

Restoration Revisited (13): A Misplaced Preface

(Acts 15)

I. Introduction

- A. One year at Pepperdine, we met Michelle at late-night worship
 - 1. She wondered in looking a bit lost, so we invited her to sit with us
 - a. She'd just moved to LA from NY to break into movie business
 - 1) She was already actress (left Broadway production of Cats)
 - 2) She was working as au pair for famous producer (not to me)
 - b. She was a Christian & heard about something at Pepperdine
 - c. I've never seen anyone enjoy worship—whooping and laughing
 - 2. You need to know the rest of Michelle's backstory here
 - a. Michelle was brought up in a fundamentalist church full of rules
 - b. No secular music, no make-up, no dancing... she was in Cats!
 - c. She desperately wanted God, but all the rules got in the way
 - 1) That night, she experienced and enjoyed God in freedom
 - 2) She said afterwards, "This! I want to find a church like this"
- B. I finished up a series before Easter entitled "*Restoration Revisited*"
 - 1. We looked at our identity—where we came from and are going.
 - a. We suggested being a restored church isn't forms and formats
 - b. We don't "do Bible things in Bible ways" (one of our non-creeds)
 - 1) Restoration isn't about recreating the right rites and system
 - 2) It is about being recreated in the image of the right Savior
 - 3) We don't restore one true church; we follow one true Lord
 - 2. I'm about to start a new sermon series, "*High and Exalted*" (Isaiah)
 - a. Next week we aren't "doing church" (devo before our seminar)
 - b. Rather than start a series and interrupt it, I'm continuing old one
 - c. Today I want to talk about becoming a church for the Michelle's
 - 3. We'll look at the watershed moment in church history ([Acts 15](#))

II. The Watershed Moment in Acts 15

A. When we talk of restoration, it's Jerusalem that we have in mind

1. But the first church in Jerusalem certainly had its share of problems
 - a. Growth always causes problems; they added 3000 the 1st day
 - b. In [Acts 5](#), there was the sudden demise of Ananias & Sapphira
 - c. In [Acts 6](#), out-of-town widows were overlooked in daily care
 - d. In [Acts 8](#), persecution means church runs off and leaves apostles
2. But in [Acts 10](#), the real problems begin; the first Gentile is baptized
 - a. If you don't think that was a big deal, then listen to [Acts 11:2-3](#)
 - 1) What's the first thing Peter says to Cornelius? ([Acts 10:28](#))
 - 2) Jews and Gentiles didn't hang out; now they are in church
 - b. That wasn't a problem as long as it was theoretical and abstract
 - c. Then Paul and Barnabas baptized them by bucketful in Antioch

B. It is in [Acts 15](#) that this simmering pot comes to a full boil ([15:1-2](#))

1. Notice that for some this as salvation issue, *"you cannot be saved"*
 - a. All their lives they saw holiness as beginning with ritual purity
 - 1) You get into a covenant with God through circumcision
 - 2) You maintain covenant thru Sabbath, ablutions, feasts, fasts
 - 3) They insisted Gentiles do all of that too as believe in Jesus
 - b. Confusing? We believe we're saved by grace through faith
 - 1) But over the years we've added all kinds of salvation issues
 - 2) Like the Pharisees, we are righteous because we do right
 - c. The only difference is in our list of things that we add to faith!
2. So they met. And guess who gets the first word here? ([Acts 15:5](#))
 - a. Everyone here is Jewish! They knew where this is coming from
 - b. Most of the people at this meeting might have tended agree
 - 1) Everyone had lived their lives equating this with faithfulness
 - 2) It would be easier on them to insist the Gentiles keep Law

C. This is the watershed moment—will Christianity remain Jewish sect?

1. Peter started this whole thing, so he is the first to speak ([15:7-11](#))
 - a. What is it that saves any of us? Holy Spirit, faith and grace!
 - 1) What had he offered on Pentecost? Repent, baptize, Spirit
 - 2) That same thing was now happening among the Gentiles
 - b. We should not burden them with a list of rules we don't keep
 - c. We should not make it any harder for them to come to Jesus
2. Paul and Barnabas speak, but it is James who delivers the keynote
 - a. He points to scripture that God would work among the Gentiles
 - b. James argues what a Gentile mission should look like ([15:19-20](#))
 - 1) They had to turn away from idols—he mentions several ways
 - 2) Note his point, "We should not make it difficult for Gentiles"
 - c. They send a letter to Antioch ([Acts 15:23-29](#)). *Several things—*
 - 1) **First**, they disavow the Judaizing teachers stirring up trouble
 - 2) **Second**, they send Jewish leaders to confirm the decision
 - 3) **Third**, they affirm that this was just their decision—Holy Spirit
 - 4) **Fourth**, issues they mention are about idols and immorality
(Late when the Gentile church matures, Paul rescinds the idolatry part)

D. Again, why do they come to this decision? Same reason as before

1. People should not be burdened with things that are not gospel
 - a. They we to get everything that wasn't the gospel out of the way
 - b. That's Paul's point about meats offered to idols ([1 Cor 8:8](#))
 - 1) Eating kosher foods doesn't bring you any closer to God
 - 2) Eating meat offered to idols doesn't take you further away
2. Our traditions, preferences, interpretations aren't part of gospel
 - a. We need to do our best to get them out of the way of gospel
 - b. That will be painful for us, but it was painful for Jerusalem too
 - c. None of our church traditions are as important as gospel. None!

III. Conclusion

A. What does that mean for us? What might that look like?

1. Let me illustrate with a story Rick Atchley told during the lecture
 - a. They'd been inviting a neighbor to visit their church (important)
 - b. She was an Air Force pilot, and she'd later served in command
 - c. She'd never been to a church, but finally did visit one Sunday
 - 1) After, he was very interested in first impressions of church
 - 2) Her first question? *"Why don't you let women participate?"*
2. Professor: *"You have to read the Bible with first century glasses"*
 - a. We see church through the glasses of our church tradition
 - 1) I notice if visit a church where everyone up front is white.
 - 2) Do we think that people don't notice only men up front?
 - b. Here I'm just talking about women participating visibly
 - 1) We're not debating here if women can lead church (later)
 - 2) There's no authority in passing trays or working prayer
 - c. Paul, Peter and James took off those glasses for sake of gospel

B. Different Direction: We should not make our guests feel two things

1. **Spotlighted:** You don't want to single them out ("Stand up if...")
 - a. What is the point of our Meet-n-Greet time? Make all welcome
 - 1) What we are finding is that it makes guest uncomfortable
 - 2) They are ignored or spotlighted (introverts shrivel-n-die)
 - b. A tradition we started to help actually might be getting in way
2. **Stupid:** People always feel a bit stupid when they visit for first time
 - a. What makes people feel most stupid/awkward in our service
 - b. Communion! If you've never been to church, that's strange
 - 1) Person to neighbor, "That was stingiest snack I've ever seen"
 - 2) We need to make sure we explain it; purpose of table-talk

C. Paul reminds us that the gospel itself is a stumbling ([1 Cor 1:22-23](#))

1. There is beauty and power in gospel, but there is also offense
 - a. You have to believe certain things before you accept gospel
 - 1) That God became flesh, that the Creator was born a baby
 - 2) That this God lived among us a life where he was perfect
 - 3) That He died on a cross as the ultimate victory over sin
 - 4) That He was raised from the dead as our victory over death
 - b. That's some story, right? Have we forgotten how radical it is?
 - c. The gospel story itself is to many people today offensive
2. We don't need to add to that offense with our unthinking tradition
 - a. We can't let our church custom and culture obscure the gospel
 - 1) We must be willing to let go of anything that is not gospel so that others can see the gospel and be drawn to the gospel
 - 2) Jerusalem did that when released Gentiles from Old Law
 - b. We must be willing to do the same thing for the sake of gospel

D. Last Saturday, Rachel Help Evans died at 37 of complications from flu

1. She began as a blogger, writing about matters of faith and doubt
 - a. Her first book, *Evolving in Monkey Town*, told of her journey
 - 1) She wrote for "the outcasts and oddballs" ignored by church
 - 2) She asked hard questions that made many uncomfortable
 - b. She searched for ways to get "us" out of the way of the gospel
2. I thought I'd end with two more quotes from *Searching for Sunday*

Imagine if every church became a place where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might just create sanctuary... This is what God's kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there's always room for more.
3. We've got to be a church where there is always room for more
 - a. To be that church, then we must get out of the way of the gospel
 - b. Here's a sign Bob sent me—this is a church where there's room