

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Series: Next!

(studies in the book of Acts)

Protecting Our Faith's Fragile Unity

Study #18

(Acts 15:1-35)

Introduction: Protecting something fragile ...

Some precious things are tough(er) than nails. Diamonds are precious - but you don't have to protect a diamond. Diamonds cut steel!

There are things, though, that are both precious AND fragile.

- A beautiful flower is a gift to cherish, but it can be easily crushed.
- A crystal vase may cost thousands of dollars - and one misstep on a tile floor will send it crashing.
- A pristine natural environment that is a delight to the senses is ruined by toxic waste or by thoughtless travelers

One of the most precious truths of our faith is that every Christian is united with every other Christian in the Body of Christ. Every one of us here who has placed faith in Christ for forgiveness is a member of the Body of Christ. We are ONE with each other.

The *experience* of that unity, though, is a fragile thing. It can be lost. A powerful diversity can devolve into divisiveness. Unity is a force multiplier, but there are forces that will divide us and weaken us.

On one occasion the early church waged a battle against an insidious foe that would have shattered its precious and fragile unity.

And Scripture challenges us to fight for that unity, today, too!

Last Sunday we took a wild ride with first century Christians Paul and Barnabas through Asia Minor, tracing their steps on the church's first-ever missionary journey.

This morning, that mission completed, we continue tracing the story of the early church as Luke takes us back to Antioch and introduces us to a new teaching, courtesy of some visitors from Judea.¹

Bad Baggage from Jerusalem (vv. 1-4)

Trouble Comes to Antioch... (v. 1)

[1] Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

OK. This is a significant teaching. It is significant because nothing like this had ever been taught in the church at Antioch before!

It wasn't the teaching of the founders of the church who had brought the Gospel to Antioch when persecution forced them to flee Jerusalem.

And it certainly wasn't the teaching of Barnabas and Paul who instructed the church prior to being sent out on the First Missionary Journey.

The idea that you couldn't go to Heaven without circumcision was a brand new teaching. And, for a variety of reasons it was profoundly unsettling to the Gentiles in the church at Antioch.

It would have been troubling, in part, of course, because of the physical pain involved in a mid-life first-century (i.e. - without much in the way of anesthesia) circumcision procedure.

¹ These may be the ones referred to in Galatians 2:12 - *"For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision."*

But, here's an even more troublesome part. If it was true that circumcision, a Jewish ritual, was required for salvation, then the Christian faith was nothing more than a sect of Judaism and was much less than Christians had thought it was.

The full message of the men from Judea was, *"If you want to be a Christ-follower, you have to be a Moses-follower. If you want to be a Christian, you've got to be a Jew."*

Now these men (unnamed throughout) may have been Christians from Judea, the historical center of the faith. But, they weren't dealing with a bunch of shrinking violets.

Paul and Barnabas had faced rock-throwing crowds in Lystra and assassination attempts in Iconium. And they weren't about to roll over for these supposed heavyweights from Judea.

Antioch - a Church with Backbone (v. 2)

[2a] And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them...

When the men from Judea asserted that all the Gentiles in the church at Antioch had to get circumcised and begin following the Mosaic Law, Paul and Barnabas stood up and said, *"No way!"*

They had just returned from a missions trip to the Gentile world of Galatia and had seen people from all walks of life receive the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ alone. Never did they encourage these Gentiles to observe Jewish holidays, keep a kosher diet, or get circumcised.

Now, looking at it from the perspective of the men from Judea, we can understand where they were coming from. They had never experienced Christianity without the trappings of Judaism. They couldn't imagine a God-fearing person NOT observing the week-long festival of Tabernacles, NOT restricting himself to kosher foods, NOT getting circumcised.²

² This debate about whether a Christian was obligated to keep the Law of Moses was bound to come up as the church developed.

Well, after a while, it became obvious that the two sides were at an impasse. So, both groups agreed that they would take the matter to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders.³

[2b]...the brethren⁴ determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

The men from Judea traveled back to Jerusalem separately from Paul and Barnabas. And when it came time for Barnabas and Paul to leave, they did so with the church's full blessing.

On to Jerusalem! (vv. 3-4)⁵

Spreading joy on the way (v. 3)

[3] Therefore, being sent on their way by the church...

Interesting. Those are just about the same words that were used when Paul and Barnabas left on their missions trip. And I think that this is Luke's way of telling us that the church at Antioch understood that the stakes involved in THIS journey were HUGE.

What will be decided in Jerusalem is determinative for the direction of the church of Jesus Christ.

[3] Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

Traveling south from Antioch, they encountered Christians all along the way.

³ Apostles had oversight over all the churches; Elders probably had oversight over the congregation in Jerusalem.

⁴ Let's assume (at least to be friendly about it), that *"the brethren"* is a reference to both sides of the debate, and that all were concluding they needed arbitration.

⁵ Paul probably wrote the letter to the Galatians after a skirmish with Judaizers who were trying to influence the Judean church. The letter may have actually been written on Paul's way to Jerusalem for the Council. In any case it would be dated AD 49-50 and would thus be the earliest of Paul's extant epistles.

In just fifteen short years, churches have sprung up between Jerusalem and Antioch. They are not just in the major metropolitan areas, but in lesser known towns and villages.

There were churches in Phoenicia, just south of Antioch, on the Mediterranean coastline.

There were Samaritan churches, populated by those who had been disenfranchised from Jewish religion for centuries, but who were now welcomed into God's family through faith in Jesus.

And, of course, all of these groups of Christians were thrilled to hear about God's amazing work among the Gentiles of Asia Minor! (People who have been touched by God's grace are always thrilled to hear of others who have experienced the same touch.)

So, Paul and Barnabas and the others with them were spreading joy everywhere they went, just telling the stories of what God had done (we call them "God-sightings")!

And they continued spreading joy when they hit Jerusalem.

Spreading joy at their arrival (v. 4)

[4] And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders,⁶ and they reported all that God had done with them.

Very soon after their arrival, though, it was time to get down to business.

The first-ever meeting of the general leadership of the church was going to set out to determine a make-or-break doctrinal issue. THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL is about to convene.

Right out of the chute, the men from Judea explicitly stated their new teaching.

The Jerusalem Council (vv. 5-29)

Meeting the Issue Head On (vv. 5-6)

Let's state the issue plainly (v. 5)

[5] But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them (i.e. - the Gentiles), and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

You heard it right. This teaching was coming from Pharisees. The Pharisees had been among Jesus' fiercest enemies during His earthly ministry - and some of them have now become Christians!

Well, praise God! Pharisees have come to Christ. But the fruit hasn't fallen very far from the tree. Their teaching here is consistent with everything we see of them in the Gospels. These guys naturally gravitate toward rules and "*Thou shalt*" and "*Thou shalt not*."

They hold that if a Gentile wants to become a Christian, if he wants to be involved in the church, if he wants to be a member in good standing - he must submit to circumcision.

Circumcision had long been recognized by the Jews as a symbol of the covenant God made with His people. The cutting of the foreskin of a baby boy on his eighth day of life indicated that the child was a part of the covenant community.

Dating back to the days of Abraham, circumcision set the Jews apart from all non-Hebrews.

But as we noted earlier, circumcision was just the first step for these Pharisaic believers. It was just the nose of the camel under the tent flaps. The rest of the camel will surely follow.

Once the church admitted that circumcision was a part of essential Christianity, the rest of the Law of Moses would follow, making Christianity nothing more than a minor sect of Judaism.

⁶ The church in Jerusalem knew Barnabas well, as he had been an active part of that church, years earlier. (See Acts 4). They knew Paul, too. He had been to Jerusalem shortly after his conversion, trying to associate with the disciples, when Barnabas befriended him (See Acts 9). And the two had come to Jerusalem one time, together, to bring a financial gift to the church during a famine (cf. Acts 11).

This is a clear display of **Jesus** + Christianity. The Bible presents Christianity as “faith alone in Christ alone.” The Pharisees are adding to the message, but it is an addition subtracts from the power of the Gospel.

The leaders in Jerusalem, having heard the teaching, agree that it is a sufficiently weighty issue to look into. It’s serious stuff.

Let’s debate the issue honestly (v. 6)

[6] And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Of you trace through the history of the church, you’ll find that when it has been confronted by major issues related to faith or practice, leaders have come together to study, to discuss, and to pray. Then, after consideration they will make a statement, a ruling that will be binding on all the churches everywhere.

These church councils helped define essential Christianity.

- When the question arose, “*Who, exactly, was Jesus?*” the church convened at Chalcedon to hash out a statement about the God/Man.
- When the church had to formulate its understanding of how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all functioned together, yet within the framework of monotheism, a church council convened to explain the inexplicable relationships within the Trinity. (The Council of Nicea)
- When issues of how to get saved came to the fore, the heretic Arius was condemned at the same church council.

It was not uncommon during the early centuries of the church’s life to pull prominent leaders together from various congregations and hash out a doctrinal or lifestyle question. And the first time this happened was in Jerusalem around about AD 50. We have the minutes from that meeting in Acts 15.

We don’t know how many people were present for this Council’s deliberations. My guess is that there was quite a crowd.

Pharisees, apostles, Elders of the church, the delegation from Antioch, and others who were interested in the proceedings would have all gathered to hear the discussion.

And after lots of people had their say, the Apostle Peter finally spoke up.

The Debate Rages (vv. 7-18)

The apostle Peter speaks (vv. 7-11)

[7] And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.”

Peter had excellent credentials for speaking to the Council.

Remember that when Jesus had asked the apostles, “***Who do you say that I am?***” Peter got it right when he answered, “***You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.***” (See Matthew 16)

Jesus replied, “*Bingo Simon! I’m going to call you Peter - Rocky - and I’m going to give you the keys to the kingdom.*”

With these “keys” Peter opened the door to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost with his sermon of Acts 2.

Then, God allowed him to unlock the door for the Gentiles when he went to Cornelius’ house (Acts 10) and saw the Holy Spirit poured out on non-Jewish people for the very first time. (That opening in Cornelius’ home occurred about ten years before the Jerusalem Council.⁷)

With respect to the issue at hand (acceptance of Gentiles into the church), Peter said, **[8]...“God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us”**

God, he said, made “***no distinction***” between Jews and Gentiles, “***cleansing their hearts [and ours] by faith***” (i.e. - NOT through obedience to the Law!).

Peter continued, accusing the Pharisees of putting God “***to the test.***”

⁷ We believe that this occurred around A.D 49.

He asked them why they would place [10]...*“upon the neck of the [Gentile] disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”*

And he wrapped up with this: [11] *“But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”*⁸

Next up to the speaker’s platform were Paul and Barnabas, recently returned from the First Missionary Journey.

Paul and Barnabas speak up (v. 12)

[12] *And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

Their part in the proceedings was to be story-tellers. They gave testimony to what God had done in the Galatian cities to which they took the Gospel.

I’m sure that they would have told about Paul’s stoning in Lystra, the opposition in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, and all the other hardships of the journey.

But they would have certainly also told about the four healthy churches and the many new converts and the changed lives they had left behind.⁹

And then the final speaker stepped to the podium. This is James, not the apostle (his death is recorded in Acts 12), but the half-brother of Jesus.¹⁰

⁸ A more Jewish-centric way of saying it, but less gracious, would have been, *“they are saved as we are.”*

⁹ Barnabas and Paul were not teaching. They were giving testimony. They were telling the same sorts of things that they had been telling the “brethren” throughout Phoenicia and Samaria on the way to Jerusalem.

¹⁰ This is the James who wrote the little epistle of James.

James had dismissed Jesus’ claims during His earthly life. But after Jesus’ death and resurrection he became convinced that his older half-brother, Jesus, was indeed Savior and Lord.

Now James has become a leader of the Jerusalem church, and he has some profound things to say at this Council.

James speaks up (vv. 13-18)

From experience (vv. 13-14)

[13] *And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me. [14] Simeon¹¹ has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.”*

First, he speaks to what God has clearly done. He has called Gentiles into the church. It’s obviously not just a Jewish thing anymore. Simon Peter’s testimony as well and Paul’s and Barnabas’ stories made that clear.

So, the first words of James relate to experience. And experience is important.

But then James turned a corner and spoke from Scripture.

From Scripture (vv. 15-18; quoting Amos 9)

[15] *“And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,*
[16] AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,
AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,
AND I WILL RESTORE IT,
[17] IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,

¹¹ Peter’s name is given as “Simeon” an extremely Jewish way to say or spell “Simon,” appropriate to the Jewish context and setting in Jerusalem. Peter is referred to in this way only here and in 2 Peter 1:1.

AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, [18] SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD.

James says that what they were seeing in Gentile conversions to Christ was actually what prophets had been predicting for centuries.

See, while experience is important, Scripture is determinative. This was (and is) the ultimate test of any teaching. Not, “*Is it confirmed by my experience?*” but “*Is it confirmed by the Word of God?*”

The prophet Amos affirmed that all of mankind - including Gentiles! - will benefit from “*the rebuilding of the house of David.*”

The Gentiles were in God’s mind when Amos wrote the prophecy James quotes. And the point is that Gentiles, AS GENTILES - NOT AS JEWISH CONVERTS, will be accepted into God’s family.

So, experience and Scripture coinciding, James moves to make a recommendation to the gathered group about how to proceed on the issue of Jewish/Gentile relations.

His recommendations can be boiled down to two principles to guide the Christian life, especially as it relates to protecting the precious and fragile unity of the Body of Christ. So, if you are interested in how to protect and maintain unity in the church, what James says is for you.

First, he gives a word to the Jews about how they are to treat Gentiles who are coming to faith in Jesus so as to protect the precious and fragile unity of the church.

Resolved: Two Principles to Guide the Christian Life (vv. 19-21)

Principle #1: No baggage! (v. 19)

[19] “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles”

Literally, James says to not “annoy” them. It is the same word used in the Old Testament (the Greek translation) to describe Delilah’s treatment of Samson. She annoyed him.

These Gentiles coming to faith in Christ are to not be annoyed by things like circumcision and other explicitly Jewish things.

In other words, don’t make it any more difficult to follow Jesus than you have to. Don’t attach Jewish baggage to the Gospel and then expect Gentiles to carry it. (After all, as Peter just pointed out, the Jews, themselves, hadn’t done all that well obeying Moses...)

That’s the first thing. Secondly, James has recommendations about how Gentiles, for their part, should behave so as to protect that precious and fragile unity in Christ.

Principle #2: Be sensitive! (vv. 20-21)

[20] “but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication¹² and from what is strangled and from blood.¹³ [21] For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”¹⁴

That is an interesting list. And we would probably agree that the items he lists are important.

¹² Being “*contaminated by idols*” concerns the issue of purity in worship. They are to worship the one, true God. “*Fornication*” is referring to something similar as it likely has in view cultic (religious) worship rituals involving sex.

¹³ “*Strangled*” has in view a form of death for an animal in which the blood is not drained. Thus, when cooked, the blood is cooked with the animal and the blood is eaten. The last words “*and from blood*” speaks of eating or drinking blood, a practice condemned by the Jews because they understood that ***[Leviticus 17:11] the life...is in the blood.*** Eating/drinking blood was tantamount to eating life, which is sacred.

¹⁴ At the end, James is probably telling the Gentiles that since Moses is read each week in the synagogue, they should therefore be sensitive to Jewish concerns. Or he might be saying, “*If you want to know about Jewish sensitivities, go to the synagogue and listen as Moses is read and you’ll find out all about them.*”

On the one hand, given that the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ were coming from rank paganism where the worship practices were idolatrous, it rings true that the first couple of prohibitions would speak to off-limits worship practices.

That is the thought behind keeping away from contamination by idols and from fornication (which is likely a reference to worship rituals involving sex). The message? **WORSHIP GOD.**

The second set of two guidelines concerned blood. We might have questions about this one. But, summed up, it is **DON'T EAT BLOOD.**

And that's it.

- Nothing is said about Sabbath-keeping.
- Nothing is said about tithing.
- Nothing is said about tests for leprosy.
- Nothing is said about kosher-keeping.
- Nothing is said about observance of Jewish festivals.
- Nothing is said about circumcision.

And the **omissions** say as much about what Christianity is all about as the **inclusions**.

Christianity is not Judaism + Jesus. The church is not the synagogue with a cross at the front.

James urges that the Gentiles leave all vestiges of their pagan past in the past (idolatry) and that they be careful about issues that would deeply offend their Jewish brothers and sisters (like eating blood).

As Darrell Bock says in his excellent commentary on Acts, "*There is a cultural sensitivity [being urged] here where the issue is not establishing a fixed set of practices. The issue is establishing respect for the [culture] of others and making a commitment to not force one's own [culture] on others.*"¹⁵

James has proposed an ethic that will protect the precious and fragile unity of the church. To both groups, he says, "*Be sensitive to the scruples of others. Have a spirit of sensitivity about what might cause offense.*"

(As John Newton, the author of the hymn, Amazing Grace, said it, "*Be an iron pillar when it comes to the Gospel and be a reed blowing in the wind when it comes to nonessentials.*")

By bending their behaviors in this way, the Gentiles would not give offense to their Jewish brethren.

So, will James' advice fly? Will the apostles and elders go for it? Will the delegation from Antioch buy it? What will the church in Jerusalem say about these extremely minimalist requirements for Christian behavior?

Well, **EVERYBODY** bought it. Case closed. They heard the proposed guidelines James lined out, and something went "click."

They rang true. And just like that, plans were set in motion to carry the guidelines to the church in Antioch.

Sharing the Council's Resolution (vv. 22-29)

[22] Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

They decided to draft a letter with the guidelines all spelled out. The letter is included in Scripture.

[23]... "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

¹⁵ Paul addressed this in detail in 1 Corinthians 8-10, identifying the practice as not necessarily sinful in and of itself, but wrong if it caused a (weaker) brother to stumble. See Romans 14 as well.

[24] Since we have heard that some of our number TO WHOM WE GAVE NO INSTRUCTION¹⁶ have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, [25] it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, [26] men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [27] Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas¹⁷, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. [28] For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit¹⁸ and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: [29] that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

The letter carriers made their way to Antioch and were welcomed with open arms. They got the church together and read the letter. The communication from Jerusalem, too, was warmly received!

Traveling Light to Antioch (vv. 30-35)

[30] So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. [31] And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. [32] And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. [33] And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [34] [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]¹⁹

¹⁶ Emphasis added. Notice how the letter purposefully distances the church from the “*men of Judea*” who went to Antioch with the troubling teaching.

¹⁷ Silas (later to become a major player in Acts) is mentioned first here. Typical of Luke’s habit of foreshadowing. He did the same thing with Stephen (mentioning him first in Acts 6 before detailing his martyrdom in chapter 7) and with Paul (showing his part in Stephen’s stoning before telling of his conversion).

¹⁸ And just HOW did they discern what the Holy Spirit was directing? As we have seen before in Acts, the thought is that when the church, in submission to God and in prayerful waiting on God comes to consensus it can just as easily be said “*we agreed to such and such plan of action*” or “*the Holy Spirit is leading to such and such plan of action.*” See Acts 13 and the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul for the First Missionary Journey for another example of this.

¹⁹ There is good reason to suspect that this verse was added later by a scribe. While likely accurate (that is, Silas did stay behind in Antioch), it was probably not a part of the original book that Luke wrote.

[35] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

The congregation in Antioch considered the letter to be a great piece of encouragement. They rejoiced over the guidelines that the apostles and elders sent to them.

For one thing, the letter assured them that their eternities were as secure as they had thought they were.

For another thing, they rejoiced that they could follow Christ and still maintain their cultural identity.

And finally, they got advice about how to not offend their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters.

Conclusion:

Now, we’ve just spent a good bit of time working our way through Acts 15. Is it really that important? Well, yes, it is. Acts 15 and the findings of the Jerusalem Council are to us important for a variety of reasons.

- *It clarified the nature of Christianity.*

First, if the Jerusalem Council had come to a different conclusion, Christianity would have become just another Jewish sect. The Council killed the idea of a **Jesus** + kind of Christianity. What was agreed to in Jerusalem was the Christianity Jesus intended to establish and it is the faith we enjoy today. It’s all about Him!

- *It clarified the Gospel.*

Second, the Council affirmed that we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone (v. 9) and solely through the grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 9).

Peter, in particular, could not have been more clear when he was speaking to the Council. He said that God cleanses the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles “*by faith*” (v. 9), and that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved “*through the grace of the Lord Jesus*” (v. 11).

- *It clarified how to maintain the unity of the church.*

Finally, the debate in Jerusalem answered the question, *“How do we protect the precious and fragile unity of the church when it is composed of people from VERY different cultures?”*

Here’s how.

Gentile Christians were not required to obey Moses’ Law and Jewish Christians were not required to eat pork - although both groups would have been free to do either.

All Christians were to accept the others’ cultures AND were to bend their behaviors so that the others were not offended. In short, LOVE dominates.

Today, too, the Law of LOVE must dominate if we are to experience the unity the Holy Spirit wants us to enjoy.

We are never to either subtly or *not* so subtly communicate to someone, *“If you don’t fit in with us, then you don’t fit in with Jesus.”*

We don’t baptize culture. We don’t impose our culture on others. We don’t import culture and call it “Christian.”

In the 1st century, there was room in the one church for Jews AND Gentiles. In the 21st there is room for racial diversity, generational diversity, and personal tastes and styles diversity.

We are to never intentionally do something that will offend someone or cause them to stumble (unless he or she is a Pharisee ☺). And we are never to require someone to conform to what our culture demands - be it a dress code, hair style, body art, schooling choice - you name it!

We are united by our mutual faith in Jesus. Period. That unity is precious and fragile - and we must protect it with love.