

“THE TWO PRONGED MINISTRY OF JESUS”
Acts 15:1-21, Acts 15:22-35
January 18-19, 2025

Dr. Paul Brand penned these words in the book, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*: “Using the analogy of the human body, there are some diseases that can spread infection throughout the body of Christ. The mind can become swollen with pride. The heart can grow cold and indifferent because of sin. The digestive system can get clogged by sterile theory and unapplied theology, so the body can’t digest what needs to be turned into energy or eliminate what needs to be released. When that occurs we start to fight among ourselves or we lose our equilibrium and find ourselves unable to stay balanced...” He relates this, then, to what the body goes through.

“Sometimes a dreaded thing occurs in the body - a mutiny - resulting in a tumor...”

“A tumor is called benign if its effect is fairly localized and it stays within membrane boundaries. But the most traumatizing condition in the body occurs when disloyal cells defy inhibition. They multiply without any checks on growth, spreading rapidly throughout the body, choking out normal cells. White cells, armed against foreign invaders, will not attack the body’s own mutinous cells. Physicians fear no other malfunction more deeply: it is called cancer. For still mysterious reasons, these cells - and they may be cells from the brain, liver, kidney, bone, blood, skin, or other tissues - grow wild, out of control. Each is a healthy, functioning cell, but disloyal, no longer acting in regard for the rest of the body.

“Even the white cells, the dependable palace guard, can destroy the body through rebellion. Sometimes they recklessly reproduce, clogging the bloodstream, overloading the lymph system, strangling the body’s normal functions - such is leukemia.

“Because I am a surgeon” Dr. Brand says, “and not a prophet, I tremble to make the analogy between cancer in the physical body and mutiny in the spiritual body of Christ. But I

must. In His warnings to the church, Jesus Christ showed no concern about the shocks and bruises His Body would meet from external forces. *'The gates of hell shall not prevail against My church,'* He said flatly in Matthew 16:18. He moved easily, unthreatened, among sinners and criminals. But He cried out against the kind of disloyalty that comes from within"¹ the body.

These are strong words from a physician, but they are absolutely correct when it comes to both health of the body and health of the Church. Jesus described it well when He said, *"If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand."* (Mark 3:24-25). Any body, physical and organizational, that is split in its allegiance will come to an end and will cease to function at all.

So it was Jesus' intention that we work together in unity with each other so that we might accomplish His goals for ministry. And what was Jesus' two pronged ministry? He says it well in Luke 19:10, *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost."* He came first to seek those who were not in communion with the Father, the Lord God Almighty. That included not only those who were within the household of the Jewish tradition, but also those who are not a part of the Jewish tradition - the Gentiles. Jesus came to the world as the Savior, the Son of God, in order that ALL people might turn to the Lord God Almighty through Him. So even though Jesus initially came for the salvation of the Jews, His expectation was that the Jews would then take that same Salvation in His Name to the rest of the people of the world, so that everyone might find hope for eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The second focus of ministry for Jesus was that all people, then, would be saved from their sins. This involved Him going to the cross at Calvary, taking upon Himself the sins of the world, and dying on the cross as the Perfect Sacrifice to pay the penalty for those sins. Jesus' sacrificial offering of His body and His blood forever paid the debt we owe for our disobedience

¹ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998] p. 597)

to God's Law **WHEN** we claim Him as our Savior, the One who takes away the sins of the world. It is no longer up to us to try to free ourselves from the penalty of sin through strict obedience to the Law of God, but rather it is now through the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, that we are saved from death and brought into life.

So Jesus came to first seek those who are lost in the mires of the ways of this sinful earth, to reach out to them and offer them eternal life. Then He came to save them from their sins through the grace of God. And that was Jesus' commission to His followers, "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:19-20). And then He told them, "...*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8b).

Jesus' intention was not just that the Jews find eternal life through Him, but that all people, everywhere, would find eternal life in and through Him. That meant even those beyond the nation of Israel.

So the disciples and all the followers of Jesus first began reaching out to others in Jerusalem. Then with the persecution that came upon them, they went into Judea and Samaria, reaching not only Jews but Gentiles as well. And then the followers of Jesus began taking the Gospel all over the known world, following Jesus' command.

But now that the witness of Jesus Christ was growing beyond just the Jews, the question became "what to do about those Gentiles who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior? Do they need to become Jews first before they can become Christians?" Many of the first Gentile believers were already within the Jewish tradition, being proselytes to Judaism. But with the widespread

of the Good News of Jesus Christ, most of the Gentile believers did not have any background in Jewish teaching. They were being converted out of their pagan beliefs into belief in Jesus Christ. So, did they need to first become Jewish before they could receive Jesus as their Savior?

Well that's the struggle we are told about in our lesson of Acts 15 today. We read, *"Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses'"* (Acts 15:5), for *"unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved"* (15:1).

Up until that point, the Jews had taken it upon themselves to follow the Law of Moses, and that was how they found favor with the Lord God Almighty. So the Pharisees among the believers in Jesus naturally thought that step one of being saved was to first become Jewish, following all the commands of God given to Moses. Then, having become a Jew, a person could then receive the Salvation of Jesus Christ and find eternal life through the fulfillment of the prophecies about the Messiah. In their minds, these new converts had to have some connection to the Jewish faith before they could take the next step of being "saved by grace."

Sadly, it has continued throughout history, even to our own day, that we make requirements for those who wish to follow Jesus. Many churches say, "You have to follow these rules, claim and achieve these standards, and become members of OUR PARTICULAR DENOMINATION before you can be saved. You have to conform to our way of thinking, and abide by our way of doing things if you expect to be saved from your sins. If you don't do it our way, you aren't really saved." We seem to be following the Christian Pharisees' demands.

But one of the best ways for Satan to destroy the Christian faith is to get us fighting amongst ourselves so that we become divided. And once we are divided, then our organization

falls apart, our influence is diminished, and our focus on Jesus' two pronged ministry of seeking and saving the lost is forgotten.

Chuck Swindoll makes a very good statement. He says, “*Union* has an affiliation with others but no common bond that makes them one in heart. *Uniformity* has everyone looking and thinking alike. *Unanimity* is complete agreement across the board. *Unity*, however, refers to an openness of heart, a similarity of purpose, and an agreement on major points of doctrine”²

(Charles Swindoll, *Hope Again*).

So we don't need to look alike, or completely agree with one another about everything to find unity. Unity, in the focus of Jesus' ministry plan for the world, is able to keep us working together. So despite our different opinions or understandings, we keep our focus to work on achieving the Salvation of the world - to “*seek and to save that which was lost.*”

That was the same determination of the apostles at their council at Jerusalem. **Peter** shared that God had reached out to the Gentiles in Caesarea, pouring out His Holy Spirit upon them. He says, “*God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are*” (Acts 15:8-11).

And then **Barnabas and Paul** began to share how God was working among the Gentiles to help them come to faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit had worked mightily in them to show that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. And many had come to believe and receive Jesus as their Savior. And God was working mightily within them, just as He did among the apostles.

² (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998] p. 599)

With this evidence of God's outpouring of love to ALL people, Jew and Gentile alike, James concludes that this outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles is the fulfillment of the prophecy given through Amos (9:11-12) telling of God rebuilding and restoring the line of David through the One who will bring all people to the Lord God Almighty. So with that understanding, John concludes that it was not that the new Gentile believers had to conform to all the Jewish laws first before they were saved, but that they would begin to live out their faith in Jesus by obeying four basic rules: "*abstain from food polluted by idols, (abstain) from sexual immorality, (abstain) from the meat of strangled animals and (abstain) from blood*" (15:20). They were to live lives transformed by their acceptance of Jesus as their Savior and to demonstrate their transformation by living differently than their previous pagan practices. They were to live as Jesus had quoted in Deuteronomy 6:5, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...and love your neighbor as you love yourself*" (Matthew 22:37).

So the insistence of the Christian Pharisee believers of the necessity to becoming a Jew first, and to conform to the Law of Moses before being saved, was eliminated and the new believers could grow in their faith as God allowed them to do so. Listen to the rest of this account. This is Acts 15:22-35. (READ Acts 15:22-35)

While keeping in mind the two pronged ministry of Jesus, the apostles and disciples of Jesus were able to reign in the cancerous discrepancies that had begun creating division within the body of Christ. They did not let their disagreements divide them, but rather created unity as they focused on seeking and saving the lost in the great Name of Jesus Christ. They used all of the Scriptures to come to an agreement that it is by the grace of God through Jesus Christ that saves us from our sins and gives us eternal life.

That's not to say, however, that the Laws of God given to Moses were no longer

applicable to guiding society. Those Laws are still very much suitable for guiding all of humanity in the manner that pleases God. But the Laws given to Moses are no longer the means for us to find Salvation as God's people. That has been replaced by the ultimate perfect sacrifice of Jesus, given once for all. And everyone who puts their trust and faith in Jesus as the Savior, God's own Son sent for the Salvation of the world, finds the promised eternal life as we become children of God through Jesus.

But our enemy, Satan, continues to work to divide us so that the Body of Jesus Christ becomes impotent and useless. Unless we keep our focus on the two pronged ministry of Jesus, seeking and saving the lost, a variety of issues and differences of opinion will work like cancer to bring death in the Body of Christ, not life.

In his book, *John: The Gospel of Belief*, Merrill C. Tenny gives us the importance of unity within the life of the church. He says, "Within the church of historic Christianity there have been wide divergences of opinion and ritual. Unity, however, prevails wherever there is a deep and genuine experience of Christ; for the fellowship of the new birth transcends all historical and denominational boundaries. Paul of Tarsus, Luther of Germany, Wesley of England, and Moody of America would find deep unity with each other, though they were widely separated by time, by space, by nationality, by educational background, and by ecclesiastical connections."³ It is because they were all focused on bringing Salvation to the people of the world.

Folks, in all we do in the life of this church, it is so easy to see our differences of opinion, or differences of perspective, or our differences of mindset and to let those differences slowly creep into the life of this congregation to separate us and divide us. And when we focus more on

³ (Charles Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998] p. 599)

the differences that divide us, we lose the focus of what Jesus truly wants for us right here in this place.

We must keep our eyes upon the two pronged ministry of Jesus - to seek and to save the lost by whatever means we possibly can. The way things are done may not be your preferred style, or your desired method, or your favorite process, or your anticipated result, but it is much more than our own personal wants or desires. We are servants of Jesus Christ, and He has called us to be about HIS business. And if we are able to accomplish HIS business in a variety of ways, through multiple means, and at various times, SO BE IT! LET IT HAPPEN! The ministry of Jesus is much more than any one of us individually, but it demands it to be about all of us collectively, so that as many as will hear and turn their hearts to the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will do so despite our own personal desires and perspectives and methods.

Friends, I beg you to keep your focus on Jesus' ministry goals - to be the ones who help others come to know Him as God's Messiah for the whole world, and to help them to find true life as they claim Him as their Savior and Lord. Please, we must keep the Main Thing the main thing. Don't let division come among us that brings us death, but let us work together in unity for sake of the glory of God found only in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. Father, thank You for the gift of Salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior! Thank You that You have called each one of us here as Your servants, to be Your ambassadors into the world to finish the work started by Jesus. Keep our eyes focused on the purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ among all those around us, so that they, too, may find eternal life. Give us resolution to our differences. Guide our minds so that it's not about us, but all about the Body of Jesus taking the Good News of Salvation into the world. Give us the determination to be united together IN CHRIST so that we might use our unique gifts and skills to accent and augment the fulfilling of the Great Commissions. Guide us we pray, to work together for the good of Your kingdom, in Jesus' Name. And all God's people said, **AMEN.**