

# CONTROVERSY OVER BOUNDARIES

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on Sunday, August 31, 2014**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **What the Heck Was Jesus Trying to Do?**

You should be thankful that I read only the first eleven verses of today's lesson from the New Testament (Acts 15: 1-11). The controversy described therein is pretty significant, a very big deal. It was considered the first major controversy within the First Century Christian Church. This was the first one in the Church, or at least the first big one, but it actually had some rather significant deep roots.

The gist of it had to do with Jesus' intent. When he came teaching and preaching and healing and doing all that stuff over a period of three years, was he: A) Trying to reform Judaism? Or was he: B) Starting a new religion? Or was it something else? For most of the life of the Church from then until now, it's been A or B. It has gone back and forth between starting a new religion or reforming Judaism.

## **Adult Male Gentiles Are not Fond of Circumcision**

*IF* Jesus had been attempting to restore or reform Judaism, then it would have mattered to you because, if you had been born to be a bona fide follower of Christ, then it would have behooved you to become a Jew first. Now the preaching that had been done – the vast majority of it – was outside Jerusalem and Judea to the Gentiles – in other words, preaching across a significant boundary to those who were not circumcised.

The adult Gentile men had an issue with this. They were not fond of the idea of being circumcised. That was part of the argument about it. They didn't want to. The Jews were saying, tough, Jesus was a Jew. He was a rabbi, for goodness' sake. To follow Christ in a bona fide way, convert to Judaism and follow Christ to your heart's content.

Others were saying, wait a minute. You know this message that Jesus preached wasn't exclusively Jewish. It was more perennial, it was more universal than that. Maybe we don't have to convert to Judaism first. And thus, the controversy was waged across a boundary between Jews and Gentiles, both groups being followers of Christ.

The way Peter and Paul settled the matter came about like this: The part I read for the Scripture lesson is where Peter finally caves in on the issue. He had been saying, "You have to be a Jew

first.” Paul was saying, “No, you don’t.” The portion I read describes Peter changing his mind and saying, “No, you don’t have to be a Jew first in order to follow Christ.”

Even though in my opinion they made the right choice – that you don’t need to convert to Judaism first to be a follower of Christ – the way it was worded belies a different issue. That’s what I want to get at today.

### **Jesus *NEVER* Told Us How to Be Saved!**

Because of the way in which it was worded – that is, “To be saved, you need to follow Christ” – the petitioner must either A) convert to Judaism *first* and *then* follow Christ or B) just follow Christ directly, without regard to the question of circumcision and all that entails.

I hope you get the import of this: *Never, never* – if I could speak with capital letters – *NEVER* do we have Jesus telling us how to be saved. Not once.

We have Jesus telling us how to live. We have Jesus telling us how to act in ways that are peaceful. We have Jesus telling us how to get along. We have Jesus teaching us how to heal and forgive and show mercy. We have Jesus demonstrating how to be loving. But *never* do we find anyplace in the Bible where Jesus tells us how to be saved.

And yet this 20-century-old history of the Church seems to be centered around the notion of who’s in and who’s out. Who’s saved and who’s not. And therefore who’s being covered and who’s not. Twenty bloody centuries of it.

I submit to you that it goes back to the original question: To be saved, how do we go about it? Maybe they didn’t need to worry about it. Maybe they needed to worry instead about how we live lives of spiritual integrity? How do we grow in our comprehension of the way in which divinity suffuses our world, instead of worrying about who’s saved and who’s not.

### **A Modern Joke Springs from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

The great schism of the Eleventh Century was based on that question. The Protestant Reformation of the Sixteenth Century was steeped in it. That schism reminds me of a bad joke, so I’m not expecting laughter, but the punch line, although a bit rough, makes a good point. Please humor me.

I was walking across a high bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, who was obviously preparing to jump off. So I ran over to him and shouted, “Stop! Don’t do it.” “Why shouldn’t I?” he queried brusquely. “Well there’s so much to live for,” I answered sympathetically. Gruffly, the frustrated jumper queried, “Like what?” “Well, are you a religious man? Are you a man of faith? Or are you an atheist? He replied with scant interest, “I’m a religious man.” “Well, me too. Are you Christian or Buddhist or Jewish or something else?” His interest piqued but little, he replied curtly, “No, I’m a

Christian.” “Well, the same for me. Are you Catholic or Protestant?” He talks in few words, “I’m Protestant.”

“Well, there you are. I’m the same as you. What denomination are you? Episcopalian or Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist?” He seems slightly interested, “I’m Baptist.” “I’m with you. This is amazing. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?” He asserted loudly, “I’m Baptist Church of God, and proud of it!” I came back, “I can’t believe it. We’re in the same boat.” And then I went deeper, “Are you Original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?” Proudly, he said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God.” Incredulous, I saw that the man had forgotten about his mission. “We’ve got so much in common. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879 or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?”

Deleriously, he replied, “I am happy to be Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915.”

Highly vexed, I angrily barked, “You heretical scum! Go ahead and jump!”

### **Despite All the Raging Controversies Through the Ages, Tiny First Congregational’s Mélange Lives on Spiritually**

Thank you for humoring me. Now take that controversy, which was horrible in the First Century, and many, many other controversies throughout the ages, and enter into all of that context tiny First Congregational Church, corner of Front and Main streets, the one with the bell.

In addition to all the things we do, we are a medley of worship services and Sunday-school programs and adult-education programs that look at books such as “Why Christianity Must Change or Die,” fellowship dinners, ice-cream socials, and much more. We are an O&A church, Open and Affirming, and have been for several years and voted unanimously for that honor. We are a smorgasbord, we are a mélange of all of these kinds of things.

### **How to Take the Measure of a Church**

Let me give you one measure of how you can look at a church, and that is, you can often judge people by their friends. It’s a pretty reliable way of doing that. Applying that same measure to the people of our congregation, I would like to list for you some spiritual groups that meet in our building and for whom we gladly spread our wings. The people who come through the doors are part of our church.

So you can look at this congregation and get a feeling for it by looking at our friends on the spiritual side of our activities (not to mention a host of other activities that are in the more-secular realm). I’ll start off with:

**Heart-Centered Living** Renée Guidelli is the founder, director, and organizer of HCL, which has been meeting here for several years. As the name implies, HCL is not dogmatic, not trying to coax you into believing X versus Y, but it is very interested in helping people live their lives based upon what comes from the heart. We look at all the different facets of our lives and live our lives where it is the heart that leads us as much as anything else.

**Sophia Center for Spirituality** *Our church is the host for this group.* It meets upstairs and is led by Lois Barton, who is one of the Sisters of Joseph nuns who lives out in Windsor. Some of you know about the teachings of Cynthia Bourgeault, an Anglican priest who has been teaching people to follow Christ in a contemplative way. It is nondual in its approach, and it therefore fully embraces the unity that people have with each other, with God, and with nature. And how we can follow Christ in that kind of way. That's what the Sophia Center teaches.

**Church of Christ, Scientist** *We are the host church for the local congregation of this denomination.* They meet just across the hall, and we say "Good morning" to each other every Sunday morning. They are the very first ones that have been with us for a long time, five or six years at least, maybe more at this point.

**Binghamton Buddhist Meditation** *We are also the host church for this group.* They were in the local paper yesterday on page 2! The picture shows Charles Goodman, who is a professor of Asian philosophy over at Binghamton University. I doubt if he's meditating in the photo; I think he's just assuming the pose for the sake of the photographer. But it shows him there in the classic meditative pose. The group practices a Tibetan, mostly generic, kind of Buddhism. It is co-led by the professor and Tara Balsari, who is a psychiatrist in Binghamton. The two of them organized this group.

**Three Jewels Meditation** *We are the host church for this group as well,* the Three Jewels being the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, something that's worth the time that Christians can spend learning about Zen. The group is led by Michael

O’Sullivan, a good Japanese name. He is a retired New York City police detective, who has been practicing Zen for about 15 years now and wanted to organize a group here in Binghamton.

**A Course in Miracles**

*This study group is also hosted by our church. ACIM is one of the most profound books I have ever come across in my life. I treat it with the same respect that I treat other spiritual books like the Bhagavad Gita or the Dhammapada or the Bible. The course is led by Terry Ludwig, who is an interior designer and a student of ACIM for virtually all of her adult life.*

**The Science of Mind**

*First Congregational is the host church for this study group as well, led by our own Ethy Enos. She has been studying this material for a number of years, took formal training in it, and is now a certified teacher and trainer for the Science of Mind approach to spirituality.*

**Conversations with God**

*This is another study group hosted by our church. The book of the same title came out in 1995, authored by Neale Donald Walsch. It has had a whirlwind influence on the spirituality of millions of people. The group meets here on Thursday nights, led by Dave Peters, who is the CEO of a flight simulator corporation in Vestal. A very bright lightbulb is he.*

Let me recap for a moment: Heart-Centered Living, the Sophia Center for Spirituality, the Church of Christ, Scientist, the Binghamton Buddhist Meditation Group, the Three Jewels Meditation Group, A Course in Miracles, the Science of Mind, and Conversations with God.

Finally, I’m very happy to announce to you for the first time publicly that **Unity Church of the Southern Tier** will be joining us this fall. They had become displeased with their former digs, and we put out an offer for them to consider coming here. They have come and scoped us out, and they will be worshipping at 11:00 o’clock Sundays in the Eden Room, the meditation room down the hall. I am thrilled about it.

Now, would you take a moment to consider how amazing all of this is when you put it together? Would you take a few minutes to ponder the quality of the teaching? One of the frustrations I have as a minister is that spiritual teaching is frequently of very poor quality. It often takes the form of, “Here’s a text, what do you think?” “Well, I don’t know.” “What do you think?” “I don’t know.” And you share ignorance. Ours is some first-class spiritual teaching. It doesn’t get much better than this.

Now take the time to ask this question, “What are we doing here, inviting all these folks into our building?” Is it random? Is it haphazard? Or is there a plan?

**Not Interested in Reforming Judaism;  
Very Interested in Reforming Christianity**

Like Jesus, I am not interested at all in reforming Judaism. I am *very* interested in reforming Christianity.

I think Christianity took a wrong turn a long time ago when it asked the question, “In order to be saved, are you doing this or doing that?” I think it was a fundamental wrong turn. And I am *very* interested in having Christianity go back to the perennial teachings found in all sorts of religions and throughout the centuries.

I am *very* interested in having Christianity return to Christ. Christ-mindedness. The mind of Christ, thinking the way he did. Exhibiting love the way he did. I am *very* interested in having the church return to Christ-consciousness. The way in which a Christ-likeness infuses the whole of our being and the whole of our behavior.

**Finding Perennial Teachings in Our Study Groups**

What I’m hoping will happen in church on Sunday mornings, in Fellowship Hall, in the Ice-Cream Social, in Sunday School – what I’m hoping is that our whole church, as well as these nine spiritual organizations, will seriously engage themselves in the perennial teachings, such as:

**Judge Not.** Just stop it! Judge not. We have judged people because they’re women, because they’re of a different race, because they’re gay. We have judged people on basically any differentiation we could think of. Just stop it!

**The Kingdom of Heaven Is Within You.** If you want something worth thinking about for the balance of your days, ponder this thought: “The kingdom of heaven is within you.” And as printed in the Sunday Bulletin, divinity rests in whom “we live and move and have our being.” You want a mystical thought? Think about the notion of the kingdom of heaven being within you *and* we are dwelling within it. Each and every one of us. How does that happen?

**The Golden Rule.** You want a way to stop wars? Just obey it. The Golden Rule, that’s why it’s called “golden.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

**The Teachings of Love.** Love, love, love. Love the Lord thy God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love yourself. God is love. Every way in which you experience love in your life has divinity attached to it.

**One More Teaching.** Let me quote from the end of the article on the Buddhist group: Mary Cuddeback and Carolyn Blake are members of First Congregational Church, but they came to

meditate with the Buddhist group. “We are all one,” said Cuddeback of Binghamton. “What we do for others, we are doing for ourselves.”

*Amen.*