

25. Truth, Tactics and Tolerance

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[0 : 00] When reading the Bible, it's the apparent oddity or apparent inconsistency in the text that's actually the key to getting hold of the message that it's trying to alert us to.

Often something like that is like a hook that we're dangled on, just to make us look closely and really see what the focus of the writer is for us. And it's certainly like that here in the end of Acts chapter 15, in the beginning of chapter 16 that we read.

We just read all about the Jerusalem Council and the huge battle for the gospel that went on there and the absolute insistence on a united declaration of the truth.

Unity was absolutely essential. And again and again through the text it's emphasized it was all the apostles, all the elders, and indeed the whole church, says verse 22, that are of one mind on this issue.

But then in the very next breath, we find ourselves reading about this apparently damaging division between these key missionary colleagues, Paul and Barnabas. And then right after that, we find ourselves reading about what seems to be a damaging departure from the very gospel principles that had been hammered out and insisted upon in the declaration from Jerusalem that clearly stated that Gentiles need not be circumcised.

[1 : 33] And over all people, we find the person who is doing this, chapter 16, verse 3, is Paul, the very one who fought so vehemently for this gospel freedom.

Paul, Paul, says chapter 16, verse 3, took Timothy and circumcised him. What on earth is going on? Well, I guess we've got two possibilities, haven't we?

Either the writer is such a complete buffoon that he just doesn't realize the glaring inconsistency of what he's written down here, and it's just another thing that goes to show that you can't trust the Bible at all.

It's all a load of nonsense. Well, there's some scholars who say that kind of thing. I suppose I would say to that, it tends to take a buffoon to no one. That's one possibility.

Or the other possibility is that Luke, the careful and the highly skilled writer that we've come to recognize and to respect, that he knows precisely what he's doing.

[2 : 35] And that he's put these things together, one after the other, precisely so that we will ask that question. What on earth is going on? And so that, therefore, we'll see exactly what he is teaching us here about the realities and about the priorities of genuine gospel apostolic mission.

And you remember, right at the beginning of his first book, Luke's Gospel, he tells us that he writes precisely to give us certainty about the things that we've been taught and heard.

And one of the things that Christians must be certain and clear about is that we should know when there are controversies in the church that simply must be disputed publicly and even painfully, regardless of the cost.

But also, and equally important, that we must know that there are some matters that are not like that, and that we can be very flexible on for the sake of the gospel. And also, what about other times when Christians disagree over not matters of doctrine, not matters of the substance of the faith or of the mission, but just over practical issues about how we go about the mission that God has given us.

Well, it's precisely these kind of issues that Luke's asking us to think about here in this passage. He wants us to see, from the Apostles' example, the place of truth, the place of tactics, and the place of tolerance in Christian mission.

[4 : 06] And these are very, very important lessons for us to learn, especially, I might say, at the present time in the goings-on in our own denomination and in other denominations in this country and beyond. So let's look at these three sections then, and see what Luke is pointing out to us.

What he's saying is that there is a place for public controversy, for public clarity about that. But there's also, he tells us, a place for personal conviction. And indeed also, there is a place for pragmatic concessions to be made in gospel work.

But we must be never confused between these things. First then, look at verses 22 to 35 of chapter 15. Luke is teaching us plainly that public clarity is essential in matters of gospel truth.

And therefore, we simply must be united in the truth for the sake of the kingdom witness of Jesus. And therefore, it's not wrong to insist that truth prevails, whatever the cost, even if it does bring rifts with some that we have to oppose publicly within the professing church, from whom, in truth, we're actually divided from such people spiritually.

In Acts chapter 15, it was from within the professing church that teaching was being promoted that was so destructive to the gospel that it simply had to come to a public controversy in order to preserve the truth of the gospel of salvation.

[5 : 42] It was painful, I know that it was very time-consuming, very draining to have all that discussion. But it had to be done because the truth of the gospel was at stake. But we see from Luke that when that did happen, even though there was great controversy, it was the way to real blessing from God in the church.

The resultant letter proclaiming the truth of the gospel was read in all the churches, says verse 31, and it brought great rejoicing and encouragement and strengthening and growth.

Verse 31, when they had read it, the churches, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Now, we can't go in again into the detail of these issues of the Jerusalem Council.

We dealt with them last time. But we'll recall that it really was the heart of the Christian message that was at stake. The gospel that fulfilled the scriptures of the Old Testament, the words of the prophets that James quotes from there in verses 16 and 17, and the gospel that was testified to once and for all by the apostles right from the beginning.

That was what the church affirmed at that council. They affirmed their commitment to the full biblical apostolic gospel and to no other gospel.

[6 : 58] There is no room for any other. But agreement behind closed doors by this committee of the church, this gathering of the church, wasn't enough. The gospel is public truth and therefore public clarity is essential.

And so they produced this letter to be sent and read out in the churches so that absolutely no one could be in any doubt about what the Christian church believed about the truth of the gospel.

Well, there's great need today, isn't there, for public clarity on matters of gospel truth. That hasn't diminished. It's increased, if anything. Well, more often than not, what we get today, unfortunately, from the public words of our denomination and others is more like public confusion.

People just don't know what the church actually stands for. That's certainly true at the moment in our situation in the Church of Scotland. But look at the example that the apostles give us.

What do they make absolutely clear in this public letter to these churches? Well, three things. First verse 24. They disassociate completely from the error and from the untruth taught by some in the name of the church.

[8 : 11] These men claim the authority of the apostles, they say. They claim to be apostolic, but we gave them no instruction. Well, there are plenty of people since, all the time, have claimed to be speaking the truth in the name of the church, claimed to be genuinely Christian, but have never had any apostolic credentials at all for what they teach.

And notice here, the apostles call it for what it is. It's a doctrine that troubles. That is, it brings distress. It brings ill health. It unsettles their minds.

It disturbs, it pollutes Christian minds. It's a very strong language there. They're not saying these people came and gave a different point of view.

No, they're saying they came with destructive heresy. It's a very similar language to the language used in chapter 14, verse 2, of those opponents who came outside the church, poisoning the minds, disturbing the people against the Christian faith.

They call it what it is, and they dissociate from it publicly, and from all those who teach it. Secondly, verses 25 and 26, they stand publicly in solidarity with the true Christian ministers and those they recognize to be of men of sincerity, men of integrity.

[9 : 40] People, they say, who have risked their lives, risked everything for the cause of Christ. They're not afraid to publicly align themselves with true gospel people.

And thirdly, in verses 28 and 29, again, they affirm unambiguously the true gospel that was proclaimed by Paul. Nothing more, nothing less.

No additions, no subtractions. The salvation that is by free grace alone, whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, God's grace is real.

It's powerful to save. But also, it's a grace that's powerful to transform, to turn you away from idols, and towards the living God. And therefore, it will issue in real changed lives.

The pagan lifestyle that revolves around, the idolatry of these temples, the debauched sacrifices, the sexual immorality, all of that must be left behind for true Christian believers.

[10 : 39] So they affirmed, in other words, the true apostolic gospel of genuine grace that issues forth in a life of genuine repentance.

And they made it unequivocal. They made it absolutely unambiguous. They said in writing, and they said it verbally, sending these brothers along to do that.

Because they understood that public clarity is essential in matters of gospel truth, whatever the cost. That was true, as Ewan was saying last week, in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, when Hitler and his henchmen tried to use the church for political ends to serve the political correctness of that day. And men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others refused to do that and formed a confessing church movement, standing up and proclaiming the truth of the gospel that would not be made to serve the evil of Hitler.

Of course, it ended up in imprisonment and indeed for Bonhoeffer, his own death. But it had to be done because the truth of the gospel is not negotiable, whatever the cost.

[11 : 54] And today, of course, in just the same way, there is great pressure in our churches in the West, great pressure for us to serve the political correctness of our culture.

It's just the same. The presenting issues are a little bit different, particularly at the moment. It's the issues of sexuality and sexual freedom, especially the issue of homosexual practice. And it's the issue of pluralism, that all religions must be seen to be equally valid and therefore it's absolutely wrong to try and convince others that their way is wrong and that it's offensive to say that there is only one way to know God through Jesus Christ.

If you're listening to the radio this morning, the former Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazarelli, was being pilloried just for that. And that's why confessing church movements have once again had to arise all over the world in many of the historic denominations, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, the whole Anglican Communion, and indeed in our own church, the Church of Scotland, to publicly stand for gospel truth and to publicly stand with genuine gospel people.

There are always those who wouldn't do that, of course. Just as many abandoned the Apostle Paul back then. You read in Philippians chapter 1 about how his imprisonment had become an embarrassment to many, how some were using it against them for their own advantage.

You read in his letters to Timothy how many deserted him, indeed all of them in the province of Asia, shamed by his notoriety, by his opprobrium, by his chains. Not everyone, though, on his Ziphorus, remember, was unashamed of Paul's chains and he blessed God for him.

[13 : 41] Well, there are those in the church who will always be ashamed of being associated with people who are prepared to make a public stand. But we must make a public stand.

Because public clarity is essential when the truth, the very heart of the gospel, is at stake. And it certainly is at stake in our churches today. Make no mistake about that.

And notice the Jerusalem Council did not say, all right, Paul, we agree with you privately, we agree with you in principle, but we don't want to kick up a fuss here for the sake of the peace and the unity of the church.

No, quite the opposite. For the sake of the peace and indeed the continued existence of the real church, they must publicly defend the true gospel against the false.

Because only the true gospel will ever sustain and build the church of Jesus Christ. And we've got to be equally clear about that. There are some who love the Lord, but who focus far too much on things that are merely human inventions.

[14 : 48] Things like church denominations. And there are people who cherish the unity of these things at all costs. But you know, often that is a very false unity.

It's a unity that's sought by human beings against God. Just like the men of Babel sought unity and a name and security without God. But God will not tolerate that kind of Babylonian unity.

And nor was we. True unity in the gospel is unity in the truth. The truth of the true apostolic gospel. We mustn't sacrifice the church of Jesus Christ, the true church, on the altar of a false pride and a false loyalty to any mere human institution.

However historic it might be, however venerable it might once have been. And I think we can be confident that the apostles of the Jerusalem Council would be in agreement with us on that. Because they knew that public clarity was essential on matters of gospel truth. Even if it meant distancing themselves from and repudiating some within the professing church who claimed to be at one with them but clearly were not.

[16:08] And their clarity in this instance and their unashamed action led to rejoicing, as verse 31 said. It led to encouragement. It led to strengthening. It led, we're told, to peace, to real peace.

Not the pretend peace, but real peace of the real gospel church. So let's take that to heart in our own situation today in the Church of Scotland.

Public clarity is essential in matters of absolute gospel truth. But secondly, what verses 36 to 41 teach us just as importantly is that personal conviction is inevitable in matters of gospel tactics. And therefore, that means that we must be able to differ on tactics for the sake of the kingdom mission of Jesus. And that means it's not wrong to act on these different convictions.

Even if it does mean practical and physical separation from other Christian brothers in gospel work. But these personal convictions must never divide us spiritually.

[17:18] Because we can and we must be able to have different approaches to our mission without there being any real division in the fellowship among true believers. And where we can do that and where these things do happen, it may even serve to promote the gospel further.

If we put the gospel and if we put the mission of the gospel of Christ first, not our own egos, not our own way. It seems to me that's what Luke's telling us here by not trying to airbrush over this disagreement that happened between Paul and Barnabas which otherwise might seem to be very embarrassing.

verse 36, you see, tells us that after a while Paul wanted to go back and visit these churches that they planted and to encourage them. Obviously Barnabas agreed, but he thought they should take John Mark with them.

But verse 38 tells us Paul thought no, it wouldn't be wise to do that because Mark has already deserted us once and not persevered in this tough arena of mission. So I don't think we should take him.

And that led to what verse 39 calls a sharp disagreement. Now we know that Barnabas was related to Mark.

[18:29] It's not mentioned here, but we're told that in Colossians. That may have had some effect. Maybe he had a soft spot for him. We don't know. We do know that Barnabas was a very generous-hearted and a very positive person.

He was perhaps willing to give him another chance. And it's sometimes said that Paul was being rather too harsh here. But Barnabas had the right tack that in fact he was vindicated later on because you read in Paul's second letter to Timothy that he requests later on that Mark should be sent to serve with him.

He knew that he was very useful to him. So was Paul wrong? I don't think we can say that with any great confidence here. No doubt Mark grew in maturity and experience with time and Paul too was very generous.

He wasn't a guy to hold grudges. Doesn't mean that Paul was wrong here but he recognized changes and growth in Mark later on. I think here Paul is just being discerning.

He knew more than anybody that frontier mission was very tough. There was no place for those who haven't got the stamina or perhaps haven't got the guts to stick with it. Remember from what we've read it involved many stonings and beatings and imprisonments.

[19:42] I think he's just being discerning just as we must be discerning. One writer says this, a church of course must nurse and carry the weak, the fearful, the inconsistent but a pioneer missionary team may well think it wise and kind not to include such people among their numbers.

And that's true isn't it? Just so today. Not everybody who volunteers a front line ministry or missionary service should be allowed to do it. Enthusiasm isn't enough. The church has got to have confidence in their staying power and their ability to stick with it.

And Paul here does seem to have had the backing of the church in his choice of Silas. Verse 40 tells us that they were sent on their way commended to God and to his grace by the brothers. We're not told that of Barnabas. I don't think that means that Barnabas wasn't commended. I think it's just that Luke is particularly telling us here Paul wasn't making a mistake. He's pointing out that he's made a considered and a wise choice.

But the main point that I want us to note here is that Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree. But they didn't need to agree about this because it wasn't a matter of primary gospel truth.

[21 : 02] It was a secondary matter to do with gospel tactics. And the fact is that personal convictions in such matters are inevitable. And there will always be among genuine Christian brothers different views about who you can work alongside and how you can go about your mission and where you should be putting your energies and your efforts.

There will always be differences between people who are otherwise united in the truth of the gospel. And by far the best thing is for us to recognize that and be realistic and to get on with it. There's no point in endless efforts to get total agreement about some of these secondary things because gospel unity does not mean and will never achieve absolute uniformity in the way that we pursue gospel work.

And trying to achieve that kind of outward uniformity is often very fruitless and often very, very frustrating. And Paul and Barnabas, I think, knew that and so they parted company and they just got on with the same mission.

One went one way around the circuit. Barnabas went to Cyprus. Paul went the other way around the circuit. We don't know if they met halfway. Perhaps they did. I'm sure if they did they swapped stories and they shared great fellowship together.

[22 : 19] No doubt they had heated discussion and argument, sharp disagreement as we're told. But it's equally of no doubt that they must have parted in peace with all goodwill, with no acrimony, with no bitterness.

And the later evidence of what Paul says about Mark is surely evidence of that. And in fact, it turned out to be a great benefit to the church. Instead of one missionary team at work, there were two missionary teams with others being taken along and being trained.

There was a practical separation, yes there was, into two groups. Different tactical approaches. But no real spiritual separation between these brothers.

There's absolutely no hint here or anywhere else in the New Testament that they started movements of their own. That Paul sought to have people following him and Barnabas sought to have people following him.

Absolutely not. Paul writes to the Corinthians saying precisely the opposite. Don't say, we are of Paul, we are of Apollos, we are of Barnabas or anybody else. We're all just God's fellow workers, he says.

[23 : 24] We're all doing our part in God's building. It's God's work. Now isn't that a very, very practical message? A very realistic message.

A very necessary message for us in the church today. Hasn't it been true so often in the history of the church that we divide spiritually? We have great spiritual rifts with people that really we are at one with over matters of primary truth.

But we have rifts with them spiritually over entirely secondary matters of tactics. We just need to recognize that sometimes we're going to disagree.

And it's best just to agree to disagree and just focus on getting on with the job that we all share that God has given us in the way that we can do it, not trying to get others to do it that way or not trying to do it in a way that others want to do it.

Some Christians in ministry are deeply united in gospel truth. They're absolutely united in their heart for mission. But they differ in secondary issues in matters of church government and the importance that they give to things like that.

[24 : 34] Some people can work in one particular denomination, others can't, or they can't any longer. Well, they must clearly and obviously be united in the matters of gospel truth, but at the same time able to recognize personal convictions about how to go about the ministry, about where to do it, who they can do it with, how it's best done.

It may be quite best to be separated in practical ways of doing these things, working in different denominations and places and so on, but absolutely united in the common mission of Jesus that

they share together.

Now that must be so if we're real gospel people. That's why denominationalism is such a terrible sin for gospel people. Well, not that denominations are wrong. I think they're necessary in one form or another, either loose or tight, depending on the way you look at it, but by definition, the kind of things that unite people in an organization like that are secondary things.

That matters to do with church government or the sacraments or these sorts of things. They're not primary things to do with the truth of the gospel. A true gospel people will always want to work together right across these quite secondary divides, these unimportant divides, in matters of real importance and truth.

They just might find it more convenient and easier to be separated from one another in these secondary ways. They work best like that. But we must never confuse truth with tactics in the gospel.

[26 : 13] And it's true also on the individual level. Personal convictions and indeed personal chemistry are inevitable. There are some people that can just work closely together on one team and there's others who just can't work together closely like that.

Different personalities. And it's far better to recognize that and just get on with the work in different places with different people for the same great cause of Christ as Paul and Barnabas did than to try and insist that everybody can try and work together in exactly the same way, cheap by gel, just because they believe the same gospel.

That's just unrealistic. It's just common sense, isn't it? But it's also spiritual sense because it recognizes that what really matters is the mission of the kingdom.

And what really matters is the truth of the gospel. And when we put that first and when we're realistic about the fact that we'll often see other things, secondary things different from one another because of our personality, because of our experience, because of our backgrounds or whatever, and because of our sin, when we recognize these things, we'll stop being idealistic.

And we'll not confuse these things with vital matters of truth where we must strive for unity. And we'll agree to disagree without acrimony on some of these things and we'll get on serving Christ in the way that we know that we can with the people we can, not in a way that we can't with the people that we can't.

[27 : 46] And sometimes, just like here, that might mean that it's time to move on from ministry colleagues that you perhaps could work with at one time. Once you work very fruitfully with, as Paul and Barnabas did, absolutely no shame in that.

But new doors opened and off they went. Sometimes that happens to folk as well in a church. Sometimes they have to move on from a church where they've served very happily in the past. We should be very slow, I think, to decide that. Very slow to want to move around between fellowships where we serve. But sometimes it just does happen for various reasons. As do many other kinds of changes and partings.

And you see, personal convictions are inevitable in matters of the gospel tactics. And the way that we deal with those things must be quite different from the way we deal with things when matters of absolute gospel truth are at stake.

And that's what Luke, I think, wants us to see here. Paul and Barnabas, they separate tactically. But they are still absolutely at one in the mission of Christ.

[28 : 54] And the result was not damaged churches, but strengthened churches. And I think we can learn a great deal from that. But thirdly, the first five verses of verse 16 remind us also that pragmatic concessions are also necessary in matters of gospel tolerance.

That we must be prepared to be very flexible and very tolerant for the sake of the kingdom mission of Jesus. And therefore it's not wrong to be very sensitive and to be as accommodating as possible in all kinds of cultural and religious ways in our dealings with non-Christian people in order that we might win them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now there's two things that Luke points up for us in these verses. First of all there's Paul's choice of Timothy, which tells us a great deal about the character that he values in Christian workers.

But the emphasis really is on the second thing, on Paul's circumcision of Timothy, which tells us very clearly about the need for these cultural considerations and even concessions in our gospel mission.

Just a brief word about Paul's choice of Timothy as a co-worker. Verse 2 tells us, tells us that Timothy was a young man with a very solid reputation among the churches.

[30 : 13] He was serving locally in Lystra and in Iconium, some 20 miles or so apart. He was well spoken of, says verse 2. And of course anybody who's going to serve in special Christian service needs to prove themselves locally in all kinds of general Christian service.

Of course that's true. Just going overseas isn't going to turn you into a missionary. Just being ordained isn't going to turn you into a minister. These things simply recognize somebody who already is known to be gifted, who already is seen to be serving in the Lord locally. And Timothy was just like that. We know from 2 Timothy that both his mother and his grandmother were believers and that from the very earliest age he'd been raised and trained in a Christian home. Even though his father was a Greek and I'm sure the implication there is that he was not a believer and very probably he was already dead. But again that's often the way, isn't it? Christian leaders are often those who are raised from their earliest days in Christian homes and in solid gospel churches.

That's what we should be expecting too from our own children, from our own young folk. That's what our own young folk, you guys should be expecting also for yourselves. You've had a great privilege, haven't you, in your upbringing?

[31 : 31] It's not an accident that you guys who have grown up in this church have received the grace of God. To those to whom much has been given, much will be required.

So we should be taking that seriously. But notice also what Timothy's call to ministry was like. In verse 3, it came very directly from Paul.

Paul pointed the finger at Timothy and he said, I want him and I'm taking him. And we're told Paul took him and he circumcised him.

Apparently Timothy was not consulted in this. Certainly Timothy had no sense of some great mystical call before he went off with Paul.

There's no mention here of any great sensation that he had to have. Paul simply went to him, recognized his gifts, led him very practically and said, I want you and that was that.

[32 : 29] I think we'd do well to notice that. A lot of people are very paralyzed at times in matters of guidance. They're very fearful to do anything unless they get some sort of special mystical or mysterious sense of a call that God is calling them to go and do something.

Well of course God will put convictions in people's hearts for certain things and of course God must gift his people for the service that he wants them to do. You can't make somebody a missionary or a preacher or any other kind of servant of the gospel if God hasn't gifted them.

Of course not. It doesn't matter how much training you give them. They go to Corn Hill for ten years. You can't make somebody have the gifts that God has not given them. But at the same time, the New Testament seems to teach us that it is the church's responsibility to seek out the gifted and to encourage them and even sometimes as here to propel them into Christian service.

And that's what Paul tells Timothy he ought to be doing himself later on in Ephesus in 2 Timothy 2 verse 2. Entrust the gospel, he says, to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Find people like that, train them, and send them out into service. And that's just what Paul did here to Timothy. So having chosen Timothy, he took him and verse 3, he circumcised him.

[33 : 51] And that's what seems so strange in all of this. Surely, why on earth did he do that? It just seems to jar so obviously, doesn't it, with chapter 15, with everything that Paul fought for.

Remember Galatians chapter 5.

If you submit to circumcision, he tells the church in Galatia, you are severed from Christ. So has Paul gone mad here? What on earth is he doing circumcising Timothy?

Well, of course Paul hasn't gone mad. Nor has Luke gone mad. Luke clearly sees that there's no problem, there's no jarring between reporting what Paul does in verse 3, and what Paul does in verse 4, going to all the churches and reading out the letter and insisting on obedience to that letter. A letter that explicitly denied that Gentiles had to be circumcised. In fact, that's the whole point of what Luke is telling us here. What he's telling us is that as long as the church is absolutely clear about the true gospel freedom in Christ, that it's absolutely clear that salvation is by grace alone, quite apart from any marks of being Jewish, whether circumcision or anything else, as long as the church is clear on the truth of the gospel like that, then they can see that there can be great flexibility on all these cultural and ethnic matters for the sake of those, not inside, but for the sake of those outside the church.

That's why Paul circumcised Timothy. It wasn't for Timothy's benefit. You shouldn't think Timothy found it of great benefit at all to be circumcised as an adult male. Nor was it for the benefit of those in the church.

[35 : 40] It wasn't to give Timothy a better status with Jewish Christians. We're told that plainly in verse 2. Already he had a very high reputation among the Christians. No, Luke tells us very plainly in verse 3, it was because of the Jews.

The Jews that Paul was wanting to evangelize that he circumcised Timothy. For non-Christian Jews, not the Christian brothers.

He did it because all the Jews living in the place knew that Timothy was a result of a mixed marriage, knew his father was a Greek, knew that he wasn't circumcised, but in their minds, because his mother was Jewish, he ought to always have been circumcised because he was considered to be a Jew.

And certainly knowing all of this, there was no way that Timothy would be able to go into the Jewish only parts of the synagogue or the temple. No way any Jews would come and listen to this man teaching them about the scriptures if they considered him to be a Gentile.

So as long as the Christian church was perfectly clear that no Gentile needed to be circumcised to be a proper Christian, and that neither circumcision or uncircumcision is of any importance in the matter of salvation, that it's all about faith alone, and as long as they understand that, then, in order to facilitate the gospel's witness to non-Christian Jews who don't know that, who don't know any better, then Paul's willing to be as flexible as possible, so as to win a hearing for the gospel among these confused Jews, so that they also might hear the gospel and come to faith in Jesus Christ.

[37 : 24] As long as the true gospel is not at stake, Paul will be as flexible as is humanly possible, and as accommodating as he possibly can be in all cultural matters in order to win people to Jesus.

So he writes in 1 Corinthians 9, though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jew, he says, I become like a Jew.

To the Gentiles, when I am among them, I become like a Gentile. And that's what he tells the church there to do. Seek to give no offense either to Jew or to Greek or to the church of God, but try to please everyone.

Not seeking your own advantage, but the advantage of many, that they might be saved. He's doing all of this for outsiders who don't know any better.

And you see, if you're going to win people to the Lord Jesus Christ, many pragmatic concessions will be necessary for the church. And that's the right kind of true gospel tolerance.

[38 : 32] It was John Newton who said that Paul was a reed in non-essentials. He would bend almost to the point of breaking. But an iron pillar in essentials.

And you see, so often, alas, today in our churches, we've got it absolutely the wrong way around, haven't we? We think we'll win people by being flexible with the truth and giving them what they want to hear.

And yet at the same time, we're unmoved and unmovable in all kinds of things that are just cultural, things that are just relics of the past, things that do not matter. But by keeping them, we impede and destroy the effect of the gospel.

So there are all kinds of ecclesiastical shibboleths that no one will let go of, like traditions of the parish system and all sorts of things, like ecclesiastical garb.

Whenever we're told to go to an official presbytery service, we're instructed to wear all kinds of robes and ridiculous things. And yet at the same time, nobody cares a hoot if you totally abandon the Bible's teaching about salvation and the uniqueness of Christ and the way that we're supposed to live as Christians.

[39 : 43] Oh, think about church buildings. Surely in the 21st century, we want to have changed, comfortable surroundings for people to hear the unchanging, uncomfortable message of the gospel of Christ.

But for the most part, as you go around the country, you'll find churches that haven't been changed for centuries that are absolutely uncomfortable, freezing cold. You can't hear a thing. But the one thing that has changed is the message.

It's been changed into a comfortable, anodyne, anemic gospel that is no gospel at all. No wonder people are not being saved and coming to know Christ.

It's all back to front. But no, Luke is telling us we are never, ever to make pragmatic concessions where the truth of the gospel is concerned.

Not ever. But where we're clear on that, we will be willing to make endless, limitless personal concessions to those who don't yet believe and don't yet understand and are confused.

[40 : 48] They're like lost sheep. So that we can gain a hearing for the gospel that we might win some. So we'll tolerate all kinds of cultures, perhaps, that we're not particularly keen on personally in order to spend time with our friends who are not Christians because we long that they'll hear the message of Christ.

Or we'll perhaps even go through all kinds of hoops in the denominational training for the ministry, which is largely pointless and sometimes damaging. But we'll do it because it will give us a way in and an opportunity to proclaim the gospel of Christ in churches.

Or we'll tolerate all the kind of avalanche of red tape that's coming down on us all the time about, for example, child protection legislation so that soon, I think, almost everybody in the whole church will have to be screened to show that we're not pedophiles just so that we can run a Sunday school.

But we'll do it so that nothing will hinder the reputation of the gospel of Christ among us so that we can gain a hearing for some and many, many other things besides.

Matters of real gospel tolerance for the sake of the non-Christians, those round about us who need to hear the glorious message of Jesus. Well, our time's finished, but isn't there a great deal of practical wisdom for us to ponder?

[42 : 14] When Christian people and when Christian churches are clear about how to think and act in matters of gospel truth, we must be united and publicly clear, and in matters of tactics that we can have differences and we don't have to have real divisions over it, and in matters of tolerance where we will adapt ourselves endlessly to get a hearing for Christ.

Well then, says Luke, the church of Jesus Christ will gain strength and it will gain souls. Verse 5, so the churches were strengthened in the faith and they increased in numbers daily.

Well, may God give us that wisdom today. Let's pray. Lord, our Father, we pray that you would give us the wisdom of your Spirit to know where we must stake all for the truth of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, whatever the cost may be.

But help us also to know when we can bend over backwards and tolerate everything that some who desperately need the Lord Jesus Christ may hear of him and come to know him.

And help us also to be truly united in spirit with all those with whom we share the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel. That where we differ on incidentals and secondary matters, nothing might ever hinder our unity in the mission of the kingdom to which you've called us.

[43 : 50] And so, we pray in our own day, in our own city and nation, we may see through these wisdoms being made manifest in your churches, people coming to know you and churches being encouraged and being strong for the glory of Christ our Savior.

in whose name we pray. Amen.