

Acts 15:1-35: Jerusalem Council

This is one of the top 3 chapters in Acts. Why is the Jerusalem Council so important? Because of its impact on the Gospel. Will the Gospel continue to be “good news” for all people or not?

15:1: *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* Jews from Jerusalem came to Antioch. Paul & Barnabas debated with them. This must have confused the new Gentile converts! What’s the truth? This issue needed to be settled once and for all.

There is only one action you must DO to be saved. It isn’t circumcision. Baptism is the modern equivalent of (replaces) circumcision in at least one denomination. A modern Pharisee may say, “Unless you are baptized you cannot be saved.” That’s not true to scripture because baptism is an effect; it’s the symbolic action of a public confession.

Romans 10:5-13: ⁵ *For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.* ⁶ *But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down)* ⁷ *“or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).* ⁸ *But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);* ⁹ ***because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*** ¹⁰ ***For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*** ¹¹ *For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.”* ¹² *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.* ¹³ *For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Belief in the heart precedes confession with the mouth.

Think of cause and effect. The cause is BELIEVE (belief). The effect is CONFESS (confession).

One other necessary effect is obedience. The confession “Jesus is Lord” is obedience. Jesus is your master, your boss, your commanding officer. When you

confess “Jesus is Lord” you’re saying, “Jesus, you’re first, and I’m second. Whatever you command I will obey.

The cause is belief and the effects are confession and obedience.

There are certain truths you must believe to be saved. You must believe God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul doesn’t include all the beliefs in this statement. You must also believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins as God’s atonement for sin.

Can you confess “Jesus is Lord”?

1 Corinthians 12:3: *Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.*

Story: A Christian was riding a crowded bus. A man stood beside him, bent down and whispered in his ear, “I heard your Bible says no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ unless by the Spirit of your God. I’m not a Christian. I can say it, ‘Jesus is Lord.’ So your Bible isn’t true.” The Christian said, “Stand in the middle of the bus and say it out loud for everyone to hear, ‘Jesus is Lord.’” The man looked scared and said, “No!” He got off the next stop.

15:1, 5: *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”*

This wasn’t just a misunderstanding or different interpretation of scripture. This was false doctrine. They told Gentiles they could not be SAVED unless they got circumcised according to the custom of Moses. This is justification by works and not by justification by faith in Jesus Christ. The faction in the Jerusalem Church teaching this was Pharisees who believed in Christ as Messiah but continued to keep the Law of Moses for justification. They were called Judaizers.

Analogy: What the Judaizers were teaching the Gentiles would be like a man convicted of a crime who did his time in prison. He walks out of the prison a free man, but the judge who sentenced him tells him if he wants to be a good citizen then he should go back to prison and stay there.

Why did they teach this false doctrine? Because they would not give up their Jewish identity and what they had been doing for thousands of years to gain God’s

favor. They wanted to keep elements of the old covenant and add them to the new covenant. This false doctrine needed to be firmly denied.

Jesus said the old and the new cannot coexist. Jesus said new wine cannot be put in old wineskins (Mark 2:22) and don't put an unshrunk patch on your old bluejeans.

If we give the Judaizers the benefit of the doubt then we may speculate they were confused. They were not maliciously teaching false doctrine. The Judaizing Pharisees may have been confused about justification and sanctification. Their emphasis on keeping the Law of Moses may have been related to their concern for the Gentiles' holiness. That's why James recommended some practices for Gentiles to avoid that are unrelated to salvation.

There are some modern 'Pharisees' in churches who confuse justification with sanctification. They do this by adding extra beliefs and actions to the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ. Some of the behaviors they want new believers to change belong to the process of sanctification. (You must stop drinking all alcohol, even beer and wine to be saved. Or, you cannot be divorced and saved if you weren't divorced for biblical reasons. I am politically conservative. So, if someone claimed to be a believer justified by faith in Christ and was pro-abortion, then I would seriously doubt that person's salvation. A Christian's opinion on political issues is a matter for sanctification.)

The issue at the Jerusalem Council doesn't appear to be a confusion between justification and sanctification. How did the Apostles know the Law of Moses and circumcision were not necessary for salvation? What evidence did God provide?

15:6-12: ⁶ *The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.* ⁷ *And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.* ⁸ *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, **by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us,*** ⁹ *and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.* ¹⁰ *Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?* ¹¹ *But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."* ¹² *And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what **signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.***

God confirmed salvation by grace through faith in Jesus two ways.

First, Peter's evidence was the gift of the Holy Spirit. God gave the HS to Gentiles the same way he gave the HS to the Jewish believers. The primary evidence was speaking in tongues. Read Acts 10.

Second, P & B's evidence was from their first mission trip. God gave "signs and wonders." Read Acts 13-14.

God confirms salvation through the grace of the Lord Jesus the same way today. God gives the HS to confirm salvation by grace. The HS produces conviction of sin and the need for righteousness in the heart of an unbeliever as he/she hears or reads the word of God. Sometimes a new believer may have a very emotional experience with the HS even before baptism (Acts 10:44-48).

God gives "signs and wonders" to confirm salvation by grace. There are two kinds of signs and wonders: 1) casting out demons; 2) physical healing.

Paul reminded the Galatians that God gave the HS and the HS performed "signs & wonders" among them by faith and not by obedience to the Law of Moses. Galatians 3:1-6: *O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ⁴ Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—⁶ just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?*

Very important: James provided the scriptural foundation for the experiences of Peter and Paul & Barnabas. James quoted from Amos 9:11-12. Acts 15:16-17: ¹⁶ "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old." James quoted from the Greek translation of the OT (i.e. Septuagint) to make his point. God rebuilding the fallen tent of David refers to a new Israel in Christ united with Gentiles.

James, Peter, and P & B could have used Joel 2 as a scriptural context for HS's filling uncircumcised Gentiles and working "signs and wonders" among them. Peter quoted Joel 2 as scriptural context for the experience of Pentecost (Acts 2).

James recommended some actions for Gentiles to avoid that are unrelated to salvation. These may be considered “diplomatic concessions” for the sake of the Judaizers. These rules are for fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, and for their sanctification, not salvation (15:20, 29).

1. Do not eat food sacrificed to or contaminated by idols. If buying meat in the marketplace then ask if it has been sacrificed to idols or not.

2. Do not eat strangled animals because the blood will still be in the animal. Do not eat blood. *Both of these food recommendations would be difficult for Gentiles to keep so they probably only did it when fellowshiping with legalistic Jews.*

3. No fornication (GR *porneia*). This seems obvious! First meaning: Do not engage in ritual immorality with temple prostitutes. This was actually encouraged in pagan Greco-Roman culture. Second meaning: The reference is to Leviticus 18:6-23: no incest, homosexuality, or bestiality. The single most likely meaning is do not break the Jewish marriage law prohibiting those of close kin to marry. Do not marry a close relative. (A possible scenario: A Gentile Christian comes to a fellowship meeting and introduces his wife to a Pharisee who believes in Jesus; that is, a circumcised Jew who follows the Law of Moses and believes Jesus is the Messiah. The Pharisee notices a resemblance between the man and his wife and asks, “Are you both related?” The Gentile says his wife is also his sister or his cousin. The Pharisee freaks out and doesn’t want to fellowship with the Gentile who broke the Law of Moses. He says, “That’s unholy! It’s a detestable sin!”)

James wrote a letter and it was delivered to the Gentile believers at Antioch. The Gentiles rejoiced. “Hallelujah! We don’t have to become Jewish. We can eat pork! We just need to make sure it’s kosher when we eat a fellowship meal with Jewish brothers.”

Application

First application: We see how the Jewish and Gentile churches worked through differences in belief and practice. The Gentile Antioch Church gave preference to the Jewish Jerusalem Church. The council met in Jerusalem and the Gentiles honored the apostolic Jewish leaders. They shared experiences and scripture to determine God’s will. The experiences they shared had to be confirmed by scripture. But even experiences confirmed by scripture can lead to divisions.

The Jerusalem Council decided on an essential belief - justification by the Law of Moses or by faith in Jesus Christ. Churches divide over nonessential beliefs and

practices. A certain church has a nonessential belief (determined by scripture and experience) which leads to a practice which leads to divisions. So, we have conservative evangelical churches who cannot worship with Pentecostal churches. We have Protestants who cannot take communion with Catholics.

Second application: Experience and scripture, which comes first? They confirm each other but scripture is primary. It may seem like Peter and Paul & Barnabas put experience before scripture. They already knew Christ commanded them and scripture told them to take the Gospel to the nations. They still probably needed confirmation that the Gentiles were acceptable to God without circumcision and the Law of Moses because of the extreme Jewish faction in the Jerusalem Church. Therefore, the need for experience; the need for the HS to take the lead and demonstrate God's acceptance. The HS did this with signs and wonders (speaking in tongues and healing miracles). Scripture confirmed their experiences with the Gentiles. James quoted the OT prophet Amos.

People seek spiritual experiences but the experiences must be judged by scripture and the 'fruit' of the experience. Does the experience have a scriptural foundation? (Is the scripture being interpreted correctly?) Does the fruit of the experience produce love for God, a desire for holiness, and boldness to witness? There was a brief period in my Christian life when I sought experiences. I would go to a church where a revival was taking place to experience the HS.

God is not a fact to be learned. **God is a Person to be experienced.** God is omniscient, but he can make his presence seen and felt. The glory cloud of God's presence filled Solomon's temple: 2 Chronicles 5:11-14. The priests had a worship service in the temple and God's manifest presence filled the temple and knocked them down.

What about church worship services? We are God's new priesthood in Christ. When we worship the HS is present and I hope you feel his presence when you worship. When you believe in Christ you become a temple of the HS. I hope you feel the HS in your spirit because he is in you. I hope the HS in you takes away your fear of COVID-19 and protects you with peace.