

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL: Part 1

Acts 15

Through the years, I have spoken to you about my "top ten" lists:

- my top ten favorite books
- my top ten favorite movies
- my top ten favorite chapters from the Bible, and so forth

In like manner, if someone were to ask me, "What would you say are the top ten most important sections from the Bible, Acts chapter 15 – the chapter that we are coming to this morning – would definitely make that list. I'm not sure just where I would rank it in that list of 10. It may not be as significant as Genesis chapter 1 or John chapter 1, but it is a crucial chapter for understanding the nature of Christ's death and its ramifications upon daily living. Without Acts chapter 15 and the decision that came out that chapter made by our spiritual ancestors, our entire lives would be **quite different** than they are today.

So let's read Acts chapter 15. Today we will only get as far as laying the groundwork for the next two Sundays...

Acts 15:1-35

Back in Acts chapter 10 we read the account of Peter and his having traveled from Joppa to Caesarea to meet with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Let's pick up the narrative of that meeting as recorded in Acts chapter 10. We will pick it up right at the place where Peter has entered Cornelius' house and is beginning to speak...

Acts 10:34-48

The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and those with him came to be viewed as a pivotal event in the history of the spread of the gospel. Up to this point the good news about Jesus was viewed as a message for the Jewish people only. Here and there, some non-Jews had shown interest in the message of Jesus (e.g., John 12:20ff), just as some non-Jews had converted to Judaism, taking upon them the Jewish law and the practices of the Jews. But with Cornelius it was different. He was, like the Jews, a believer in but one God, the God of Israel, and because of that he had been kind and generous towards the Jewish people. But he was not a convert and he was

still living very much as a Gentile man. Yet the Holy Spirit came upon him JUST AS the Holy Spirit had come upon the Christ's Jewish disciples back in Acts chapter 2.

Peter saw this as HIGHLY significant, and almost immediately reported it back to the rest of the early Christian leaders in Jerusalem.

Paul, formerly known as Saul, was like Peter a Jew. And although he was from birth a Roman citizen he was first and foremost a Jew, trained in the law of God and in the ways of Judaism. But as he and Barnabas had been sent out as what we would call "missionaries" they had quickly found that **many of the Gentiles** were **more receptive** of their message than were the Jews.

For example: When Paul and Barnabas were in Pisidia, many Gentiles rejoiced at the hearing of the gospel message, and "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). But whereas the Gentiles seemed receptive to the good news about Jesus, most of the Jews were hard against it...so much so that, in the end, it tells us in Acts 13:51 that Paul and Barnabas "shook the dust from off their feet" against them and moved on to another town.

This didn't alter Paul and Barnabas' set pattern of FIRST attending a Shabbat service at the local synagogue of the Jews, upon entering a town. But if they found the Jews unreceptive they quickly moved to preaching the gospel to the Gentiles.

So Jews first, and then the Gentiles.

No wonder Paul would later write in Romans 1:16,

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**"

Both in terms of priority as well as in real time, Paul believed the gospel should go to the Jews first, AND THEN to the Gentiles. But as he was learning over time, often it was the Gentiles who were more receptive to the good news about Jesus than were the Jews.

Why was this?

1. Jesus didn't quite fit the model that many Jews had in their mind regarding the coming Messiah. There was no white horse, no

blazing saddle, no raising of a sword against Rome. Jesus was, in effect, too passive, too kind, too forgiving, and too loving.

2. It was quite well known that Jesus of Nazareth had been put to death at the prompting of the Jewish Sanhedrin who saw him not only as a blasphemer but also as somewhat of a brash nuisance to the status quo. Jesus had been a threat to Israel being able to live peaceably under the rule of Rome.

3. Having dug their heels in pretty deep, any sympathy towards Jesus or his followers was not well received by the Jewish leadership back in Jerusalem. They were quite happy to mark the era of Jesus off as a **bad blip** in the overall history of modern Judaism, so any and every attempt to bring up the name of Jesus was not appreciated – neither by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem nor by those who wished they were Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

But when Paul and Barnabas preached to those who weren't Jewish they were preaching to people who **weren't already prejudiced against Jesus** for the reasons I just stated.

Now unto the text before us...

Acts 15:1

In the history of the early church these kind of people that we read here of in Acts 15:1 have come to be called "Judaizers." These were Christians – Jewish followers of Jesus – but they were convinced that the law of Moses was **not set aside** by Jesus **nor was it to be set aside** by those who believed in Jesus. Furthermore, in their minds, if the good news about Jesus was now going out to the Gentiles, then the Law of Moses should also be going out to the Gentiles.

These Judaizers, throughout the rest of Paul's life, would become a huge thorn in his side. They caused him **more than a little bit** of grief. But in all fairness, one cannot help but **appreciate** their heart.

These were Jewish men (and women) who had their entire lives been immersed in the law of Moses. The law of God had been **their delight** (Psalm 1). Moses had shown them as individuals and as a nation a better way to live and they praised God for it. Jesus' suggested violations of the law of Moses (like healing on a Sabbath) they saw as but an overextending of the intent of the law on the part of those

who were critical of Jesus. Jesus had kept the Law of Moses...and he had kept it perfectly. He had kept the feasts. He had honored Moses and the law, and in so doing He had truly shown himself to be qualified to become the sin-bearer of humanity.

So to them, the idea that Paul and Barnabas were teaching the Jews about Jesus but then **teaching them basically NOTHING about the law of God, as given through Moses**, this was a **HUGE MISTAKE**...a huge mistake reflecting a lack of understanding of God's great plan for the human race!

All of this to say that instead of seeing the Judaizers as legalists, I think we should try and APPRECIATE where they were coming from, even if, in the end, we disagree with them. They didn't hate Jesus. They loved Jesus. But they also loved Moses. **So why can't we just teach Moses AND Jesus together?**

That was the question. What a GOOD QUESTION.

And it was with that question that they came to Antioch to, in a sense, **confront Paul and Barnabas** and the church of Antioch.

And so they did. And the result was, as it says in verse 2, "no small discussion" – meaning, that the debate with Paul and Barnabas went on for a **very long time**. But as it remained unresolved, it was decided that there needed to be a **definitive answer** by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

In the older adult Sunday School class we have been going over church history through the centuries. Like everything else in life, our study got derailed by the coronavirus. But we are now back at it and we are now up to the 13th century. But back in the early 4th century, following Constantine's conversion to faith in Christ, and then his becoming emperor over the Roman empire, an Edict of Toleration was issued followed by a later full embracing of Christianity. Soon after, in an effort to help the church, Constantine ordered an assembling of church leaders from all over the Roman empire to resolve a basic question regarding the nature of Christ: was he God or not? To that end, the Council of Nicea was formed. This was in 325 A.D. It has forever since been deemed the first ecumenical

council.

But Nicea was **not** the first church council. Rather this council in Jerusalem, now called "The Jerusalem Council" of Acts 15 was the **very first** church council: a coming together of church leaders: apostles, elders, and in the case of Paul and Barnabas, missionaries as well.

As people came to this gathering of The Jerusalem Council, their assembling would have been like almost any other gathering: people coming from here and there, being greeted, getting situated, getting unpacked, telling stories.

"Hey, how was the trip?"

"So, where are you staying?"

"When do we eat...and what's for supper?"

On their way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas (and those who traveled from Antioch with them) had run across other believers and shared stories as they went. But now in Jerusalem and having gotten settled, the meetings of the Jerusalem Council began to get underway. Right off, Paul and Barnabas began to report what had happened on their first missionary journey: how many had believed including many Gentiles.

One gets the impression that the Judaizers, zealous as they were that everyone should obey the Law of Moses, **jumped into** this time of reporting...possibly interrupting what was being said. I say that because of the words in verse 5 that they "rose up" and began speaking. It is questionable if they were even called on. But they wanted to deal with **THE BIG QUESTION** and so they **RAISED THE BIG QUESTION** but not as a question. Rather they made a statement:

"IT IS NECESSARY TO CIRCUMCISE THEM (meaning these Gentile believers that Paul and Barnabas had mentioned) **AND TO ORDER THEM TO KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES."**

Thank God for the boldness of the Judaizers. That is, thank God that **they were CLEAR** in what they wanted to see happen. There was **NO AMBIGUITY** in what they thought should happen. No one then and no one now could walk away from this wondering what it was that some people thought should happen. **The Gentiles need to keep the Law of Moses.** By that they meant what we would call the Old Testament law, with all of its laws pertaining to everything from what one may eat, to how one must dress, to how one should cut one's beard. We may think of the Law of Moses as the

10 Commandments, but it was a LOT BIGGER than just the 10 commandments.

I would have you note, along the way, that the issue being raised was not regarding the Jewish Christian's relationship to the law of Moses. Indeed, one doesn't get the impression that that was even an issue of debate. It was assumed...at least at this time...that **all Jews** everywhere – Christian or non-Christian – should keep the Law of Moses.

No, the issue at the Jerusalem Council was not about a Jew's relationship to the Law of Moses. It was only about Gentiles – non-Jews – and their relationship to the Law of Moses.

And as verse 6 confirms: this and this only was the question before everyone.

And so the discussion began. The text doesn't tell us who all initially spoke, or for how long the debate went on. Was it just a few hours? Did it last for days? Centuries later, during the Council of Nicea and the other councils that followed it, discussions would sometimes go on for MONTHS before a decision would be reached. So for how long these church leaders were debating the issue we simply do not know.

But **FINALLY** Simon Peter stood up. Peter – the one that Jesus seemed to have earmarked as the leader of the others...the one to whom Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." Peter stood up and began to speak. Peter may have spoken before. If the debate had literally been going on for days it is possible that Peter spoke even several times before. Then again, maybe Peter had been silent up to this point.

There is a great scene in one of my "top ten" movies, Dances With Wolves, where a Sioux Indian tribe is trying to decide what they should do about an Army Captain who has taken up residence at an abandoned post not far from where the Sioux are camped. Various members of the tribe give their input. All the while the chief – a much older man – sits quietly listening to everyone's input. After a long time he finally speaks, acknowledging those who have spoken before him with their various opinions. Then he says, "It's easy to become confused by these questions. It's hard to know what to do." And then after

a long pause he says, "We should talk about this some more. That's all I have to say."

Well, Peter somewhat had that kind of role: the role of the chief. But when he finally spoke he didn't resolve the issue any more than did that old Sioux chief.

verses 7-11

Indeed the only thing that Peter really adds to the discussion is his admission that the Law of Moses was a "yoke on the neck" that neither they nor their Jewish fathers were able to keep.

Next up the text tells us that Barnabas and Paul again gave a report – and note here how **for the first time** in many chapters Barnabas' name is mentioned first. But as the leaders in Jerusalem knew Barnabas much better than they knew Paul, that made sense. So they gave their report about the signs and wonders that had accompanied their work among the Gentiles.

And after they finished James then spoke.

Now back in Acts chapter 12, verse 2, we read about how Herod had put James, the brother of John, to death with the sword. That James and John were the two sons of Zebedee, the "sons of Thunder" as they were called, two of the original 12 apostles. But as that James was now dead, who is this James that we are hearing from in Acts 15:13?

Bible commentators believe **this** James is

1. The same James who is the brother of Jude, mentioned in Jude verse 1,
2. The same James that wrote the book of James (following Hebrews), and likely
3. James the son of Alphaeus, or "James the Less", who was a relative of Jesus. In Galatians 1:19 Paul mentions "James, the brother of the Lord" and while some believe that James was indeed a later son of Mary, others believe he was more likely a cousin.

But whatever his physical relationship to Jesus, James – though he had not served as one of the 12 apostles – was clearly **highly regarded** by the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. And now was his time to speak...

verses 13-21

And with those words...words that ended up finding great acceptance by those who had attended this first of many church councils...the entire future of Christendom turned away from Rabbinical Judaism and towards a more libertine spirit.

Next Sunday we will delve this "judgment" of James. We will consider at that time verse 21 – **one of the most enigmatic verses in the entire Bible**, and on that Sunday and the Sunday following – Lord willing – we will consider not just the 1st century Gentiles relationship to the Law of Moses but our relationship to the Law of Moses as well. There may be some **more important topics** that we should discuss, but in light of the fact that the Old Testament scriptures (which are founded upon the Law of Moses) constitute roughly three-quarters of our entire Bible, **not many** topics are truly of greater importance to us today.

So...until next Sunday...