

# Holy Flexibility

*Sermon by Bob Arbogast*

*Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan*

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**Scripture: Acts 16:1-5**

## Sermon

When I was a young man, I fought against becoming a Christian. Jan tried to convince me. Her dad tried to convince me. But I fought back. And I won. No Jesus for me! Well, that was only the first round of the fight. And eventually I did lose. Jesus was the winner, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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When I was a new, young Christian, I was on fire. I was eager. I was learning. I was growing. And when the time came for Jan and me to get married, I knew what I had to do. I had to tell my brother, my one and only brother—I had to tell him that he couldn't be my best man. Because we were having a Christian wedding. And my brother was not a Christian. So how could he stand up there with me?! It was plain as day.

You see, I had fought against becoming a Christian. But now I was fighting to be a Christian, to be a good Christian, to be a Christian who stood up for principles, to be a Christian who did what was right instead of what was convenient. And that's never easy! Some of you know what I'm talking about. Maybe all of you do.

NOW, SUPPOSE WE TAKE THOSE EXPERIENCES and blow them up to biblical proportions. That would put us somewhere in the middle of the Book of Acts, where we've been reading lately. That would put us right in the middle of a church fight.

Those first Christians, they had their fights. They wrestled the way brothers do. And it was painful. But they couldn't stop. They couldn't let go. Not until they had wrestled their way to a blessing, even if that blessing would leave them limping.

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Here's what was going on. Most of the first Christians were Jews. But now Gentiles were joining the church, and that was a big challenge. How could Jews and Gentiles be part of one church together? It went against all their experience. And for the Jews, it went against so many rules. But the Holy Spirit was bringing Gentiles into the church. And that's how the fight started.

THERE WERE STRONG OPINIONS ON BOTH SIDES. Some people said that Gentile Christians should follow the Law of Moses. And that the men should be circumcised. But Paul said no. And Peter said no. And James said no. They were not about to let the Law of Moses interfere with the work of the Holy Spirit. They were not about to let circumcision interfere with the mission of the church.

It wasn't easy, but the church did reach a decision. And it was a good decision. It was a forward-looking decision. It was a faithful decision. The church said, no, Gentiles do not have to keep the Law of Moses. And no, the men do not have to be circumcised.

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It was a great victory for principle. The church chose what was right instead of what was convenient. At the same time, it was a great victory for church unity: Jews and Gentiles would be one church. What a happy day! Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas, brought the news to Antioch. And the church there was encouraged.

FROM ANTIOCH, PAUL AND SILAS TOOK THE NEWS to Derbe and then to Lystra. That's where Timothy joined them. And that's where the strangest thing happens. Here's Paul with news that Gentiles don't need to keep the Law of Moses. Here's Paul with news that the men don't need to be circumcised. Here's Paul, and he turns to Timothy and says, "For this trip, you better be circumcised." Huh?!

What's going on here? Paul had fought so hard to keep the church from imposing the Law of Moses on Gentile Christians. Paul had fought so hard to stop the church from requiring men to be circumcised. In other words, Paul had stood strong on principle. Paul had stood for what's right instead of for what's convenient. So what is going on?<sup>1</sup>

SOMETIMES WE THINK BEING CHRISTIAN IS ABOUT KEEPING A SET OF RULES. We have our Christian principles, and we uphold them. We have our dos and don'ts, and we stick to them. But I wonder if we have too many lists and too many principles!

Think about Paul. At his most unattractive, he was breathing out murder against the church. He had his principles, after all. And he was following those principles to Damascus.

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<sup>1</sup> Is Paul here acknowledging that Jewish Christians ought to be circumcised? (Timothy's father was Greek, his mother Jewish.) That is not clear. It appears most likely that Paul's decision is pragmatic, whatever principle may be relevant. Consider: in 1 Corinthians 7:18-19, Paul writes, "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised.- Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing." Also, Acts 21:20ff recounts an accusation that Paul instructs Jewish Christians living among Gentiles not to circumcise their sons. Whether there is substance to the accusation or not, it is not out of line with Paul's principles.

But when Jesus met him on the Damascus road, Paul didn't exchange one set of principles for another. He didn't exchange his Jewish principles for Christian principles. No; he exchanged his principles for a person. And in time, he figured out that all those principles didn't amount to a thing, not if you measured them against knowing Jesus.

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Remember, Paul is the man who was ready to become all things to all people. He became like a Jew for the sake of his mission to Jews. He became like a Gentile for the sake of his mission to Gentiles. And so, for the sake of the mission he and Timothy were on, he made sure that Timothy was circumcised. And he did it even though it was a matter of principle that Timothy did not need to be circumcised, a matter of principle that Paul had in writing! He did for the sake of the mission.

IN 2016, JAN & I CELEBRATED OUR 35TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY. It took some sneakiness, and it took a few tall tales, but I managed to surprise Jan with a second wedding ceremony! I'll never forget it. While we made our promises to each other, our daughters stood next to Jan. And standing next to me was my brother. Finally, he was my best man.

He should have been my best man thirty-five years before. But at the time, I was a newborn Christian. I was immature. And I was confused. I thought being a Christian was about standing up for my principles. I thought being a Christian was about keeping all the rules.

It took me a long time to learn that being a Christian is about knowing Jesus. It took me a long time to learn that being a Christian is about loving my brother and never letting go of him.

How about you? Are there principles you need to let go of so you can love your brother?

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Glory and thanks be to God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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