**A Great Church Fight**

Books by Leslie Flynn:

         When the Saints Come Storming In

         Great Church Fights

Things churches have fought over:

1.    Appropriate length of the worship pastor’s beard.

2.    Should they build a children’s playground or to use the land for a cemetery?

3.    Should a clock in the worship center be removed?

4.    Which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer.

5.    Should the worship leader have his shoes on during the service?

6.    The church budget off $0.10. Someone finally gave a dime to settle the issue.

7.    Should the church purchase a weed eater? It took two business meetings to resol*ve.*

8.    What the type of coffee? Folgers or a stronger Starbucks brand? One church simply moved to a stronger blend. Members left the church.

9.    Should the church allow deviled eggs at the church meal?

10. Should the call a dinner “potluck” or “pot blessing”?

11. A church member was chastised because she brought vanilla syrup to the coffee server. It looked too much like liquor.

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Know what’s really sad? None of that surprises me. It’s not at all uncommon, especially in small churches. That’s partly why they remain small. No issue is too petty for some churches to fight over.

Did you notice that not one of the issues mentioned had any theological significance? There was nothing that pertained to the church’s mission. Church fights are usually over personal preference, not the Word of God.

Acts 15 recounts the first known church fight - but it was a lot different than what churches today experience. It all started because Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas obeyed God and shared the Gospel with Gentiles. To make matters worse, many Gentiles accepted the message of salvation in Jesus.

*Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”* Acts 15:1 That’s fundamentally a different Gospel.

*This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.* Vs. 2a *This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.* That’s a cute euphemism.

         στασις – sharp dispute – translated “rioting” in Acts 19:40

         συζητησις – dispute but with a pejorative sense meaning it was not a friendly disagreement.

This is the beginning of the first church fight. *So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.* Vs. 2b

Let me be clear, this was a fight about doctrine and correct doctrine matters. As I said a few weeks ago, having faith is not good enough. Our faith must be in truth. If our doctrine isn’t consistent with what God says, it’s not Christian faith. So this is legitimate a fight.

*When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.* Vs. 4

Verse 5, *Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”*

The party of the Pharisees. Now that’s a party. Put out some nachos and queso dip, throw in some chicken wings and something to drink, then make rules for everyone to follow.

To be fair, the Pharisees and what was called the circumcision party weren’t all bad. They believed God, were committed to obeying Him, and were quite Biblically literate (or maybe I should say “Torah-aly” literate).

They were serious about obedience. Circumcision was the first proof of obeying the Law and thus became the catch word for people who believed in strict obedience. They said that in order to be saved by Jesus a person had to obey the Law. Not just the Ten Commandments, but every command in minute detail, starting with circumcision for males. For them the Law was still the means to salvation.

The Pharisees and circumcision party didn’t want to exclude the Gentiles as much as they wanted the Gentiles to play by their rules. They had a concept of a ladder, based on the Law, that leads to heaven.

The Christ was a Hebrew Messiah. For Hebrew Christians Jesus was part of that ladder. Gentiles could come into the “people of God” but only by this ladder that included the Law.

The problem as they saw it was that Paul and Barnabas weren’t telling Gentile believers that they must be circumcised and obey the Hebrew Law.

Verse 6: *The apostles and elders met to consider this question.* I call this a Great Church Fight because while there were serious differences of opinion, nobody got killed. That’s a good thing.

Here’s how the meeting went. First everyone shared their thoughts on the matter. *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Vs. 7a* He talked about how God used him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. (We talked about the episode with Cornelius from chapter 10.)

Peter offered this conclusion:

*God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them* (Gentiles) *by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith.* *We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.* Vv. 8f, 11

Paul and Barnabas also spoke, *telling about all the miracles signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles and through them*. Vs. 12

Certainly there was a lot of discussion and arguing that is not recorded here. I’m sure the sharp dispute and debate continued in Jerusalem. Both sides arguing for their point of view. Both sides standing for what they believe is correct doctrine.

Finally James summarized what they heard:

         *Peter had demonstrated from the Old Testament history that God chose Israel to be His people.*

         *This is consistent with the writings of the prophets.*

         Vv. 19f *It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.*

That’s how this Great Church Fight concluded. Then the Apostles and Elders

*…sent the following letter: The Apostles and Elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.* Vv. 23, 28f

Key here is to see that when the fight was over they were brothers. This wasn’t a matter of good guys versus bad guys. They were all good guys, committed followers of Jesus. They weren’t fighting for personal agenda. However hot it got, their concern was to reach a peaceful and correct agreement on this theological issue.

When all was said and done they wanted to call one another brother. No one was seeking to “win” an argument. They pursued the cause of Christ and continued fellowship.

The church’s faithfulness is shown in how they addressed people who were teaching a different Gospel. Their different Gospel went something like this:

         *People who don’t follow the rules as we understand them are disqualified from Christianity.*

         *Such people don’t “really” know Jesus.*

         *They must obey the rules that we have followed from the time of Moses.*  

This teaching threatened the fellowship of brothers in Christ. Standards and values are important. Correct theology is important. But to add conditions for accepting Jesus disrupts brotherhood. The letter added…

*We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.* Vv. 24-27

In other words, *We, the Apostles and Elders, didn’t authorize those who are teaching this different Gospel*.

Luke concluded his report about this congregational meeting with this: *The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message*. Vv. 30f.

I call this a Great Church Fight because it ended with brothers in fellowship. Most church fights end with brokenness and splits. People who used to sit beside each other in worship now avoid each other at Walmart. And there are lots of tiny little church of about 27 people who all agree on everything and don’t want anything to do with whoever does not agree.

The 15th chapter of Acts shows us that conflict is not exclusive to Agape Christian Church or First Church of God or Bethany Lutheran Church. Think about it. The church in Acts was led by the Apostles, the men who walked with Jesus and yet they had conflict.

We can learn from these church leaders how to work through important issues and decisions without spiritual bloodshed. I’m going to call this: *How to Have a Great Church Fight*.

**Step 1:** Acknowledge differences. We don’t need to be afraid of differences. Most issues we can even agree to disagree. Differences do not have to mean broken fellowship. Real brotherhood sees past differences and seeks the mind of Christ.

The church in Corinth was a troubled church with a lot of differences. Paul started his first letter to this church urging,

*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought*. 1 Corinthians 1:10

He didn’t mean that there must be no differences. Rather he meant that they should come together and agree on what really matters eternally, even if they agree to disagree on less important matters.

This great church fight in Jerusalem started by recognizing that there was a difference of opinion. We too should start by acknowledging that we do in fact differ on some things.

**Step 2:** State thoughts. Everyone should be bold enough to state their thoughts on issues in honest debate. Verse 7 tells us there was much discussion. “Discussion” here is the same word from verse 2, συζητησις. This was not an exchange of opinions.

It was heated debate. But we see that the debate occurred in honest discussion, not in private gossip sessions.

Meetings like this can be very emotional. We all have ideas and we want to be heard, and so we should. One woman in a church fight got frustrated by not being allowed to finish her speech said, *Don’t interrupt me. Let me have my say and then I’ll feel better and hope we can find a solution together*. Bingo! That’s huge. Everybody with a stake in the game should be allowed to speak.

Nowhere are we told how long this meeting lasted. It might have gone on for several days. We don’t know, but it seems that no one was barred from airing their thoughts. Our fights will be better if we allow everyone to state their thoughts.

**Step 3:** Listen. Verse 7 actually begins: *Discussion having taken place*. That indicates sequence. Before the leaders spoke they listened, then Peter and Paul and Barnabas and James spoke. They didn’t begin with a conclusion in mind. Before they spoke they listened.

One sure way to cause angry feelings is for a leader to stifle ideas and expression by making his decision clear before others have spoken. James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, probably an Elder and almost certainly the author of the Book of James, wrote in that letter, *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.* James 1:19 He obviously had been there and done that.

The leaders in this great church fight were quick to listen and slow to speak, and I surmise they were slow to become angry. That’s how to do it.

**Step 4:** Allow the Holy Spirit to work. In the letter they prepared for the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia the leaders based their conclusion on, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit…* Vs. 28

What did the Holy Spirit do?

1.    He used everyone present to create a better plan than any one man would have created.

This is important for us, church leadership is not representative like civil governance, where officers are elected to represent the views and desires of factions within the church. That leads to division not unity.

Church leaders should be chosen because they’re people of wisdom, filled with the Holy Spirit, and have the qualities given in the Bible. (1 Timothy 3:1-12; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4)

2.    The Holy Spirit led them to the Word of God. In his summation James quoted Amos 9. *I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things.* Vv. 16f

James saw the fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy in the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus and in Jesus’ disciples being the reconstitution of the new Israel.

We should always be looking for the Word of God to apply to dispute or difference. We are people of the Bible. That’s why we read and study it.

**Step 5:** Summarize the final decision. James was obviously a skilled orator, able to crystalize the decision of the body of leaders.

If someone doesn’t summarize a decision people often go away confused. When the Great Church Fight of Acts 15 was over, the decision of the leaders was clear, which led to…

**Step 6:** The decision of the leaders was accepted. Circumcision and the requirements of the Law were not to be imposed on new Christians. Only appropriate behavior and way of life were to be expected of new believers.

As far as we can tell, the people of the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch and Syria and Cilicia accepted the decision and there was peace and unity at least for a time. Instead of continuing the fight they respected the God-given leaders.

The Holy Spirit won a significant victory in this church fight. He established that the only basis for salvation is faith in Christ. As Paul wrote years later, it is by grace that we are saved through faith, not by works (Ephesians 2:8f). At the same time He established that true faith is accompanied by works (James 2:14-26).

Before we close allow me to point out a couple of things.

**First**, not everyone accepted the decision of the church leaders. Certain people were so locked into their own agenda that they rejected the decision of the Elders and Apostles.

Referred to as the Judaisers they continued to try to force new believers to follow all the Hebrew rules. They actually followed Paul around and disrupted churches with their version of the Gospel. These were not good people.

And **second**, sometimes differences concerning issues that have nothing to do with salvation or life in Christ cannot be mitigated. Paul and Barnabas disputed on whether or not to allow John Mark to continue on their mission trips. *They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.* Vs. 39

They experienced what we call “*irreconcilable difference*”. They didn’t declare that the other wasn’t Christian. They didn’t try to destroy or hurt the other. They simply parted ways. Sometimes that’s the best outcome you can expect from differences. We’ll talk more about this next week.

Jim Butcher, preacher at Madison Baptist Church in Madison, VA shared this story.

The business meeting at First Baptist was well into its second hour. It had been another cantankerous meeting. Lots of angry comments, snide remarks, and power plays. And, making it especially sad, the issue on the table wasn’t even an important one. The debate was over a relatively minor recent change to the church’s worship service.

Finally, one of the older members stood. He paused for a moment, looking down at his feet, thinking about how exactly to share what he was thinking. Several members shifted in their seats waiting for the old man to speak. At last, he did. “*Who, in hell, cares?*” he said.

There was an audible gasp at what they thought he’d said.

He continued, “*Don’t mishear me. I didn’t just use vulgar language. I asked a question. Who, in hell, cares? We’ve been debating this little bit of nothing issue for ninety minutes. It’s all about each person in this room getting what they want. But who, in hell, cares?*

*Who, having died without Christ and finding themselves in hell, is going to care two hoots about whatever we decide tonight? We’re wasting our time arguing over things that don’t amount to a hill of beans and the world around us is dying without a saving knowledge of Jesus. Who, in hell, cares?*”

The old man sat down and there was an awkward silence for the longest time as no one wanted to be the first one to jump back into the previous debate after his words.

What makes a great church fight is seeking correct doctrine concerning something that matters to the essence of the Gospel: that Jesus died for the sins of man and that He gives every person who receives Him, who believes in His name, the right to become a child of God, and doing so without spiritual bloodshed.