

Martin Luther and Acts 17: A Conflict with Ecclesiastical Authority

Acts 17:1 – 15 (10-12)

Introduction:

There is a church in central Florida that recently was subjected to a lawsuit with its expense and negative publicity. The struggle centered on control of church property and “name.” It developed over time with a revival of Biblical teaching on salvation and nature of the individual’s response to the gospel and subsequent participation in the life of the church. It became clear to an established group, that they were being challenged to participate in the gospel in a manner with which they “disagreed.” In hindsight the real question was likely “what ‘gospel’ do I embrace?” The challenge was “who has authority to interpret the Bible and set the rules in my church.” In fact one of the quotes from the conflict roughly goes like this, “we were here first!” Graciously, it appears at this point, that God is rewarding those who wish to stand on Biblical authority. But this is a contemporary reminder to ask, “Just who makes the rules around here?”

This evening we want to go back to the 17th chapter of the Book of Acts. We want to nuance an additional thought about the Bereans and their approach to the Scriptures. As we think back on the conflict that occurred in both Philippi and in Thessalonica, we see that it was focused on the ultimate source of authority and allegiance. Questions like, “Where did that authority come from?” “Does not authority lie in the decrees and patronage of Caesar?” “The truth is found in the traditions of the rabbinical interpretations of Moses?” These questions were answered with an unequivocal “no” from the teaching and preaching of the apostle Paul. He proclaimed the true king, the king of the ages, prophesied in the pages of Scripture who burst upon the scene in the current era. In this Jesus, crucified, risen and coming again, is where citizenship and allegiance is found. Jesus, embraced by faith as Lord and Savior, is the true Caesar and lawgiver, the true authority for life. The Bereans were notable in that they searched the Scriptures, not because they were suspended in doubt, but to affirm authority. We merely alluded this morning to a tension in this text. The conflict involved that of hearing Paul as one of authority or hearing Paul as one under the authority of the Scriptures.

Exposition:

Paul embarked on this current journey coming from a “church council” at Jerusalem. This council was to think through and analyze what God was doing, particularly in the lives of Gentiles. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem, the apostles and elders, heard testimony and examined the Scriptures. What followed was a pronouncement that was then shared with other churches. The delivery of this message, coupled with Paul’s desire to go and continue to teach,

encourage and build up those churches, carry with it a sense of authority from the teacher. So Paul embodies some element of authority in part because of his divine appointment as an apostle to the Gentiles but also in that he has been challenged and charged from the colloquium there at Jerusalem to teach the truths regarding God's message in God's plan for the ages.

There is real potential for conflict then in the minds of the Bereans between this internal testimony of Paul and a proper understanding of Biblical authority. We stated this morning that Luke and Paul give some element of approval to the Bereans approach and their responding to Paul in this manner. It was not in opposition to Paul's authority that caused the examination, on the contrary it was to affirm and support what Paul had to say. Look again closely at verse 11. It says "Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so." They *received* what Paul said. They were eager in their belief of the gospel. The Spirit had opened their hearts to receive the message and opened their minds to hear the truth clearly presented. They likely understood Paul to not only be a spokesperson for the church at Antioch, carrying a message affirmed by the church of Jerusalem but also heard Paul to be the spokesperson of God. But even in this they recognized the tension between hearing the word of man and hearing the word of God. They examined the Scriptures!

This conflict was not limited to the Bereans. It was not even isolated to the Bereans in the era of the New Testament. This conflict, this tension, this situation exists all the way to the current day. Historically we can see it where it came to a head in the life of Martin Luther.

History:

As far as anyone knows, Luther never actually had the debate he proposed with his "95 theses," but he did create quite a stir both in the theological academy and the hierarchy of the church. Martin had issued the "theses" in 1517 and by 1519 he was invited to participate in a debate over his previously condemned "heretical" views with one, Johann Eck. Eck was a theology professor whom Luther would have regarded as a friend and ally at one time. Johann Eck had previously written his opinion on Luther's views. He has been quoted as calling Luther "a heretic, rebellious, presumptuous and impudent as well as sleepy, simple-minded, unlearned and a despiser of the pope." Exactly what you like to hear from a friend (one thing to keep in mind, whether it is wise or Biblically correct, it was common practice in the day to attack your opponent with often caustic and defamatory statements. We hear them probably a bit more oddly than it was heard in the day).

It was during this debate in the summer of 1519 that Luther was "trapped" in aligning himself with another previously convicted heretic. Jan Hus had been

burned at the stake in 1415 for challenging papal authority, the efficacy of indulgences and upholding the primacy of the Scriptures. He had laid groundwork on the continent from Bohemia by spreading a similar message as had John Wyclif in England 50 years or so before him. One interesting note, at his death Hus is reported to have declared, "In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed."

Luther found himself arguing against the "absoluteness" of papal authority, the efficacy of indulgences and upholding the primacy of the Scriptures. Eck pointed out that Hus held the same views, prompting Luther to remark, "not all the articles of Hus are heretical." That was as clear of an admission of guilt as you can get, aligning yourself with a known heretic from history!

As the course of the debate progressed, Luther made this statement, "I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. A council cannot make a divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right. Councils have contradicted each other...a simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without...neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and council." This was recognized for what it was, a clear declaration of the authority of Scripture. Eck attached this corollary to it: "this is the Bohemian virus, to attach more weight to one's own interpretation of Scripture than to that of popes and councils." That is, where does one place his trust, in one's teachers and shepherds or in personal opinion, which may be outright error?

This concept, that the pope and council did not carry the weight of eternity with their pronouncements found fertile soil in the social politics of the era. Do not hear the effects of the reformation as evidence that the entire social fabric embraced the gospel of grace and became genuinely Christian. Much of what followed as "reformation" was in reality political upheaval, even revolution, masquerading as some pious religious change. This is why in the spring of 1521 Luther was "invited" to participate in an imperial Diet or council being convened in Worms to discuss many of the conflicts occurring in the empire. Luther was no longer merely some theological fly in the papal soup, he now attracted the attention of the forces of the earthly powers.

Charles V was the new emperor. He was both young and zealous to establish and consolidate his role. Even though he was the emperor of the German "Holy Roman Empire," he was of Spanish descent (he did not even speak German). He eventually acquired the title "Defender of the Faith" in part for his role in holding off the Ottoman, Islamic threat on the Western borders of the empire. His family was known for its zeal to affirm the tenets of the Roman Church in spite of political conflict with the pope (think Spanish Inquisition). He was the grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella of Columbus fame and nephew of Catherine of Aragon who was married to Henry VIII of England. Luther agreed to participate because

he was given a decree of safe conduct, the papal office objected because Luther was already declared heretical. Charles however needed to assert his authority in all aspects of the empire (at the time the largest, most diverse and increasingly most volatile in some time).

Luther appeared in the late afternoon of April 16, 1521 before the emperor, the regional princes and leaders, and many other imperial officers. Luther was so overtaken by this audience that he was barely audible in his responses. He was placed in front of a pile of books and tracts (the printing press was a great tool for Luther's supporters) and asked if these materials were his and would he retract what he had written. He admitted that these and other books were indeed his but requested time to consider the second part of the question.

There have been many explanations offered as to why Luther would ask for an additional day. Was he contemplating capitulating to the pressure? Had he not known the question before him? His challenge from his accuser, I think reflects the solemnity of the situation and the issue now before Luther. He was not shrinking from his confidence in Biblical authority, he was wrestling with exactly what he was charged to consider that night; to consider "the general peace and quiet of Christendom and not to rely on his own private opinion or to overthrow the universal Christian religion, to incite the world, to confuse the lowest with the loftiest and so seduce so many godly minds and souls." He was struggling with challenge of the authority of the church. What effect would his challenge be among the masses? By now he had been engaged with others who shared his disdain for the papacy but who disagreed with his own assessment of the direction change should go. Was he "right" or were the others? Perhaps even the teachers and the pope had been given this authority and he needed to back down and work through what might be viewed as the divine channels for change?

The following day Luther was brought for his answer. He was willing to recant some of the tone of his writings and even that some of his general content was subject to debate. He was *not* however willing to recant unless proven by Scripture. He was challenged that every heretic used the Scriptures in the same way and he "should not be so arrogant as to think he was the only person who truly understood the Scripture." Here was Luther's opening to back down and subject himself to those his teachers and leaders. But this is his famous response: "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture, or by evident reason (for I put my faith neither in popes nor councils alone, since it is established that they have erred again and again and contradicted one another), I am bound by the scriptural evidence adduced by me, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot, I will not recant anything, for it is neither safe nor right to act against one's conscience. God help me. Amen."

Likely in view of the political upheaval at hand, the electors convinced Charles to authorize a commission to further examine Luther's writings with hopes to

convince Martin of certain errors. But since they could not convince him from Scripture, Martin held his ground and with his safe conduct passage was able to leave Worms peaceably. He was eventually banned from the empire, his books to be burned and was placed under the sentence of death. He was able to continue to live only under the protection of his “prince,” Frederick, who was not motivated by theology but rather politics.

Luther had wrestled, this time with the implications of his personal interpretation. His hesitation indicated he understood the ramifications of unlearned and false readings of the Bible with the resultant anarchy it would bring. He was well aware of the Bible’s teaching of the authority of the apostles and elders in such passages as Hebrews 13:17. But yet how to reconcile that with what he felt was such blatant disregard for Scripture and even to the point of denying the Scripture’s ultimate authority.

That brings us full circle back to Acts 17. How did the Bereans respond to the obvious authority carried by Paul? Paul was learned in the Scriptures and understood the relationship between the work of the Christ and the Spirit to the Old Testament thoroughly. This would definitely be reflected in his teaching in both style and content. We know from his debate with the Corinthians, that he was meek in his oratory, but yet declared his particular status as “apostle of Jesus Christ” with all seriousness. We have it clear from our narrative though, that the Bereans did not take Paul merely at his own word, but ensured, through their own examination, that Paul truly spoke the Word of God.

Reflect and Respond:

Luther understood the tension, between standing for the Word and listening to his shepherds and teachers. His original desire was to debate and discuss the current situation and compare practice with the Scripture. As this was shown not to be a popular option, he understood the risk of standing with those declared to be heretics (both correctly and falsely). This tension continues in churches today. Even recently in the life of Clearcreek Chapel, one waged a war on the Word as taught through an Internet campaign to discredit the teaching here. The charge levied was one of abusing authority to teach and promote heresy. What should we think about such an attack? Should we agree that the leaders of the church have no authority to speak? Upon what grounds do we assess the teaching of the church and how should we progress if we disagree? What should this look like in contemporary practice.

Plural leadership is one safe guard against political power-play frequently found in churches. Notice I did not say multiplicity in leadership. Plurality involves overlap and interdependence. The shepherd-leadership model at Clearcreek Chapel is intended, although imperfectly at times, to have singular oversight of ministry and yet have significant interaction with ministries that interface with them. Individuals are “shepherded” by the elder of their flock (you all know you

are in a flock whether you attend a flock gathering or not) as well as those elders that may be responsible for the ministry or ministries in which you serve. For both the good and the bad, you hear preaching from each of the elders to be challenged and encouraged from various perspectives and styles. But plurality demands a unity that multiplicity can avoid. Plural leadership must have a common focus, a common vision and common strategies in order to be effective (and we assert, Biblical).

Leaders should be competent in their understanding of the Scriptures and the application to life. This idea is almost understated at Clearcreek Chapel but is not as consistently applied in other churches and contexts and needs to be overtly stressed even in ours. Leaders are not in place (I am speaking here about elders, deacons/deaconesses, teachers, ministry coordinators and “whatever”) because they merely have the appearance or “skills” in those areas. Social position and comfort, expressive abilities and technical expertise can all be substituted for Biblical leadership qualities. Historically it is shown, currently it needs to be affirmed, that Biblical leadership is just that, it is Biblical.

Church policy, doctrine and practice should be publically available and explained. Even though churches frequently post and publish their “statements of faith” and operational “constitutions” these are often skeletal presentations of what is taught and understood to be true and practiced in their context. We must be clear and forthright in what we teach and how we practice. The elders are constantly reviewing ministry and beliefs and examining how to best present them publically. And yet, large areas of “assumptions” can often be made that even at the leadership level can lead to disagreement and even outright failure of a ministry or project. Some areas of interpretation are given wide latitude as to what the Biblical text means and yet others need perhaps even more careful and public affirmation because how things are understood and “nuanced” have great effect on how we practice.

There should be a concerted effort to teach, not only the content of the Bible, but the principles of interpreting Scripture and these principles should be evident to be in operation in the public proclamation that occurs. This involves the equipping of saints for ministry that I was challenged to present a few months previously. All of us need the requisite background and skill to be competent Biblical interpreters, not just Pastors Russ, Dan and Chad. We should not teach the Bible in the sense of “believe what we say” about the Bible, but “believe the Bible” and yet be confident in our saying of its message.

There should be a general attitude of submission on both ends. Those in “authority” should be gracious and cautious and the congregation should be eager to listen and follow. Examine your heart, are you resistant to change and generally require great effort to be convinced or are you eager to search the Scriptures to see if things are “so?” All of us should constantly and consistently be reminded to renew our commitment to Scripture