Google search and look at the different faiths, the different churches in Edinburgh, you'll find a Chinese church and you'll find a Japanese church and you'll find a Korean church.

And of no doubt, there are some fellowship groupings of other nationalities as well. And of course, this is an encouragement, isn't it? This reminds us that the gospel has found a home within these different cultures.

But it also reveals that there continues to be division along ethnic lines. And I wonder if we might consider how to make Christians culturally different to ourselves more comfortable in our company. I think that is one of the points of application that comes out of this passage. Now that the Christian church and the Gentiles and the whole variety of nationalities, it's not just about how we're saved, but how we can incorporate one another and reflect that breadth.

So this is a watershed moment. We don't hear about Peter from this point onwards. Paul takes center stage. Jerusalem becomes less important and Antioch comes into focus.

[28 : 47] And not only that, but we see Barnabas and Paul split and separate as well. This is quite jarring, actually, when you read chapter 15 and you see this effort to come together in unity.

And then all of a sudden, after verse 35, Paul and Barnabas are off in different directions. What's going on? What we notice is that they're not split by a conflict about the gospel or defining the gospel.

They're united in preaching this gospel. But they seem to have a different ethos of ministry. The way they want to go about things is different. But the result of that, in fact, is a multiplication of the proclamation of the gospel.

So the outcome is actually a good thing, even though the narrative follows with Paul in the book of Acts. So what is the gospel then?

A bit of a spoiler alert here. If we go on to chapter 16, don't want to take next guy's sermon, but Paul goes to Philippi, and the Philippian jailer comes to Paul, and he says, what must I do to be saved?

[29 : 59] And Paul replies with crystal clear clarity. And it is on account of what has happened in chapter 15, this resolution of these issues, that Paul is able to reply in the simplest and most straightforward terms possible.

And it's the same message for us today. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved. Amen.