

Spreading the Gospel Far and Wide #1

Introduction

- *(Intro sermon series on Acts)*
- What would our equivalent of the Jerusalem Council be?
 - a Presbytery meeting called to consider a radical offshoot from an existing congregation?
 - one where they don't have a minister, no Session Clerk and certainly no Presbytery elder?
 - or one where they don't have a building?
 - or one where they only baptise adults, and not children as we do?
 - or one where the congregation is made up of the homeless, the prostitutes - including the leaders?
 - or one where....?
- This is a reaction to a challenge, a challenge that has come from a developing situation on the ground:
 - its something that has happened many times over the centuries, in different guises
 - lets listen carefully to 3 things God was saying to his church in the 1st century that he still needs to say to us today...

Them or us?

- Gentiles or Jews?
 - whole background of segregation over generations
 - deep seated prejudice - but remember, not **felt** as prejudice!
- Do we feel we are prejudiced against the Asian population in our midst?
 - probably not...
 - but the fact is our communities are divided, separated; not, perhaps, deliberately, but still that is the sad reality
- What the early Christians had to learn is that its not "them or us", but "we are all sinners"
 - how do we view those who don't know the Saviour?

Gospel or Law?

- Question for the church then was whether Christians needed to observe the outward signs of Jewish faith - circumcision, and by extension the sacrifices, temple worship, holiness laws, etc
 - the critical thing was "could a person who didn't do those things truly be a follower of God?"
 - it may come couched as: "as believers they should be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses" - as if it were a consequence
 - but the question is whether someone is a Christian without such outward signs
- Perennial question!
 - do you have to do particular stuff to be a Christian?
 - and the answer is **NO**, it is by grace we are saved
 - humanity has a built in propensity to try and buy salvation, a bias like that on a bowl
 - an we must continually fight to re-express that it is by grace...
 - indeed, it has sometimes been said that if we are not open to the accusation that we preach license then we aren't preaching grace enough!!
- In the context of the situation, the letter to the churches was a clear statement that

salvation was by grace, but that believers would **do well** to avoid certain things, things that have little to do with Jewish religious observation and lots to do with where their hope for salvation was:

- food sacrificed to idols - context of pagan worship...
- sexual immorality - context of brazen immorality...
- and **nothing about circumcision or the Law of Moses!!**

Play it safe or run the risk?

- Were they willing to run the risk that it would all go horribly wrong?
 - was God big enough?
 - or did they want to retain control?
- Implicit here is a challenge to the church's **attitude**
 - do I trust God, or tradition?
 - will I obey when he calls me to... speak to certain people, offer salvation without strings... go out of my comfort zone, doing the kinds of things or with the kinds of people I am naturally drawn to
 - he won't always call everyone to live permanently outside our comfort zones, but faith grows when we take risks, when we say "Yes Lord", not "But what if, Lord"!

Application

- All in all, as this young church agonised, they learned to put sharing the gospel first:
 - mission was the cornerstone of what they were about
 - they weren't interested in treating outsiders as second class citizens, them rather than us, but rather desperately concerned to draw them in
 - they weren't interested in imposing their own cultural heritage on new believers, but were desperately concerned to pour out the grace of the Lord, the free forgiveness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus
 - they weren't interested in just playing it safe, but were willing to take risks in obedience to the Spirit's prompting

Will we?