

Acts 15:1-35, "The Jerusalem Council" 2024-08-25

Intro & Review:

We've been in the book of Acts and have seen how the Spirit of God has moved throughout the region of ancient Israel and out into the world of the gentiles. There have been persecutions from the Jews and yet, the good news of King Jesus continued to spread with significant success. Even one of the persecutors himself was converted and is now the main character in this story line.

Paul and Barnabas have just finished their first missionary journey to the area of Asia Minor going through the Galatian region. Now, there are people who heard about the gentiles having come to faith in Christ and these people (v1) begin telling everyone that in order to become Christians, they must first become Jews and undergo circumcision.

Paul and Barnabas have a long and intense argument with them (v2). Then the church at Antioch decides to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to get some clarity on the matter. When they get there (v4), they relay all the good things that had happened, namely how God poured out His Spirit on the gentiles. However, (v5) some of the Pharisees who had believed sided with the Judizers and said that to become a Christian, people needed to essentially become Jewish first and keep the law of Moses. Of course, this included circumcision, which was the rite of initiation into the covenant people of Israel.

So, the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem came together to get at the heart of this matter. This is what is known as the **Jerusalem council**. This council would later serve as a template for the first seven ecumenical councils of the church: Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople 2 (553), Constantinople 3 (681) and Nicea 2 (787). These were ecumenical meaning that all three branches of the church, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant, all agree on the wording of these councils.

After much debate, **Peter** (v7) reminds everyone how God poured out the Spirit on the Gentiles, recorded in Acts 10-11, and how he had already come to Jerusalem on a prior occasion to defend this. V9 "God made no distinction" Peter says. "Why do you impose something that God has clearly not required on them?" V10, "the yoke" was a euphemism for the Law that the people had to bear. Salvation is "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" and that alone. This is where we get that Reformation credo "grace alone". Salvation is by grace alone,

through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to the Scriptures alone, to the glory of God alone.

Afterwards, **Paul** and **Barnabas** gave testimony about the miraculous signs and wonders that God did among the Gentiles. Why did they do this? Because the miracles were signs that God was present. Only God could heal and cast out demons. No man can do this alone. God was validating the work of the gospel and saving gentiles. That God would save the gentiles was so shocking that it needed the very hand of God Himself to validate the phenomenon. If He hadn't done that, the church at Jerusalem probably would not have believed that it was possible. God was pouring out His Spirit on the gentiles and this was WILD! They did not anticipate this. They were shocked and (v12) "kept silent". They were so flabbergasted; they did not know what to say. They were probably in disbelief and awe. Who would have ever thought that these unclean dogs would now be on the same level as them? There truly was a sense of disdain and racism from the Jews regarding the rest of the world. That God would save them and make them part of the same covenant as them was almost unbelievable.

How is it possible that all the covenant promises of Israel are now open for the world? This made no sense to them. All their lives, they had separated themselves from the world and meticulously maintained the ceremonial washings, sacrifices, festivals, and moral law. Their entire way of life was centered around obeying the Law. They were a particular people who took great pains to maintain that identity and now, in Christ, all that is meaningless?

How are people who were never circumcised, or half breeds, or just on the fringes are now welcome to the familial table of God? What!!!? God is pouring out His Spirit on the pagan, demon worshipping, immoral gentiles?! Yes! Paul and Barnabas say. That is what has happened.

(v13) now **James**, the brother of Jesus, obviously not the one who was beheaded earlier in chapter 12, steps in after Paul and Barnabas had given their testimony. He says, "Listen up!" Then he basically says that although this seems unexpected and totally outside the realm of what is possible, it should not have been because God told them multiple times that this would happen.

Let's look at v14. James goes on so say that Simeon, a different spelling of Simon, meaning Peter, has already given them the precedent for this phenomenon. In addition to Peter's, Paul, and Barnabas' testimony, there were multiple Prophets (v14) who foretold this. For example, (v15-18) and he quotes the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT) Amos 9:11-12.

The way James uses Amos is a great paradigm for how the New Testament writers and early church came to understand Old Testament prophecy. They argue from the greater to the lesser.

Let me see if I can explain. In the Jewish mind, God was going to reinstate, or fulfill the covenant that He had made with David by sending a deliverer. A king. A messiah. A Christ. He would kick the sorry gentiles out of Jerusalem and sit on the throne again establishing Jewish dominance. What James says is that Jesus, by His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God, doesn't just sit on the throne in Jerusalem, but sits on the throne of the God of the cosmos. He has a higher authority and kingdom. His rule is broader than just Jerusalem and Israel. It is over the entire world. And because of that, Jesus more than fulfills the prophecy.

Without getting too deep into the weeds, this is one of the primary differences as to how Covenant theology differs from Dispensationalism. Many people today believe that the Jews still need to dwell in the land of Israel and build a temple and have an earthly kingdom. That understanding is a misunderstanding of the greater fulfillment principle propagated by dispensational theology. God has opened the doorway to all the world and now all His people will inherit not just the land of Israel, but the entire world. **Dispensationalism misunderstands the use of the Old Testament prophecies by the New Testament writers.** There is a ton more we could say about that, but it goes beyond the purposes of what we're doing here today.

James' conclusion is that it is not necessary for the Gentiles "who are turning to God" to become Jews, become circumcised and obey all the law. They do however, tell them to do four things: 1) abstain from things contaminated by idols 2) sexual immorality 3) what is strangled, and 4) from blood. These were all things closely associated with idol worship. This probably needs some explanation. Meat sold at the market in the ancient world was almost always the result of a pagan sacrificial worship. In this situation, animals were strangled instead of bled out. **The Old Testament is replete with commands not to eat meat with blood: Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17; 7:25-27; 17:10-14; 19:25 Dt 12:16, 23, 25, 27; 15:23; 1Sam 14:32-34; Ez 33:25. In the NT, Rom 14-15; 1Cor 5-6; 8-10; 1Thess 4:1-9 all deal with similar situations.**

One of the interpretive difficulties with this text has to do with the question of what is being prohibited here. Are these four things specifically being banned or are they to be taken as a whole? The best clue to what is being forbidden here is the culture of the gentiles themselves. Most, if not all these practices were part of gentile aka pagan temple worship.

Additionally, this interpretation matches the context of the book of Acts if understood that the gospel is not to be mixed with anything whether it be Old Testament ceremonial law keeping and legalism or gentile pagan worship. **Syncretism is prohibited.** Syncretism is when you take two different things and put them together into one new thing. Combining Jesus and His lordship and gospel with anything else is not allowed. He is King of all and must be worshiped

alone. He is to be valued and honored. This is similar to what we see in the first couple of chapters of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Jesus is preeminent and not to be confused or added to.

That being said, we need to heed this command in our own time. The so-called prosperity gospel is actual syncretistic. It is combining the western materialism with Jesus spirituality. Not only that, but the other so-called liberation or woke gospel attempts to combine cultural values of tolerance and socialism with Christianity. Lastly, the cultural Christian model, particularly in the south, adheres to the conservative fiscal politics implied by the gospel but empties it of its power. All three of these **fake gospels** neglect the sexual implications of Christianity. They all promote either indirectly or sometimes outright, a perverse and loose view of sex. Interestingly enough, I suspect that was the case here also. What red blooded guy doesn't want to go to the club, eat a steak, and have an encounter. Not much has changed in 2000 years. Ladies, no strippin' for Jesus. And, cover yourself up. The three Bs should only be seen by your husband. If you don't know what those are, ask me later. Be modest like the Bible says to. Guys, no going to the club or bar or hanging out at places you shouldn't be. See our Proverbs studies on chapters 5-7 for more detail. Audio and handouts are on our website.

Back to the story...The apostles, elders, and whole church agreed on this conclusion. They sent two others, Judas, called **Barsabbas**, and **Silas** with Paul and Barnabas to deliver the letter. The details of the letter are details of the letter are in verses 23-29 with the explicit command repeated in v29. The opinion of the church is seen as "good to the Holy Spirit" in v28.

In v30, they arrive in Antioch and deliver the letter to the congregation. The result in v31 was joy and more preaching in v32 by Judas and Silas. Then they went back to Jerusalem in v33. V34 is a textual variant. V35, Paul and Barnabas spent a long time there in Antioch teaching and preaching.

Conclusion:

The gospel of grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, is affirmed. There are no additional conditions to salvation, but sensitivity to the situation is called for. The term for this sort of behavior is prudence. There is a time and place for everything under the sun (Ecc 3).

There are two very helpful points here:

- 1) **Gospel fidelity is very important. Know the gospel.** Paul will say in Galatians 1:8-12 that if anyone preaches another gospel, even an angel from heaven, let him be damned. Know

the gospel. Don't compromise on the gospel. The Gospel is freely given and calls people to repent and believe. Repent and be baptized. Trust Christ. Abandon your way of life and submit to King Jesus.

- 2) Because Paul will allow for greater freedom in the future, understand that **people are in process. Be patient** but firm. Most scholars agree that this letter is a stop gap measure and temporary in nature. Later, as the church becomes more and more gentile, these restrictions will lift.
- 3) Be sexually pure. Don't even give a hint of immorality Paul says in Ephesians 5:3.

Closing Prayer: Lord God in heaven and our Father, thank You that the gospel is better than anything in this world. Thank you that it is only by Your grace that we get to come to You.

And now, grant us spiritual food and drink as we obey Jesus' command to partake in His supper. Open our hearts and minds. Fill them with Your truth as we remember the death of the Lord Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.

Questions:

1. What requirements were the Judaizers making on the gentiles?
2. Who were the leaders of the church at Jerusalem? What person in particular?
3. What OT reference was used in response to the Judaizers?
4. How does covenant theology offer a better understanding of Biblical prophecy than dispensationalism?
5. What is the Old Testament command in these passages Gen 9:4; Lev 3:17; 7:25-27; 17:10-14; 19:25; Dt 12:16, 23, 25, 27; 15:23; 1Sam 14:32-34; Ez 33:25?
6. What does Paul say about these things in Rom 14-15; 1Cor 5-6; 8-10; 1Thes 4:1-9?

Application:

- 1) Gospel fidelity is VERY IMPORTANT. _____ the _____.
- 2) People are in process. Therefore, be _____ but firm.
- 3) Embrace God's sexual ethic.