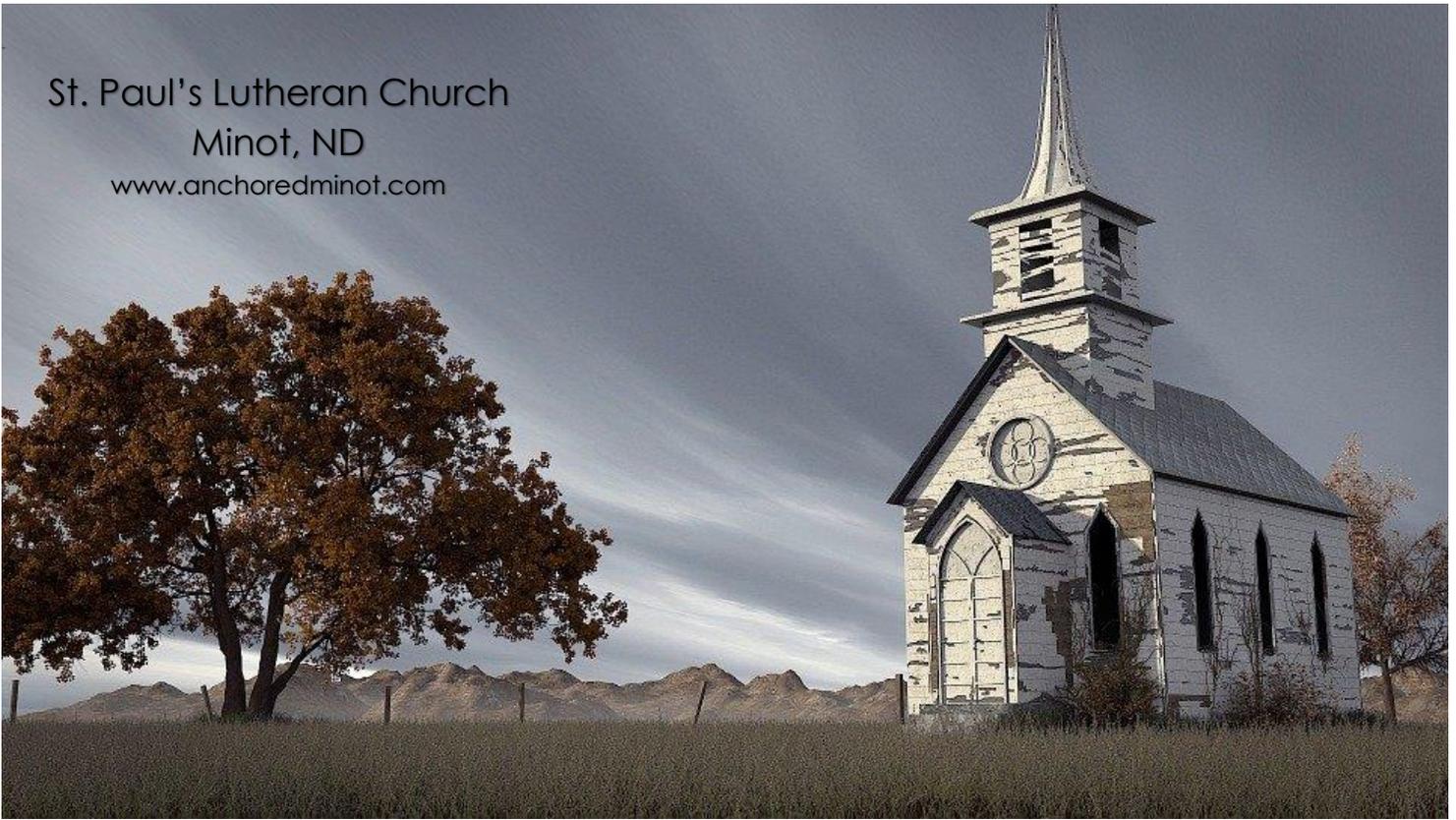


St. Paul's Lutheran Church
Minot, ND
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The Acts of the Apostles

The Ministry of the Gospel in a Messy Church & Conflictive World Acts 15:22-40

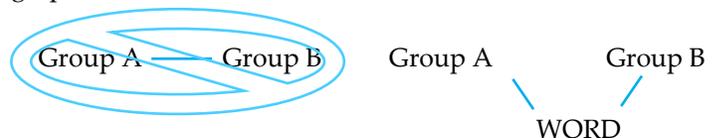
Perhaps the most important words in our selected scriptures in this lesson are in verse 28, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us." These words and Acts 15 have served the Church well, as being an example of how church councils should work. In other words, the decisions that were made in Acts 15 were not something 'human.' In other words, when theological problems have arisen in the Church over the last 2,000 years – problems that were of no small dissension and debate – the Church would call together a council to tackle the issues.

Now, it is important to keep in mind how doctrinal or practical issues are resolved in the Church, especially within the original councils and the various councils that have followed since then. First, it is important to recognize that the Church did not originate from the will, wisdom, and efforts of mankind. The Church is created by the Word and Sacraments – not mankind. And so, since the Church does not originate from mankind, the authority for the Church is none other than the Holy Writ – God's Word.

And so, let's consider it this way. What is the *control center* for the Local Church? Does it reside with the pastor? How about the suggestions and opinions of the laity? How about culture?

Simply stated, the control center for the pastor and Church is God's Word. Pastors are not to subject their parishioners to anything that is not of God's Word. And the congregation cannot expect the pastor to do and say anything apart from the Word of God. That which governs the pastor and the Church is the Word of God. And so, unity is had when pastor and parishioner are preaching, hearing, living, and rejoicing in the *same* Word of God.

And when there are great disputes of no small proportion? One dare not try and reconcile groups to each other! Heaven's no! That is awful. That is wretched! Reconciliation in the Church with opposing factions is never to each other but always to each other *through the Word of God*. Consider the graphic below:



Now, what about the times where scripture is silent on issues of dispute? Is it every man to himself? No!

With regard to issues neither forbidden nor commanded in the Church, we do still have an ethic that we follow. Consider the following criteria:

- 1) Is this man-made tradition Evangelical? Does it promote or prohibit the Gospel? Will this man-made tradition inadvertently uncut the doctrine of Justification or promote it clearly within the Church's context?
- 2) Does this man-made tradition respect the historic faith, and does it honor the wisdom of the faithful saints that traveled before us?
- 3) Is the handling of the man-made tradition handled with respect and love towards one's neighbor and fellow churchman?

And so, as we can see from above, the goal with respect to things neither commanded nor forbidden in the Church is that we promote the Word of God without imposing further burdens on the Church.

With respect to the word, 'burden,' it is important to differentiate this word from the word, 'preference.' That is to say, God never forbids useful ordinances, policies, and the like in the Church, as long as they work to build the Church up in the Word and Sacraments. However, if such things burden the conscience, they are unnecessary and should be removed. And they go against a person's preference? Ah, we must be careful that we don't eliminate Evangelical traditions that have promoted the Gospel for centuries! What gives us the right – or arrogance – to toss out an evangelical tradition that is not theologically burdensome and has blessed countless saints for thousands of years on multiple continents?

Keep in mind that the Lord longs to burden us with the 10 Commandments. He longs to burden us, but not for the sake of condemnation but for the sake of confession/repentance. And when we confess? The Lord God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins – freedom!

And so, the Church is not a place of a burdened conscience, with the exception of being brought to repentance. Instead, the Church is a place of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Woe to pastors and churches that place unnecessary burdens on members – burdens that do not come forth from the Word of God, as well as burdens that do not lead to the freedom of repentance/confession.



