

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

Acts 15:1-41

key Verse: 15:9,11

“For he made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith...No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that they are saved, just as we are.”

* A sharp dispute in Antioch (1-3)

The roots of the gospel are in the Old Testament. Jesus' coming was a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. It was a fulfillment of his promise to David. It was a fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah. The Apostles were Jews; Paul was a Jew. A question arose that had to be settled: Did one have to become a Jew in order to be a full-fledged Christian? Antioch was the place where this question came to a head. Believers in Jesus were first called “Christians” in Antioch. They were not just a sect of Judaism. They were Christians. Not only was the Antioch church more than half Gentile, also it was a missionary sending church and the missionaries whom they sent out found that God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles all over the world. The whole church rejoiced and praised God for this. Some Jewish Bible teachers came from Jerusalem and taught, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” If one was a man, he must be circumcised. Christian women must also keep the rules and regulations of the Old Testament. In other words, Christians must also be Jews. Believing in Jesus was not enough. This view circumscribes the gospel and would shut the door to many whose hearts are open to Jesus. It was not a small issue. So the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to talk about this problem with the Apostles and elders.

Their journey to Jerusalem was a joyful one, for they visited many small house church ministries in Phoenicia and Samaria and reported on the work of God among the Gentiles of the world. The believers in every place were greatly encouraged and gave praise and thanks to God.

* The Jerusalem council--A careful examination of the facts (4-12)

Barnabas and Paul were warmly welcomed by the church, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They gave their world mission report, describing how God was working among the Gentiles to bring many to faith in Jesus. Then some believers who were Pharisees, men of sincere conviction, spoke up. “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” This was the issue. The future of the Christian Church hung on the way this issue was resolved. Barnabas and Paul were quiet as the Jerusalem leaders discussed this question. Then Peter got up and spoke. He was a faithful Jew who kept the law—and he was the spiritual leader of the church, even though

he had no special title or office in the church. He reminded them all of how God had used him to bring the gospel to Cornelius the Roman centurion. He reminded them that when they accepted the gospel, God gave them the Holy Spirit with no strings attached. God blessed the Gentile believers and accepted them when they came by faith alone. He said, "Don't put an unnecessary yoke on the necks of the new believers. "We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are."

Then, the assembly quietly listened to Barnabas and Paul as they described the great work of God which they had witnessed in the Gentile world.

* The decision, based on Scripture and announced by James (13-21)

James, Jesus' half brother, was the moderator of the Council and recognized as the leader of the church. He did not base his decision on Barnabas and Paul's experience or report. But he took seriously the words of Peter and he also went back to the Bible to find God's answer. He pointed to a quotation from Amos which looked forward to the time when God would take from among the Gentiles a people for himself. Amos prophesied that God would rebuild the fallen tent of David and restore its ruins so that Gentiles would be included in the people of God. Based on the words of the apostle Peter and on Scripture, James announced that Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to be Christian. "We should not make it difficult for Gentiles who are returning to God." But he went on to suggest some things that Gentile believers should respect. They should not despise their Jewish brothers and should be considerate of them. They should refrain from the Gentile habits that were most offensive to and damaging to the faith of the Jews. They should not eat blood or food that had been offered to idols. And they should abstain from sexual immorality. This decision was written in a letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia and entrusted to Barnabas and Paul to take with them back to Antioch. Judas and Silas who were also Bible teachers—prophets—went with them. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for some time to teach the Bible and strengthen the church.

* A disagreement and the beginning of a third journey (36-41)

God uses men of different character and temperament. He uses people who have divergent opinions about how to do God's work. We can see this in the incident involving John Mark. When Paul and Barnabas decided to visit the churches they had planted on their first journey, Barnabas wanted to take his nephew, John Mark. But Paul remembered how John Mark had deserted them in Perga, in the middle of the first journey. He did not think that Mark was qualified to go. Perhaps they were both right. Paul wanted faithful men who did not give up. Barnabas was the encourager. He had accepted and encouraged Paul when no one trusted him; now, he accepted and encouraged John Mark. When Paul refused, Barnabas took John Mark and went to visit Cyprus—his hometown. Later, through Barnabas' shepherding and Peter's good influence and teaching, Mark became a useful man to God and to Paul as well. Perhaps

Paul's strict discipline as well as Barnabas' encouragement contributed to his spiritual growth.

Paul took Silas with him and went overland, perhaps stopping by Tarsus, his home, but continuing on to visit the Galatian churches as well as those in Syria and Cilicia. He and Silas were sent out on this third journey with the blessing and prayers of the church. Praise God who works in Jews and Gentiles and in people with different kinds of character. Praise God who turns problems into opportunities. Praise God that we are saved by grace through faith alone. Jesus is enough.

One word: Only Jesus, only grace, only faith