

Title: "The Invitation in the Tension"
Immerse: Messiah, the letters of Paul part 1
Text: Acts 15:1-21, Galatians 2:11-16
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How well do you handle change?
[story about the new rules of golf]

Probably more important than change is, how well do you handle conflict?

Today we are going to talk about the first, and one of the largest controversies in the church in history, but's not going to be a history lesson. This controversy had to do with the very thing some of you experienced in church some time in your life. It's the very reason some of your parents took you out of church. It's a big reason you or your family members have not been to church in a long time. This controversy deals with the reason why people want to believe in God, they want to have peace with God and answers to questions about eternity, but they just don't think they're going to find it in the church.

The controversy can be summed up as this:

- Who should be a part of the church? Who gets in?
- How good do you have to be?
- How many rules do you have to obey?
- How holy you have to be?
- How many behavior changes do you need to change before you are accepted because of your belief?

This controversy is about 20 years after Jesus rose from the dead. It happens after this person, Saul-who-became-Paul, and Barnabas, were sent out on what the Bible calls a missionary journey, where they traveled to all these small villages and large cities around the north and east of the Mediterranean rim, sharing the message of Jesus and starting new churches.

- Paul and Barnabas's home base church was in the city of Antioch (think Winnipeg, Canada) and that is where people first referred to Jesus people as Christians. Up until this point, Jesus' followers had just been known as this little part of Judaism called "the way."
- One other important piece of information—think it theology of the rest of us—anyone that wanted to join the *Jewish faith* needed to become Jewish, meaning they needed to start eating the right foods, stop eating the wrong foods, wear the right clothes, worship God in the right ways and on the proper days. They needed to follow not only the 10 commandments, but also the 613 rules that their religious leaders had created as well. Oh, and all of their men and boys would have to have a small, but sensitive and painful, surgery—also known as circumcision.
 - So it made perfect sense to someone who was or became a Jew, that in order for people to become a Christian, they would first need to become Jewish.
 - We might describe it like this: "Oh that's wonderful that you believe in Jesus and want to follow him and be a part of his church. Like I said that's wonderful, but it's not that simple. First, there are some rules you need to learn and start obeying. Then there are certain types of clothes you need to wear and foods you need to eat. There's some words that you can say and there are some bad words you can't say. Oh, and there's this little, but sensitive and painful, surgery you need to have. Then, you can be a part of the church!"
- This is the reason that many of you, or your friends or your family, walked away from the church or aren't interested in coming to church, because you, or they, got the feeling you weren't good enough.

On the other side of this controversy are the Jewish people. In our day, it's the people who have been a part of the church for a long time. If you have been a part of the church for at least 10 years, you probably know the Christian faith has a moral and ethical standard. The New Testament is filled with Jesus saying things like, "Don't lie, don't cheat, don't commit adultery, honor your parents, help the poor, feed the hungry, serve those who are unable to serve you back.

- Jesus even says things like, I did not come to get rid of the law, I came to fulfill it.
- So in the midst of this beautiful, incredible message of grace and forgiveness, there is also this message of truth and challenge, to turn from the beliefs and behaviors that go against God and be changed.
- It seems like the truth of the gospel is in conflict with the grace of the gospel, and whenever there's conflict, church people seem to act very, very strange. They build fences and make rules, and it's really hard to tell if it's because they want to preserve the essence of what they have, or to because they want to make sure the right people get in and the wrong people stay out...It's like they want to make sure they balance the grace and the truth.

As I've been pondering this for a couple weeks, when the church gets this right, when they fully embody grace and truth, the message of grace and forgiveness and the message of truth and transformation harmonize with each other in a way that draws the rest of the world in, instead of repelling it. When you experience tension, you can actually walk through it well, where tension leads to curiosity and conversation, which can lead to celebration when it's over. But we have to make some commitments for that to happen.

We are going to look at the first church controversy and what the implications are for our lives as people who follow Jesus and help others follow Jesus, especially when we experience tension, controversy, or conflict.

Acts 15:1-2a NLT

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently.

When Paul and Barnabas lived in Antioch and when they travelled through these cities sharing the message of Jesus and starting new churches, some of the people that responded were Jewish, but many of those that responded were not Jewish but responded to the good news of Jesus anyway. What we can pick up from reading the book of Acts and the letters to the Galatians, Thessalonians, Corinthians and Romans is that after Paul and Barnabas went through these cities, other people—religious people, we might call them church people—came through these towns either in person or by writing letters pretending to be Paul, telling them, actually you do need to do these extra things and follow these extra rules... they aren't EXTRA at all!

Acts 15:2a, 4 NLT

Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question.

4 When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them.

I have to pause because I think we miss some things if we read too quickly. First, even though we don't know about the people who travelled north to where Paul and Barnabas were living,

we learn that all the people in this discussion believed in Jesus. This wasn't a controversy between people who believe in Jesus and those who didn't, they all believed in Jesus. Second, the Antioch church community realized this controversy is bigger than their group and their church, so they asked for help.

One of the dangerous slides they avoid as they walk into this conflict is the slide toward suspicion and away from curiosity. We learn in the letter to the Galatians, people had been spreading rumors about Paul: he was really only a JV apostle, he misspoke about his message about Jesus and forgiveness, and he ALWAYS teaches that the sensitive surgery is REQUIRED everywhere else he speaks...he must have forgotten to say that in your churches.

In the letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had to say,

2 Thessalonians 3:17 NLT Here is my greeting in my own handwriting—Paul. I do this in all my letters to prove they are from me.

I think this slide is first because it's so easy to do. I catch myself doing this as a parent. It's time for bed in our house and all my kids had already been told it's *wind down time*, when you leave your screens in the office charger or on the kitchen counter, upstairs to brush, flush and wash, then PJs, in your beds and if you do it quickly you have time to read. But inevitably, someone will be back downstairs...And I slide to suspect: *'what are you doing downstairs?!'*

Instead of assuming the worst about Paul and Barnabas and their situation, the whole church, including the leaders, welcomed them, believed the best in them and listened curiously to what God had done.

This is a slide we need to avoid as the church as well. When you experience tension, you can actually walk through it well, where tension leads to curiosity and conversation, which can lead to celebration when it's over. But we have to make some commitments for that to happen.

The first one: commit to believe the best about others.

Imagine how your relationships would transform at work if you believed the best in your coworkers or employees instead of assuming the worst.

Imagine how your marriage or your parenting would change if you entered a conversation listening with trust and curiosity instead of with suspicion or doubt.

The whole church listened curiously. Paul and Barnabas may have said, "We travelled to such and such city and we met with the Jewish people at synagogue and shared about what the prophets said about the Messiah and some accepted, some had more questions, and some got angry. So then we kept talking to anybody interested, not just the Jewish people, and we told them, "the God of the universe has finally made a way for people to be restored with him, and it isn't about what ethnicity you are, or what religion you practice or don't practice, or even how good or bad you behave... it is about God sending himself in Jesus Christ and living a perfect life and dying for all of us—just as the prophets of the Jewish people said...Jesus was that fulfillment...and it was proven when Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Syrians and Phoenicians are turning to Jesus.

Cretans and Cilicians are turning to Jesus.

Galatians and East Asians are turning to Jesus.

Macedonians are turning to Jesus.

Greeks are turning to Jesus, even the Corinthians are turning to Jesus.

I've also heard Romans are turning to Jesus.

Acts 15:5-6 NLT Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Some who belonged to the group known as the Pharisees.

Pharisee: was group of church people who were super-disciplined, super-religious, super-in-love-with the rules, the law and tradition. These were the people that followed the 10 commandments completely and even had the 613 extra rules memorized.

We love Jesus but this is HARD...we come from a tradition that prides itself on following these laws for over 1000 years. And the father of our faith, Abraham, gave us the mark of circumcision more than 2000 years ago.

Why can't they just behave like us if they want to become one of us?

These Gentile people eat Hot and Sour Pork, and they like it. I hear those Corinthian men have piercing in places I didn't know could be pierced and their women wear super short skirts and drink too much. Well, I hear those Cretan women wear blue jeans and chew tobacco. I hear the Roman kids play violent video games, listen to rap music and go to R-rated movies.

When we experience tension and walk into conflict, most people want to run away AS FAST AS POSSIBLE, so they slide to rules instead of lean in to relationships.

As a church grows and ages, the tendency is to make lots of rules, that make it easier for the people already there, but make it more difficult and more confusing for those not yet in it.

The insiders are thinking, you know if we had some more rules, we wouldn't have to ask the staff, and the staff is thinking, if we had some more policies, we wouldn't have to have conversations with the leadership team and volunteers. And the leadership team is thinking, Sure, let's create policies, policies are easy, you don't have to meet with anyone.

Acts 15:7 At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows: Peter has more street cred than Barnabas and Paul, and he says, Brothers, which would probably include sisters... Brothers and sisters, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. Remember when I went to Cornelius, the Italian military commander. He didn't behave like us, yet he became one of us. God gave him the Holy Spirit, and as Paul and Barnabas have told us, God gave the Holy Spirit to all these new believers in the countries around us.

Peter could have said what Paul includes in his letter to the Galatians. "I was preaching to the Jews and Paul was preaching to the Gentiles and when I went to Antioch to meet them even I messed up. I had dinner with these new believers with Paul and Barnabas, but when the church people came from Jerusalem, I got scared of how they would treat me because I had accepted people not like us. My hypocrisy caused Barnabas to do the same and made it explode into an even bigger conflict. But PAUL sternly reminded me that,

Galatians 2:16 NLT ...a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law.

Peter left that part out of his speech in Acts, but Luke who wrote Acts said Peter concluded in the same way:

God knows people's hearts, and he cleansed their hearts through faith.

Acts 15:10 So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?

God made no distinction between us and them, do we really want to act like God and make that very distinction?!?

We slide to making rules when we want to make that distinction.

We make rules to balance grace and truth, but Jesus was the fullness of Grace and Truth.

The apostle John makes this amazing statement about Jesus. As he is reflecting on who Jesus is and what Jesus did, he says, John 1:14 NIV The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the

Father, full of grace and truth. He wasn't the balance of grace and truth. He fully embodied grace and truth.

Maybe that point is more profound than we realize...maybe the only way we experience the fullness of Grace and Truth is in relationships, not in rules.

If we want to be people who can experience tension, and still walk through conflict well, we commit to believe the best about others, and we commit to be full of grace and truth.

When we commit to be full of grace and truth, we need to start with grace.

Isn't that what God did for me and you?

God can purify a heart way before I change my behavior.

Don't you believe that if God can do that for you, He can also do that for someone who is not like you?

God was working in those people in Thessalonica, and those people in Galicia, and those people in Corinth, and those people in Rome... and he works in people in Minneapolis, and those people in Eagan, and those people in Lakeville, and those people in Apple Valley.

Then James, the oldest little brother of Jesus, and the leader of the church in Jerusalem, stands up, and he acknowledges what Paul, Barnabas and Peter have said. Then he says, "We are wrapping this up, friends. The prophets predicted this. The Prophet Amos said,

Acts 15:16-21 NLT

I will return and rebuild and restore a chosen one from the royal family of King David, 17 so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord, including the Gentiles—all those I have called to be mine.

The Lord has spoken— 18 he who made these things known so long ago

"And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood.

21 For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations."

And Luke who was writing this probably said, "Ok, what else?" There has to be more rules than this.

- Nope. We are not going to require that sensitive surgery. And we are asking them to refrain from any pagan idolatry and sexual immorality.

But won't that get messy?

Yes, people come to believe in Jesus far sooner than they change their behaviors to be like Jesus.

That will mean we have to be OK with tension.

I want to be someone that does not make it difficult for someone far from God to turn to Jesus.

- I want this church to be a community that does not make it difficult for those today in our world who are far from God to turn to Jesus.
 - That what God laid on my heart when we started this church that all kinds of people no matter how much or how little church they had, would be able to find Jesus if they were seeking him.

How can we walk through conflict well?

3. Commit to be bold and advance God's kingdom.

Even in conflict, we have to ask, how can God's kingdom expand through this? If we experience tension, we have to ask, "Am I sensing this because God's kingdom is growing?"

be bold with your invitations and your life. We don't need to preserve, we need to advance the kingdom and the promise.