

In his book, *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness*, Eric Metaxas gives a short biography of George Washington. In it, he highlights the fact that as one of the first leaders of the new nation, Washington faced what was, in effect, an unclear political situation. He had the incredible task of working to define the political system he helped create, particularly the presidency. Many people expected him to take power as King George I of America; in fact, there was even one officer who warned of the “certain disaster that would befall postwar America unless Washington declared himself king.” Washington would have none of it and refused to use his military power for himself. Even the number of four-year-terms a President can serve is based on the fact that Washington refused to serve more than two. Metaxas also writes that: “Washington had no model upon which to base such decisions as how the president should dress, whom he should meet, how he should make federal appointments, whether people should curtsy or bow to him, or even what he should be called.”

At the time of its inception, America was a new country that was free to set up its government however it saw fit. In a similar way, the early Church existed in a new era that required wisdom and discernment to live out their freedom in a missional, constructive, and God honoring way.

In most areas of life, I’d say I’m a realist. When it comes to conflict among believers, however, I tend to be an idealist. I believe that unity is something God requires of us. Fellow believers should be able to talk, pray, and work through conflict—just the way it was worked through by the church in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, after 40 plus years of Christian ministry, I’m becoming more realistic about this. Why? Because I have seen over and over again the consequences of our human nature, which includes my own human nature of course. Traditions of faith bring stability to our life as a community. But they can also work against needed change. What would you say is the most important ingredient for resolving conflict in the life of the church? For bringing about reconciliation? The same undeserved gift that saves us: Grace. It is through God’s grace that hopelessly divided people can come together.

Let me be candid about what is going on in Acts 15. People new to the faith are being informed that one of the entrance requirements involves a sharp knife and a body part. Naturally this situation causes consternation and serious personal discernment of the nature of freedom in Christ. After “*believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees*” (v. 5) stood up and said that circumcision and following the Mosaic Law should be requirements for new Christians, it would not be hard to recognize this made things “difficult” for many new Gentile converts.

The problem is, of course, that the very identity of God’s people in the Old Testament was framed by the rite of circumcision and the Mosaic Law, both of which were instituted by God *himself*. From the time of Abraham, circumcision was the mark of the covenant, and the expectation was that all male children and any men who became part of the Hebrew nation would be circumcised. Those who became part of the community also took on a well-defined way of life as prescribed in the Law of Moses. Circumcision and the Law weren’t things someone intellectually agreed with and then moved on. They were both part of a physical reality and practical lifestyle that was divinely ordained.

Which brings me to another observation that is less often thought of but is no less obvious: The early church didn’t have the New Testament to lean on as part of their Scriptures. The early church *was* the New Testament. The words were being written as their story unfolded. So, the only authoritative written text that they had before them (the Hebrew Scriptures) clearly spelled out that people who were part of the covenant community were expected to follow the Law and become circumcised. Further, for people who had converted to Judaism in the past, the standard operating procedure was the same that the “Christian” Pharisees were advocating for now. The points Paul, Peter, and others make in the discussion hadn’t yet been generally accepted as the orthodox response. The church couldn’t simply accept what these apostolic leaders were saying as necessarily carrying the same weight as Scripture and tradition, especially when there were others who were well versed in the Scriptures who were arguing the opposite side.

Long story short: These early leaders inherited a longstanding and deeply held religious system, and they had to discern, without a clearly spelled-out plan, the specifics of how this Old Testament system related to Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. To do so, they had to listen to the arguments, pay attention to what the Holy Spirit was doing, and then together they had to make a real-time real-life decision. And they couldn't defer it or come down in the muddy middle because you either get out your flint-knife or you don't. No surprise that verse 7 says, "*after much discussion,*" Peter spoke.

When Peter finally stands up, he doesn't just respond to the presenting issue, but recognizes Christ's work was so expansive in its scope that they weren't just rebuilding a house but *resetting the entire foundation*. **He frames it in these three important ways:**

First, he sets a new foundation. While the Pharisees seem to insist that however they proceed must be based on what God has revealed, Peter shifts their decision-making to include what God is currently revealing. He recognized that God was doing something new and unexpected, and they needed to allow for the actual work of the Holy Spirit. The stories of Peter's, Paul's, and others' work among the Gentiles needed to be admissible evidence for discerning this new foundation.

Second, he builds on this foundation. Peter moves from "*what must they do*" to "*what have they done.*" The answer is: They believed. When they look around, the evidence is clear that not only have the Gentiles been coming to Christ by faith alone, but Christ himself seems to have been accepting them and pouring out his Holy Spirit on them by faith alone as well. Without circumcision or the Mosaic Law, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them in equal measure. Which means that it's really a bit *after-the-fact* for the Pharisees to be speaking of entrance requirements for salvation. It's kind of like someone standing on the sidewalk who tries to argue about whether their new neighbor has met the requirements for securing a mortgage while before their very eyes the new neighbors are moving into their new house. Peter basically tells the

Pharisees, “If you open your eyes, you’ll see that the deal is done. They have been approved by God through faith alone, and they’ve already moved in!”

Third, Peter dismantles the old foundation. While the Pharisees are asking for these Gentile Christians to go through the same approval process they, as Jews, had to go through, Peter reminds them that this approval process is one they haven’t been able to live up to anyway. If they’re worried about circumcision and the Mosaic Law, they’re not only saying *that the Gentiles aren’t saved*, but *that they themselves aren’t either*. The whole point of the Gospel is that the yoke was too heavy. *The same grace is needed* whether someone has been trying to follow the Law or not. All have sinned. All are saved by grace alone.

Later, James follows up Peter by suggesting that they not make things more complicated or difficult than they need to be. Let’s not chain others to the things we’ve been freed from ourselves. There is no entrance requirement to salvation other than grace through faith. And the items that he suggests these new Christians stay away from (food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, etc.) are given as a way to encourage Gentile Christians to live in a way that seems most fitting to their new identity as followers of Christ rather than as entrance requirements to become considered part of the faith community.

In the end, this is a helpful reminder for us that Jesus has already fulfilled the Law and because of that, the Law is no longer a requirement for us to be considered his followers. Yet, it also reminds us that children of God ought to live according to their identity. As I said last Sunday, we cannot profess faith in Christ as Savior and Lord while making no effort to do God’s will.

After 40 plus years of Christian ministry, I’m becoming more realistic about resolving church conflicts. Why? Because I have seen over and over again the consequences of our human nature, and that includes my own human nature. Traditions of faith bring stability to our life as a community. But they can also work against needed change. What is *the most important ingredient* for resolving conflict in the church? For bringing about reconciliation? It is the same undeserved gift that saves us: Grace. Through grace alone! Amen.