

Backed Into a Corner  
July 5, 2015

Have you ever been backed into a corner? You may not have been backed into a corner physically. But I feel pretty sure you have been backed into a corner verbally over a difference of opinions. Maybe you stated an opinion as if it was a definite fact and someone challenged you on it. Maybe you made a general statement about knowing someone when all you really meant was that you were introduced to them once. Maybe someone challenged you about your belief in God by asking, "If God is real, why does He allow suffering?" See, it is not uncommon to be backed into a corner.

In fact, ever since Jesus began His church it has been backed into corners. We have been backed into theological corners for all of church history. How we deal with getting backed into such corners will determine our faithfulness to Jesus and His good news. So it is important to know what these experiences are like and what we must do when they occur, because they are occurring right now.

The first instance of this comes in Acts 15. The time of this passage is about 50 A.D., some 20 years or so after the resurrection of Jesus. During these 20 years God did a lot of wonderful things. First, in Acts 2, was the miracle at Pentecost where 3,000 people were converted to faith in Jesus. Soon after that a lame man at the temple was healed and another 2,000 people were converted. This was followed by smaller numbers of people getting saved day by day. This was all taking place in and around Jerusalem.

But then we see God expanding the invitation to salvation in Jesus. God opens the door to the **Samaritans**, some of whom become Christians. Next we see some **God-fearers** converted. The God-fearers were non-Jews who had taken the first step of conversion to Judaism. And then finally, we see non-Jews who had not become God-fearers but becoming Christians. God was starting churches, supported by all kinds of miracles, visions, and dreams in many cities throughout the Roman Empire. In many of these new churches Jews and non-Jews came together as a church.

**Now in these 20 years the message had been very simple.**

- **All people are sinners in need of a Savior.**
- **A day of judgment upon sin is coming**
- **Jesus, and no other, is Servant of the Lord/the Anointed One/Messiah/Christ, as evidenced through the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and the witness of the apostles to the resurrection of Jesus**
- **Salvation called for you to believe in Jesus, repent of sin, be baptized into the name of Jesus, and live in obedience to Jesus as your Lord**

This was the basic teaching of the early church. There was no need for much more detail. This was enough to communicate the message of the good news. This was enough for people to understand and be converted. It was this basic message that advanced across the Roman Empire as Christians traveled from place to place.

There was more detailed teaching. As the Apostles addressed ethical and moral issues facing Christians, they fleshed out a more detailed theology than just the gospel. But some questions just never came up until someone backed the church into a theological corner. This takes place in Acts 15.

A group of Christians started teaching this: that non-Jewish Christians had to obey the Laws of Moses in order to be truly saved by Jesus. That is, they had to convert to Judaism to be truly saved by Jesus of their sins. This was a brand new teaching. This was not part of the basic good news message, at least not the message that Paul and Barnabas had been preaching. That is where we pick up the story this morning.

**Acts 15:1-2a (NIV)** Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

Now consider this new theological statement. It made sense in light of history. The Jews had related to Yahweh, their God, for almost 1,500 years through the Law of Moses.

By contrast, America is only 232 years old. And in that short time we have established a recognizable culture. We speak of the American way of life, American way of thinking, the American Dream. This happened in less than 200 years.

So imagine how strong was the Jewish identity, the Jewish way of life that centered on the Law of Moses after 1,500 years. So it is understandable if some Jews in the church are upset that the non-Jewish converts to Jesus are not being taught to obey the Law of Moses. In their minds, Jesus has died for the sins that the Law of Moses could not deal with. But you still had to obey the Laws of Moses. To think otherwise was just ridiculous. Surely God would not so easily get lay aside something He introduced 1500 years before.

Now this is a huge issue. This goes to the heart of the good news and how we live it out. Their teaching has backed the church into a theological corner that the church **MUST** deal with. This cannot be ignored. It will change everything for the church and the cause of missions in the world. It will determine what faithfulness to Jesus means.

So after sharp debate with Paul and Barnabas they all realize that this issue must go back to the mother church, to the apostles to be decided.

**Acts 15:2b-10 (NIV)** So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction 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 the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

Peter makes two points. The first is that it is clear God has been working to convert non-Jews to Jesus. God has shown much evidence that HE is doing this through the miracles taking place through the apostles.

Secondly, Peter points out that the Law has been a poor yoke for the Jews. **(picture of yoke)** A Yoke is made to fit a specific animal so that it fits like a broken-in-shoe so that it does not rub blisters onto the neck of the animal. When a pair of shoes are broken in you can wear them all day without getting a blister. The same is true of a yoke that fits right. Peter says the yoke of the Law of Moses never fit them right. The Jews were never able to fully obey the Law of Moses. So he disagrees totally with the new teaching.

**Acts 15:11 (NIV)** No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

He says that the law did not save the Jews, but only Jesus. They were not saved through Jesus AND the Law of Moses. The Gentiles were completely saved by faith in Jesus, just as the Jews are. There is only one way to salvation. That way is faith alone in Jesus alone.

**Acts 15:12-14 (NIV)** The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

James is about to quote from Amos, one of the prophets, the prediction that God would one day restore Israel and bring to God, Himself, a people from all the nations, all the non-Jews.

**Acts 15:15-18 (NIV)** The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages.

Note that the church examines the evidence, looks at scripture, probably prays for wisdom from the Holy Spirit, and comes to a conclusion. The church gets out of the corner it was backed into. God, as remarkable as it seemed, was replacing the Law of Moses with something else. As Paul writes, we are no longer under the Law of Moses but are rather under grace.

There is still the problem of Jews and non-Jews, two very different cultures, trying to come together as a church for worship and fellowship, even meals. How are they to deal with the major issues. So James proposes a bare minimum of recommendations, not as a law, but in order to deal with the most challenging differences.

**Acts 15:19-20 (NIV)** "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

For most of the church that settled that issue. But ever since that day over 2,000 years ago, the church continues to get backed into theological corners. It was not too many years after this that a religious movement spread through the Roman empire. This was the **Gnostic movement**. Their name comes from the **Greek word, gnosis = knowledge**. They taught that in order to be saved you had to learn the secret knowledge that only they could teach you.

One branch of this movement proclaimed that physical things were evil. One of the extensions of this idea was that Jesus was not really a physical man, but only a spirit. He just appeared to be a man. But this meant that He did not really die for our sin. So again, the church was backed into a theological corner and had to decide whether this new teaching was true. The church proclaimed a clearer theological doctrine about Jesus, saying that Jesus was both spirit and flesh.

In about **140 AD a man named Marcion** was teaching that the God of the Old Testament was the creator, but was a different, and lesser God than the God of the New Testament. Again the church was backed into a corner and had to come together to clarify what it believed to be the truth about God. Marcion was denounced and his teachings with him.

In about **218 AD a man named Ariun** started teaching that Jesus was not eternal, and thus not always with God, but was made by God, the Father. This backed the church into a theological corner. Church leaders from across the land came together at a city named Nicae. There they worked through this theological issue and produced a statement of faith affirming that **the Son was "of one substance" with the Father**. This council settled, for most Christians, the full and eternal deity of God, the Son. But it did not address the deity of God, the Holy Spirit. For that another council had to be called in **381 AD, the First Council of Constantinople**.

And on it went. Over the last 2,000 years there have been many times the church has been backed into a theological corner. Sometimes this was done by someone in the church and other times by someone outside of the Christian faith. Examples of such issues include the theory of evolution, statements on the unreliability of the Bible, definitions of family, and most recently a redefinition of marriage. Each of these backed the church into a theological corner. Each required the church to further clarify what it is WE believe and will teach.

The fallout from the latest one is only beginning. It may be that those who have pushed for acceptance of gay marriage will be satisfied with their recent victory. At best, then, things will roll along as they are now with churches not expected to go along with gay marriage.

But I fear that the pushers of gay marriage will not be satisfied with the right to marry. Some voices want to persecute pastors and churches who do not agree with gay marriage. In order to maintain our theology I may have to relinquish the state-given privilege of performing legal marriages. Eventually, we may have to pay taxes on this

property or sell the property to avoid the taxes and become a house church or meet in rented space if we can find someone willing to rent to us. Some believe that this could never happen. But 16 years ago we never thought we would see gay marriage legalized as a constitutional right.

None of these may happen. But another issue will arise. Another statement of supposed truth will be made. We will again be backed into a theological corner. Heresies will continue, both within the church and without. We will again have to search the scriptures, and pray, and discuss, and decide what the Bible teaches as revelation from God. There are already voices pushing for polygamy, the abolition of laws restricting marriage within families, and the legalization of prostitution.

Whatever happens concerning these and other issues, we will need to study the Bible, pray, read, listen, discuss, and come to a decision about what is being proposed as truth. But, **As we are backed into theological corners, keep in mind that we must obey God rather than men.** (Acts 4.19; 5.29)