

## “A BENEVOLENT INFECTION”

*Six Tough Questions - 2*

Acts 15:1-11 (p. 1072)

Paul and Barnabas had returned to Syrian Antioch for some well-earned rest following their remarkable missionary journey to Cyprus and Galatia. While they were there they faced a major unresolved issue, and this is how it happened. Some men came down to Antioch from Judea (apparently from church HQ in Jerusalem) with a message that Gentile believers would first have to become Jews if they wanted to be saved. The disagreement between these men and Paul and Barnabas became so heated that a delegation led by Paul and Barnabas was sent to Jerusalem to settle the issue with the apostles and elders.

But there was another man caught uncomfortably in the middle of that dispute in Antioch. He isn't mentioned at first. But Paul, in a letter he would later send to the Galatians, wrote this: *“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.”*

Now, keep in mind that this is the same Apostle Peter who had long since gone into the home of a Gentile named Cornelius in Caesarea (back in chapter 10) and had said to him, *“I realize now that God does not play favorites.”* And after Peter had baptized Cornelius and family, you remember, he had then gone to Jerusalem to explain himself, and this is what he had said to his colleagues: *“When the Holy Spirit came on them who was I to think that I could oppose God?”* That is: *“To me it's obvious that these Gentiles are just as acceptable to Christ as we are.”* Apparently the church leaders had accepted Peter's explanation and the matter seemed to have been settled. But now, much later, it appears that Peter was still wrestling with the issue; and Paul tells us that he was literally “in Peter's face” about it.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, Peter was evidently already there, as was James. The atmosphere of the meeting, despite the underlying tension, seemed cordial enough; that is until some of the believers who were also Pharisees, stood up and said, *“The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.”*

Luke says that “after much discussion” Peter got up and reminded them all of his experience with Cornelius and his family. Then he ended his little speech with this incisive question: *“Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of*

*our disciples a yolk that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

Good for Peter! Then, I can imagine how he might have turned to Paul and Barnabas and said, in effect, *"You take it from here."* Then the account goes on to say, *"the whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them."*

Finally James spoke. Now, keep in mind that this is the man who, according to Paul in his letter to the Galatians, was aware of those men who had gone to Antioch to persuade the Gentile believers that they must adopt Judaism if they wanted to be followers of Jesus. Now here, as the apparent moderator of the meeting, James summarized the issues. He reiterated Peter's argument; he added corroboration from Scripture, from the book of Amos. And then he rendered his official opinion. *"It is my judgment,"* he said, *"that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."*

But then he offered four points on which Gentile converts should be required to agree: don't eat meat offered to idols, avoid sexual immorality, don't eat strangled animals, and don't eat blood. That was it. My guess is that, starting with a list of perhaps a hundred or more regulations (rules that those Pharisees would have loved to enforce), James distilled them to the irreducible essentials in that situation.

Then James laid out the reason for these four basic rules. He said: *"For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."* In other words: *"These are the rules we believe Gentile Christians must obey in order to avoid scandalizing Jewish communities all over the world. Let's not offend our Jewish brothers and sisters unnecessarily."* It was a wise decision.

The apostles and elders all agreed. They drafted a letter outlining their decision and sent it back to Antioch. The Gentile Christians there were encouraged and strengthened by the letter, it says. That, in turn, set the stage for what would become the next great outreach of the gospel into the Gentile world. All in all, it was a remarkably peaceful solution to an issue that could have torn the early church apart. But it didn't.

Now what does this account in Acts 15 have to do with us? I think it can give us some important insight into an issue that still troubles the church, and is, in fact, the second issue that Reggie McNeal addresses in his book, *The Present Future*. The first tough question he asked, you'll recall from last week, was: *How do we deconvert from Churchianity to Christianity?* That is, how does the church

in North America move from being content with the institutional expression of the faith to once again embrace biblical Christian faith itself?

The second tough question he poses is: *How do we transform our community?* McNeal contend that as long as we are preoccupied with ourselves, with controlling institutional church growth, we will most likely avoid the tough question of evangelism – or as he puts it: “How we hit the streets with the Gospel.” His concern is that we can become so intent on enhancing and regulating the supply of new members to keep the church going that we forget that Jesus didn’t tell his disciples to get people to come to church. He told his disciples to “Go!”

As I said last week, Jesus didn’t come to establish an institution. He came to save the world. And he commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all kinds of people, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey his commands. Now, if institutional growth happens as a result of Christians following that great commission, fine. But if church membership rolls don’t grow, that is not your concern. In posing this second question, McNeal is wondering out loud how and why the church in North America has largely abdicated our primary task of evangelism and become fixated on church growth.

The answer isn’t hard to track down. I think the root issue here is control. Those members of the church council in Jerusalem who were identified as Pharisees saw the impending exponential growth of the movement and wanted to control the quality of new members. I’m sure their motives were honorable and deeply rooted in their traditions. But bottom line, the issue was one of control – in this case, quality control.

An honest look at the institutional church in North America will reveal that being in control of growth is still a hot-button issue. Those in charge of the church want to control the numbers, because that’s how we measure success. McNeal writes: *One of the unfortunate side effects of the church growth movement was increased competition between congregations. Once the bottom line became the measure of success, the rush was on to acquire attendees, even if they came from other churches.* The peculiar American preoccupation with something newer and bigger and better has affected more religious institutions than we may realize.

I think it was Rabbi David Zaslow who first told me the story of the Jew who was shipwrecked on a deserted island. He was there for a long time, but managed not only to survive but to thrive. Finally a ship came along and rescued him. But before they left the island he invited his rescuers to tour the place he had made for himself. With justifiable pride he showed them the water-collection system, the garden, his shop, his home. “*But above all,*” he pointed to a building and said with tears in his eyes, “*this is my synagogue where I would come each day to meditate on God’s word and to pray.*” Now he was ready to leave the island. But as they headed for the ship, one of his rescuers noticed a building that

had not been identified. He asked the survivor about that building. The man replied, “*Oh, that’s the synagogue I used to attend.*”

The story points up a sadly widespread truth. Many people seem to have a relatively short religious attention-span. Consequently, what many have labeled “church growth” (and what others have mislabeled “evangelism”) is really nothing more than capitalizing on the migratory patterns of churchgoers. McNeal goes on: *Ministers who had studied theology, biblical exegesis, and other subjects in classical seminary education, now signed up for marketing seminars. Seminars offered in the church world increasingly offered church growth “insights” and “principles” and “prescriptions.”*

I want to underscore the fact that much of what we have called the “church growth” movement has been well-intentioned. Godly people have invested much of their best energies to reach people through the institutional church. When I graduated from seminary thirty-eight years ago certain so-called “authorities” advised me and my classmates that the institutional church would be dead within a very few years; that it was a post-Christendom dinosaur that didn’t yet have the sense to roll over and expire. Despite those warnings, I chose ministry in the church because I believe there are many who come to church who don’t know Jesus and who are hungry for a relationship with him but have never been shown how that can happen. I have never regretted that decision.

So I can bear witness to the fact that, in some ways, this “church growth” stuff has worked. Many people have been drawn to the church and have met Jesus through the church, just as I did when I was in college. Nevertheless, there are countless people in America who have simply moved from smaller to larger to mega churches where they feel that they will be better “fed” with newer facilities or bigger programs or better preaching (moving “from the dinghies to the cruise ships,” to use McNeal’s image). And yet, despite the obsession we’ve had with church growth, the bottom line is that the total number of church members in America is declining in almost every direction and every denomination.

Is there a viable alternative to a largely dysfunctional program of church growth? McNeal says there is. And he challenges the church in North America to set aside church growth and to seriously engage the question: How do we transform our community? (How do we hit the streets with the Gospel?) McNeal says that if they aren’t going to come to us, then we’ve got to go to them. Fortunately we have only to look to Jesus to see what he expects us to do and how he expects us to do it.

The evangelism strategy of the Pharisees was “Come and get it!” For Jesus it was “Go get ’em!” McNeal says that is why the Pharisees considered Jesus such a threat. They believed God’s kingdom would come only when people behaved properly. Jesus went to where people were already hanging out and told them the

kingdom had already arrived and it was in them. McNeal writes: *In effect, Jesus declared that the Pharisees' ladder for success was leaned up against the wrong wall. They had to kill Jesus. Religious people have always been a problem for God.* He claims that there's a difference between church membership thinking and kingdom membership thinking.

Now, you might read his book and conclude that he's setting up an either-or choice between them. To me that choice is both intellectually and strategically irresponsible. I don't think we have any business closing up shop here. People are coming to know the Lord and lives are being changed for the better because this church is here. But I do believe it's time we gave serious thought to the ways God expects us to share the gospel with those who haven't heard and who are not likely to come through those doors – even on Friendship Sunday.

Of course all this talk of evangelism is pointless if we don't have any good news to share. The plain truth of the matter is that you can't share what you don't have. If you don't have a relationship with God, don't fake it. People generally aren't stupid. The truth will be written all over you. But if you have found in Jesus a love that has changed your life for the better, tell others about it. What is it that keeps you from talking about your faith? Is it that you feel inadequate to the task? Let me tell you about one fellow who didn't seem to have much going for him, but he gave what he had to honor the Lord.

His name was Cordell Brown. In the summer of 1980, a friend arranged for him to speak at the Philadelphia Phillies' pre-game chapel at Veterans Stadium. Cordell was a victim of cerebral palsy and carried the evidence with him everywhere he went. His gait was awkward; his speech halting and difficult to understand. It could appear that he was shortchanged in life, that God wasn't fair to him. But if you expected to hear that from Cordy Brown, you were mistaken.

Cordell felt a bit inadequate to the task that day as he got an up-close look at the players who would make up the world champions that October. What a difference in life-styles! These were men like Mike Schmidt, Garry Maddox, Bob Boone who made their living, earned their fame and fortune with their bodies. They were cheered, praised, written and read about because they were physically amazing. Not only were they in shape and at the peaks of their careers, but they had honed their physical skills to near-perfection and they used their bodies to win ball games and delight the fans.

Cordell Brown's body, on the other hand, was an albatross. It was always in his way. It slowed him down. People didn't like to look at him. They usually turned away or pretended not to see. And those who did stare often were embarrassed, or rejected him.

After being introduced, he immediately put the Phillies at ease. *“I know I’m different,”* he explained laboriously. But then he quoted Paul’s great Easter word from 1 Corinthians 15: *“Nevertheless, by the grace of God I am what I am...”*

Cordy spoke for about twenty minutes on the power and goodness of God in his life. He concluded in a loving and simple way with his peculiar way of speaking. He said, *“You may hit .350 for a lifetime and be paid millions of dollars. But when the day comes that they close the lid on that box, you won’t be any different than I am. That’s one time when we’ll be the same. I don’t need what you have in life. But one thing’s for sure: You need what I have, and that’s Jesus Christ.”*

That’s good stuff. I warm to it, because I find it’s often someone who to all appearances seems tied down, is best able to show me what real freedom in Christ looks like. Reggie McNeal raises the question: How do we transform our community? That is a valid question for the church today. But there is one matter about which there is no question. God chooses to use normal, imperfect people like you and me like a benevolent infection to transform the world – and he will do it. Remember this: You don’t have to be perfect; you just need to be available. God already has the rest of it covered. We’ll talk more next time about sharing your faith.

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