

Reformed and Always Reforming
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Good Morning, It's good to see all of you here this morning.

People often ask me two questions, presumably because I am 24 and in seminary. The first question is: what do you believe the future of the Church looks like. The second is: Where are all of the young people and how do we get them here? Now, let me begin with a disclaimer, I cannot see the future and I cannot read the mind of every twenty-year-old. So, the answers that I give to these questions are my own based on conversations that I've had with friends. In other words, I don't have all of the answers. But I do believe that these two questions are good ones to ask because they identify a real problem. It doesn't take an advanced degree to realize that the Church has a young people problem. To put it simply: There aren't enough butts in the pews and the butts that are in the pews, well how do I say this, they aren't Spring chickens. The Church has a massive problem with young people. And if the issue isn't addressed now then in thirty years, when I'm 54 instead of 24, then many Churches will cease to exist.

Now, let's be fair to Wilton Presbyterian for a moment. I'm not in the pulpit indicting this Church, and I'm certainly not, suggesting that this Church needs to drastically alter itself in order to cater to people my age. That's not what I'm saying. Because let's be frank. Every Church is different. I believe, and maybe you do too, that every Church should look like the community where it resides. And Wilton, well, I can tell you this much: There aren't that many twenty year olds living in Wilton. But travel up the road 45 mins with me to New Haven, CT where there are three major universities within 10 miles of each other. There are thousands of people my age. And I've visited the mainline Churches in the area. Their demographics are no better. That's a real problem, when Churches in a University town, cannot attract at least a handful of twenty year olds to their service!

Is there a solution to the problem? Luckily for us, I think we can look to scripture and the early Church for an answer. Moreover, I think scripture further clarifies the problem. What we see in our passages this morning is that the Church, even two thousand years ago, sometimes gets hung up on traditions and ways of doing things that, ultimately, alienate certain groups of people. How many times have you heard the phrase. We've always done it this way. This is who we are. We can't change this. Parts of the early Church were saying this too, because it is easy to conflate tradition with the gospel. This is how we've done it, this is our custom, so this must be how its supposed to be done.

What we see in our readings this morning, however, is a radical moment where the Church decided to do something new and depart from a long-established tradition.

To understand what's going on in Acts, you must understand this:

The earliest followers of Jesus, his disciples, believed that Christ was the promised Jewish Messiah. Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. The message that Christ preached, his promise of a new kingdom, was Jewish. Jesus did not intend to start a new religion called Christianity. He and his message were the continuation of an old religion that had been around for centuries with long established traditions. But despite his intentions, not long after his death, the early Jesus movement began attracting – to the shock of many – Gentiles. And this sparked a major debate in the early Church. If Christ was a Jew and this was a Jewish faith, then what did it mean for Gentiles to worship too. Many of the early followers of Christ believed that for Gentiles to be fully included within this movement truly to partake in the gospel and experience the benefits of the resurrected Christ, then Gentiles would need to convert to Judaism and follow the Jewish law. That meant circumcision and the adherence to food laws. They believed this because that's what Jews always did and this was a Jewish movement. This had been the custom before Christ. If a gentile wanted to worship as a Jew, then they would have to become a Jew

But there were dissenters, maybe we should call them trailblazers, who believed that just because they had always done it this way, didn't mean that they needed to continue doing it this way. We see this new way of thinking emerge in the Church of Antioch, in our first text.

Here's what happened: in the early days of the Jesus movement, as it began expanding beyond its Palestinian roots, a congregation of Jews and Gentiles at Antioch began worshipping together in the fullest possible sense. Gentiles in Antioch were not excluded from the community because of their, for lack of a better word, "gentileness." Rather, Jews at Antioch invited Gentiles into their fold. This was unheard of. It was a radical new way of worshipping together.

Unlike other Jewish Christ followers, the Jewish Christ followers at Antioch did not mandate Gentile conversion. These Jews believed that Christ's death and resurrection expanded God's covenant with Israel to all of humanity. At Antioch, Jews and Gentiles were praying, prophesying, and performing miracles in the same fashion. From an outsider's perspective, then, there appeared to be little difference between the two groups.

Antioch's inclusivity, however, did not sit well with everyone in the early Church, particularly for members of the Jerusalem Church who largely believed that Gentiles needed to convert in order to be part of the Jesus movement. Antioch's new way of doing Church created a lot of fuss. People in Jerusalem were up in arms because Antioch was breaking with tradition. Let me use a Presbyterian metaphor for you here. If Jerusalem was the general assembly, then they were looking at Antioch and screaming you are out of order!

To solve the debate the early Church convened a council. We call this the Jerusalem council. There, two groups of early Jesus followers, the Jerusalem Church and the Antioch Church, convened to resolve Gentile conversion.

Before commenting on their resolution, let me make a few comments about Paul because I think his attitude toward Gentile conversion will give further testimony to the radical nature of the resolution that these two groups of individuals arrived at.

Though we are accustomed to think of Paul as an advocate for Gentiles, we should not take Paul's sympathy for granted. From scripture, we learn that the Apostle Paul like the disciples was a Jew. In fact, Paul is adamant about it: "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Php 3:5–6, NRSV). Although Paul's earlier disdain for the Church and his confession that he once persecuted the Church makes his acceptance of Christ as the messiah remarkable, what is even more remarkable is that someone as zealous as Paul — someone we could imagine taking the side of gentile conversion — could ever write something like Gal 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (NRSV).

In fact, in Galatians 5:11, we learn that at some point in time Paul himself was preaching a "gospel of circumcision." That is, Paul believed that in order for Gentiles to be part of the Jesus movement then they needed to convert. What changed? We can only speculate here. But considering that Paul spent a sizable amount of time in Antioch early in his ministry, it is not hard to imagine that it was Antioch that impacted his view of the gospel and the Church (Acts 11:25).

So, perhaps in his early ministry, like the Jerusalem Church, Paul too was preaching a Gospel of circumcision, urging Gentiles that in order to be fully grafted into the covenant, they had to completely adhere to the Jewish¹ law. Antioch, however, changed Paul's mind. There, Paul witnessed a new way of doing Church. He saw Gentile and Jew worshiping alongside one another with no distinction, both praying and prophesying as if they had the same access to God. This lived experience shaped Paul's view of the Church.

But, of course, not everyone shared Paul's view. Acts tells us that others from Judea came to Antioch and were teaching "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). This did not sit well with Paul and the Antioch community. They were living witnesses to this new way of living the gospel. So Paul, Barnabas, and Titus headed to Jerusalem appointed as representatives of Antioch to argue their case.

Acts depicts the Jerusalem council as a major moment in the history of the young church. The scene unfolding like a major courtroom drama with delegations from both sides of the debate arguing, law or no. Paul writes about the event in a much more tamed fashioned — as it probably was. He, Barnabas and Titus met privately with the "acknowledged leaders" of the Jerusalem Church. A decision came quickly and unanimously. However magnificent the scene may have been, the decision that these two parties reached would forever shape the young

¹ We can imagine, for example, that this is what is happening in Acts 9:29

Church. J. Louis Martyn writes, “For a negative stance on the part of Jerusalem would leave Antioch with only two paths: to abandon its circumcision-free mission to Gentiles, or to maintain that mission at the price of a rift with Jerusalem that would have produced two churches, one drawn from Jews and a second drawn to an increasing extent from Gentiles²

Luckily, this did not happen because the council decided, though probably not unanimously, that Paul and the Antioch Church were right. They agreed that though this was a new way of doing things and though it broke with long established tradition, it was nonetheless wholly in line with the message of the gospel.

Let’s bring this back full circle to where we started. Today, I think we find ourselves once again in a place where new ways of doing Church are arising. There are new Antioch’s popping up that are developing new ways of doing church that make people who’ve been around for a while uncomfortable. There are long-established traditions that are being tested, altered and, in some cases, done away with. And this divides people.

The debate is no longer over whether gentiles need to follow the Jewish law. In fact, many of the debates today seem trivial by comparison. But what is at stake is no less important. A whole group of people, people my age, often feel that Church is irrelevant. When they look at Church, they see a relic of the past that is out of touch with the twenty first century.

Now, let me just be very honest with you. There are Churches that are listening and that are trying new things. And these are the Churches that are attracting young people. They’re experimenting with new forms of worship, they’ve let go of their buildings and opt instead to meet in civic centers or share space with other religious communities, they’ve focused heavily on community outreach, they’ve moved away from strict denominational structures, and I think most importantly, and what makes them so appealing, is they encourage people to come as they are. That means if a three piece is suit is you and that’s what you rock, then by all means you’re welcome. If you’re a flip flops, Bermuda shorts, Hawaiian shirt type, then by all means you’re welcome. If your wardrobe consists of blue jeans and flannel, you’re welcome. On Sundays, you can be yourself. This is what young people want, and it is my hope that the Presbyterian Church will work to create these spaces.

With that said, let me say this. Just because young people want something doesn’t mean that everybody else does too. And not every church is suited for the task of attracting young folks. And traditional spaces of worship fulfill the spiritual needs of people. It is important that we maintain these spaces while they are needed. But, the reality is, these congregations are declining, attendance is declining, and the reluctance to do anything new excludes the possibility of attracting young adults. So, I wonder if we can’t cater to both. I wonder if there are steps that we can take to make Church a little bit more attractive to young people without alienating longtime members in the pews and doing away with all of our traditions. I think there

² J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 193.

are, but we have to take risks. Like the Church at Antioch, we have to be willing to try something new.