

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL – Part 2  
Acts 15

Acts 15:1-35

While still in school, I, along with a close friend, began compiling a list of **idioms of speech** – sayings that would be considered peculiar to our language and culture which, to someone from another country and language would likely be meaningless. These were and are **cliché's** such as

"That's a Duesy"

"Stuck between a rock and a hard place"

"You can take that to the bank" or my all time favorite:

"That really wet my whistle"

Well, another of these clichés is

"Cut to the chase"

We use this phrase to mean, "Get to the point" or "Stop beating around the bush" – statements which are themselves more of the same.

"Cut to the chase" is generally taken (though there is no unanimous agreement about this) to be a statement taken from the era of **silent movies**...back when early films were much more action packed and melodramatic than the talky movies that came into existence beginning in 1927 with Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer." These early films were much more oriented towards keeping the audience's attention by means of visual action scenes rather than any lengthy dialogue.

And so to say, "Cut to the chase" meant, let's get to that section of film that is **most interesting**, most exciting, or most action packed. Like a chase scene where the police are after the robber.

Well, this morning **we theologically CUT TO THE CHASE**. As I said last Sunday, **few chapters in the entire Bible are as pivotal**, important, or theologically significant as this single chapter. For at the center of this discussion and debate that was taking place at this Jerusalem Council was the question "What is the relationship of a Gentile believer in Jesus to the Law of Moses?"

The Jewish Christian Judaizers (as they have come to be called) were convinced that when a Gentile became a follower of Jesus meant, that Gentile believer now needed to take upon his or her self the entire Old Covenant law of Moses. So a Gentile would, in effect, become a Jewish proselyte even as they had come to believe that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. This would put Gentile believers in Jesus on an equal footing with those Jews who had come to believe in Jesus.

Jews accepted the Law of Moses  
 Jesus accepted the Law of Moses, and now  
 Gentiles accepted the Law of Moses.

And like some of the Jews, these Gentiles also believed in Jesus. So while these Gentiles would never have the **heritage** of those who were raised in Jewish homes, nonetheless, they would truly come to fully embrace all that God, Moses and Jesus wanted them to believe. At least that is how the Judaizers saw it.

And so they asked for...or rather DEMANDED...that the Gentiles who were coming to believe in Jesus needed to embrace the Law of Moses.

The Jerusalem Council was formed to deal with the Judaizer's demands.

Now the text is clear that both Paul and Barnabas **disagreed** with these Judaizers. And while Peter, it appears, wasn't quite ready to throw his hat in on one position or the other, he too admitted that what the Judaizers were asking for had been **pretty near impossible** even for the Jews to keep. So he called the Law of Moses a "yoke" that the Judaizers were attempting to put "on the neck" of these Gentile disciples.

Finally, James, the brother of Jude, later author of the book of James, and a physical relative of Jesus, spoke up. So let's "cut to the chase" and read again what James proposed...

verses 13-21

Now, James' proposal, in some ways **seems rather odd** given what the Judaizers had been seeking. For the text says **nothing** about the Judaizers wanting these Gentile Christians to avoid meat that had been offered to idols, or sexual immorality or to not eat an animal that had been strangled or

meat that still had blood in it. No, **the issue** they were concerned about was **circumcision** – the cutting off of the foreskin from every male's private part.

As we all know, circumcision was an outward sign of one's acceptance into the Jewish community. Infant boys were circumcised on the eighth day; Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. And every true proselyte into Judaism was circumcised, regardless of his age.

Only once in my 35 years of preaching have I preached a sermon on the topic of circumcision. Just **why** the Jews were SO CONCERNED about it, or how they even knew if a man had been circumcised or not, is **somewhat of a mystery**. But "it is what it is" and that's what the Judaizers wanted from these new Gentile believers in Jesus.

But **James doesn't even mention that issue**...at least not in the text that is before us!

Instead he brings up four things that he believes all Gentile believers in Jesus should be made or obliged to keep: Again...

1. They should avoid anything having to do with idolatry, particularly, they should avoid eating any meat that had been offered to an idol.
2. They should avoid sexual immorality. This would have included adultery, fornication (sex outside of marriage), homosexuality and bestiality.
3. They should avoid eating an animal that had been strangled, and
4. They should avoid eating any meat that still had its blood in it.

Down in verses 28-29, in the letter that would accompany Paul, Barnabas, Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, these four points are again stated...

verses 28-29

So **that** was the list.

Nothing about the 10 commandments

Nothing about circumcision

Nothing about how they should dress, or cut their beards, or how they should handle someone accused of murder.

The desire was that no yoke be placed on them.

So...Just love Jesus (implied in their belief) and avoid these four things. At least that is how it reads.

And how was James' recommendation received? They all accepted it!

verse 22 and 28.

Long ago, an old song by P.B. Bliss was written that came to be sung in many an evangelical church. The first verse had these words

**Free from the law** – oh, happy condition  
 Jesus hath bled and there is remission  
 Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,  
 Christ hath redeemed us, once for all.

What was the law that P.B. Bliss was suggesting we are free from? It was **the Law of Moses**...that which Peter confessed was a yoke upon people's necks.

Those who are **more mature** in the ways of Christ understand that while we, as Christians, may be **free from the Law** of Moses, it hardly means we are **free from law**. For we are now under a **NEW LAW, the Law of Christ**. And if one truly understands the Law of Christ one will understand that as binding a yoke as that old law may have been, in many ways, Christ's new law is **even more binding** and more of a yoke!

So, for example, while under the Old Law of Moses one was simply **not to kill**, under the Law of Christ, one may **not even hate**. Indeed, under the New Law we are to **LOVE all**, even our enemies!

Or while under the Old Law of Moses one was **simply not to commit adultery**, under the Law of Christ one is **not to even have any lustful thoughts!** THOUGHTS! Man, you talk about binding... you talk about a yoke...the Law of Christ is meant to BIND not only our bodies, but our tongues and even our thoughts! No

wonder he is to be called "LORD" and "Master."

But none of that seemed to have come up at the Jerusalem Council. The sole question was about a Gentile believer in Jesus and how that belief in Jesus affected that Gentile's relationship to the Law of Moses.

Now, Acts 15 is at the heart of what has come to be called "Dispensational Theology" – that idea that God has worked at different ways in different eras (or dispensations). That the apostles and elders in Jerusalem were willing to let the Gentiles **off the hook** of keeping the Law of Moses (with four exceptions – which we will address in a few minutes), clearly shows **a shift from one era and mindset to an entirely different era and mindset**. Under the former period (era, epoch or dispensation) the Law of Moses was king! But now, with Jesus and his new law, a new era, epoch or dispensation has been entered.

And IN THAT SENSE, I believe **we should all agree with the dispensationalists**. IN THAT SENSE and ON THIS POINT we should be in agreement with them.

Hebrews 7:12

Hebrews 7:18

Hebrews 7:22

Hebrews 8:6-7

Hebrews 8:13

The thrust of these verses is clear: With the coming of Jesus, our new high priest, came **a change in the covenant** that God had with man. A New Covenant has replaced the first covenant...the Old Covenant...making the first one "obsolete." And with that change in covenants came a change in the laws.

Now the writer of Hebrews likely wrote those verses that we read from Hebrews around 65 or 68 A.D....some 20 or so years **after** the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. In that 20 or so years, there was time to really think through this question about the Gentiles relationship to the Law of Moses. But back when James spoke, these ideas were just being formulated and beginning to be understood.

Now, let us try and answer a number of questions related to all of this...

1. So why wasn't the question about the Gentiles and circumcision answered?

I think the answer to that is that **the question WAS answered**. James' suggestion about only requiring the Gentile believers to observe four things, and circumcision NOT BEING one of those four things, shows that **circumcision was not going to be required**.

So the Jerusalem Council understood that they were not trying to make Jewish proselytes out of these Gentiles. They wanted to see Gentiles come to believe in Jesus, but they were **not** out to see them also become "Jewish."

This is a key point that in the history of Christian missions was **often forgotten**. For the history of Christian missions through the centuries is that often missionaries were not merely instructing people in the ways of Jesus but they were also instructing them in the ways of Western ideals and Western culture. One of the great charges AGAINST the modern missionary movement (that goes back about 250 years or so) is that the missionaries didn't seem to feel truly satisfied with their converts until that time that they acted, dressed, looked and talked **like a westerner**. It was as if we weren't out to mentor people just in the ways of Jesus, but also in the ways of Teddy Roosevelt or Calvin Coolidge. Instead of allowing these new believers in Jesus to explore how the Lordship of Christ could **permeate their culture**, it was as if we wanted the Lordship of Christ to **wipe out their culture** and replace it with our own.

### Galatians 5:1-6

So, again, I would say that the circumcision question was answered, albeit indirectly.

2. Those who had originally opposed Paul and Barnabas – the Judaizers – were also at the Jerusalem Council making their case. Did they accept the idea that **they had been wrong**?

Apparently so. Look at verses 22 and 28...

### verses 22 and 28

As noted last Sunday, these "Judaizers" were Jewish Pharisees who had, like the apostles, come to believe in Jesus. They were ardent supporters of the Law of Moses who also believed in Jesus. They would have been numbered with "the whole church" (verse 22) that sent out Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas with the letter making clear that only the four points of Old Covenant law were to be considered binding upon them. So, yes, these Judaizers were **won over** at the Jerusalem Council.

Unfortunately, as is evident in a number of places in Paul's later writings, there were other Judaizers who were not yet won over. And so the argument would continue to come up again and again (throughout Paul's ministry) that the Law of Moses should still be viewed as applicable to all.

3. And why **these** four points that James mentions...**why THESE four?**

I think the answer to that is found in verse 21, a verse that I last Sunday called "one of the most enigmatic verses in the entire New Testament."

#### Acts 15:21

Some have suggested that the reason that the Law of Moses (having the 10 commandments at the heart of that law) was **not mentioned** by James or put into the letter is because everywhere the gospel was going out, people would have already had some contact...some awareness...of the Law of Moses. So what we read in verse 21 is that the Jerusalem Council understood that the Law of Moses was going to be known, since it was being preached and read pretty much everywhere already.

**But I don't believe that was the point at all.**

Rather, I believe James mentioning of these four items (idolatry, sexual immorality, and the eating of things strangled and blood) is because Gentiles who converted to faith in the Jewish Messiah Jesus, would come be coming in contact with Jews, and **if any of these four things was observed** in them they would across as OFFENSIVE TO THE JEWS in these various places around the globe. For nearly everywhere there was a Jewish community and to hear that some Gentiles were becoming followers of the Jewish Jesus and yet...and yet...were engaging in sexual immorality, or eating some food that had been offered to an idol...or eating foods that were considered abhorrent...IT WOULD **JUST BE TOO MUCH** for these Jews. That's

what I believe was going on. So James' suggestion was: let's remove any stumbling blocks that these Gentile believers might potentially put before the Jews.

If James were here today, his list of items would likely be different. Certainly idolatry or anything associated with it would **still be an issue**, and so would sexual immorality. But as to eating some animal that had been strangled...man, who knows how almost any animal meat that we eat came to its death? And as for our meats, I like mine medium to medium-well, but I don't think most Jews would give a rip about how long my steak was on the grill. So some things would be different. And the points at which we might be an offense to a modern Jew who truly goes by the Law of Moses (think ORTHODOX JEW...like the Hassidim...not conservative, reformed or secular Jew)...but the point or points at which we might be an offense to such a Jew has likely changed since the time of the Jerusalem Council.

4. But certainly James didn't mean to imply that the entire Law of Moses had **no application** to Gentile believers in Jesus! And you, Pastor Doug, certainly aren't suggesting that Gentile believers can now murder, steal, or lie...just as long as they keep those four things that James mentioned!

You are correct.

#### 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

Here, without referencing the Law of Moses, Paul, in effect, **imposed the Law of Moses** upon the Gentile believers in Corinth. Now, how could he do that?

It seems to me that the answer is found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 (*"Going therefore, MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and TEACHING THEM TO OBEY EVERYTHING I HAVE COMMANDED YOU"*).

Although we are now under the Law of Christ – an even MORE STRINGENT LAW than the Law of Moses – there is never in Christ's teaching the suggestion that we can totally disregard the Law of Moses. So Jesus reiterated much of the Law of Moses while pushing it even further so that it dealt with the heart and not just the hand.

So in preaching the teachings of Christ, one would have to be teaching the Law of Moses...or at least what has come to be viewed as the "MORAL LAW" of Moses – the 10 commandments.

Yet even here, when we come to the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment (*"remember the Sabbath to keep it holy"*) it sure sounds like the apostle Paul was willing to let that go.

We will look at that **next Sunday** as we still have much further to go but we're out of time. And next Sunday I would also like us to move beyond the question of a Gentile believer's relationship to the Law of Moses to the next question and that is about the **believing Jew's relationship to the Law of Moses**.

P.B. Bliss would have the Gentiles singing, "Free from the law – oh, happy condition." But may a Jewish believer in Jesus ALSO sing that song?

But that is next Sunday.

For now we turn our attention to that which makes any and every concern about law keeping seem sort of puny in comparison. For now we want to talk about the finished work of Christ on the cross...