

# ***A Fundamental Error***

Acts 11:1-18

Earlier this month, when Wendy and I were attending the Alliance of Baptists gathering in Greenville, South Carolina, we happened to drive by a drab, yellow-brick walled and gated campus that has been the center of the Fundamentalist subculture in America, i.e., Bob Jones University. If you recognize the name, or have any sense of the legacy of this unusual educational institution, you'll know that since Bob Jones, Sr. founded it in 1927, the school's reputation for strict rules, biblical literalism, and political conservatism has been so extreme, it made the John Birch Society and Moral Majority seem like liberal think-tanks!

Urban legends abound about this notoriously prudish academy. Rumors held the campus had separate pink and blue sidewalks for females and males, a time-tested form of birth control. Actually, as I've learned this turns out to be false—they don't have separate sidewalks. However, physical contact between males and females on or off campus is strictly prohibited! In fact, opposite sex couples are not allowed to be by themselves on or off campus—they must be accompanied by others or by a certified chaperone. To quote the Student Handbook:

Groups need to include an odd ratio of genders (e.g., three women and two men) and at least one student with advanced privileges for every five people in the group. The student with advanced privileges assumes responsibility for the safety and activity of the group. Group members are to stay together throughout the activity. ... <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> First of three quotes from the Student Handbook, Bob Jones University, 2013.

The walls that surround the campus underscore the cloistered effect of worldly separation. To simply go off campus, students are required to get permission from the dean's office!

Mixed groups of brothers, sisters and first cousins may go to public places together. All student names are to be listed on a relative registration form obtained via e-pass and submitted to the dean of men's/women's office.

Other campus prohibitions: girls cannot wear pants; boys cannot have facial hair. Each morning their dorm rooms are inspected for cleanliness. Students are not allowed to dance, to play cards, go to movie theatres, and the use of the internet is severely restricted. Even watching television is limited:

Televisions in residence hall rooms may be used as game consoles or computer monitors only. Students are not to watch television shows, movies, movie trailers or sports broadcasts on their cellphones or computers. In private homes students may view appropriate television programming with a rating up to TV-PG.

I suppose it all makes sense: if Moses, Jesus, and the Apostle Paul didn't watch television, go to movies, or date, neither should college-level students!

Actually, I'm fascinated by how they are able to make this work and remain so willfully separate from the world around them through an old-fashioned resistance to cultural change. Some of that occurs because the students themselves buy into it. For most, it reflects their upbringing in the Fundamentalist subculture. What they face in college is no different than what they always experienced—at home, in church, in the church-related academies they attended, and overall in life. For the most part, these students were already sheltered from mainstream culture, so the walls that surround the BJU campus simply reinforce this protection.

However, I wonder what happens when students leave this protective environment? What do they do when they have to make their own moral decisions, or when they are in a position to be challenged by others? Do they suffer a crisis of faith, if their worldviews become insufficient for living in a real world?

They certainly do, according to Nancy Ammerman, who has studied this phenomenon: Fundamentalist churches have among the highest dropout rates of at least 40 percent.<sup>2</sup>

Fundamentalist youth find it inadequate to meet the demands of the world they now live in. ...Some children are able to maintain their conviction that everything outside of Fundamentalism is inherently evil, but others begin to encounter people, ideas, and activities they simply cannot bring themselves to condemn. ...[They] are like to find the outside world not nearly so offensive as they had been warned it was. If parents, in cooperation with the church and the Academy, are able to isolate their children from such positive experiences with the world, those children are less likely to stray. But the opportunities for failure are legion.<sup>3</sup>

Journalist, Jon Meacham, underscores her point:

An unexamined faith is not worth having, for fundamentalism and uncritical certitude entail the rejection of one of the great human gifts: that of free will, of the liberty to make up our own minds based on evidence and tradition and reason.<sup>4</sup>

Honestly, it's presumptuous for any religious community to think that human cultures and civilization won't ultimately change them—that they will always be able to withstand outside influence from generation to generation, remaining unaltered and resistant to change. It simply doesn't happen, unless one chooses to become isolated and irrelevant, with the likely result of becoming obsolete.

---

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*, Rutgers University Press, 1987, pg. 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186, 187.

<sup>4</sup> John Meacham, "Thine is the Kingdom," Sunday Book Review, *The New York Times*, April 1, 2010.

The walls of separation that have been erected eventually crumble under the weight of human discovery, experience, and freedom. Experience, alone, will often force people to rethink what they've been taught, perhaps in ways that challenge even the deepest core beliefs of their life.

There are many people I've known over the years that fit this description of facing a crisis of faith coming out of Fundamentalist backgrounds. Most speak of terribly painful moments with a bitter resignation of feeling godforsaken when they let go of a life that sheltered them—a life they were convinced was one of faith and spiritual piety—but one that was radically altered *for the better* when they were free of it and embraced the larger world.

One of the more dramatic I've known is the story of Marc Adams, who grew up a P.K. in a Fundamentalist Baptist household. Marc's story is told in his first book, *The Preacher's Son*, which describes his upbringing and his angst when he realized even at a young age he was gay. Needless to say, it was a crisis of faith, not only for him, but for his entire family when he came out, which he did in his early twenties—a family and community that has cut him off. To his credit, though, Marc created his own ministry, HeartStrong, which provides outreach and support to LGBT students in religiously conservative colleges and universities. With a great deal of humor and insight, he speaks of how God helped him to turn his personal pain into a mission of healing and redemption that is a saving grace to many frightened and confused youth in the culture from which he came.

In many ways, I find a parallel to our text for today, when the Apostle Peter had to face the conservative traditionalists in the Jerusalem church with the news that he was welcoming and affirming of Gentiles! The Jerusalem church, of course, was the mother church of Christianity—a congregation that gathered first to proclaim the Christian Gospel within a context of conservative Palestinian Judaism. The branch of Judaism that influenced the earliest believers most was Pharisaism. Pharisees, much like our present-day Fundamentalists, were the religious conservatives of their day; they took the Word of God revealed in the Torah very seriously and quite literally. They claimed to follow it to the letter of the law which, of course, was one of Jesus' primary criticisms of them—not because they believed so earnestly in the divine message, but because they were often hypocritical about it—paying lip service to the Word and then not following its intent and spirit, particularly in lacking mercy and compassion for those they judged as sinners or ritually unclean.

One of the prohibitions was in regard to Gentiles; many traditional Jews tried to remain distinct and separate from them if possible within larger culture. They didn't socialize with non-Jews and only minimally interacted with them in business. It was to protect the integrity of their faith and traditions, to preserve it from corruption in an idolatrous world and, most importantly, to not render themselves ritually unclean from contact with outsiders. An obvious distinction between the Jewish religious law and the Gentile world was in the dietary restrictions—in essence, Jews were forbidden to mix diets by partaking of non-kosher foods. They were to strictly follow the rules of *kashrut* as outlined in Leviticus.

This whole story of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius and his household is laid out in the previous chapter and again here, where Peter had a compelling dream—a message he interpreted as being from God. In the dream he saw a large sheet coming down from heaven, with all types of forbidden animals according to kosher laws. Yet, in the dream he was instructed to get up and do just that—consume what was forbidden—to go against his religious upbringing and break the laws that largely defined Judaism. Needless to say, a dream like this would be a nightmare! Naturally, Peter was disturbed by it.

However, things immediately changed when representatives of a Roman centurion named Cornelius called for Simon (Peter) to come to his house and teach him and his household about Jesus. Peter realized the dream was a metaphor for what he was to do. The moral tension of this passage occurs when Peter explains to those in Jerusalem what he had done: “...the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’” It was answered by Peter’s extraordinary experience and discovery that the Spirit of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob could bless and be present in those whom their own religious worldview had always condemned!

In effect, this startling revelation was Peter’s equivalent to Paul’s Damascus Road transformation, and both led to the inclusion of Gentiles into the redeemed and inclusive Jewish religious movement that eventually became known as Christianity. What most early Christians left behind in breaking away from the traditional rules and tribal boundaries by reaching out and accepting the very

people their own tradition protected them from became the basis for a Gospel that accommodated and adapted to many of the human differences and distinctions that exist around the world!

Yes, it creates a crisis of faith when religious walls of separation come tumbling down! But usually what is discovered is that what is torn down are not walls of divine righteousness, but walls of *self-righteousness*! It's hard to effectively argue that separation from the surrounding culture is warranted when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to transform society, not avoid it!

As I see it, a fundamental error has always occurred when religious communities consider their own piety and purity as more relevant and important than the love, mercy, and redemption that Christ has inspired the Church to offer and represent. A redemptive, incarnate faith, *by definition*, must be fully engaging with the world in which it exists—much like Jesus, offering hope, help, and healing. Otherwise, what benefit is it? Who cares what you believe if it is of no earthly good?

The one fundamental truth this world must know is about the love and mercy of God and the experience of finding it in genuine relationships of kindness, caring, compassion, and charity. No walls need to shelter us, no judgments need to separate us. For the God who created every one of us (and whose image is found in every one of us) comes to us and finds us wherever we may be. That is a fundamental Gospel truth that we can all believe.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
28 April 2013