

Lesson 22: Acts 15:1-21 The Jerusalem Council – 1st Question

Introduction

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Part IV of Acts has two movements. Chapters 13 and 14 show us the preaching of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the primary action of Paul and Barnabas everywhere they go. Three times the text says they preached the Gospel and one time that they preached the Good News. They are also described as proclaiming, testifying and speaking the Word of God three times, the Word of the Lord three times, the Word of grace once and just simply, the Word, once.

What is their message? It is the “who” of salvation, Jesus Christ, and the “how” of salvation, justification by grace through faith. Whatever the context, whether correcting a Jewish spiritualist before a Roman governor, religious legalists in a Jewish synagogue or Hellenistic pagans at the city gate, Paul’s aim was to proclaim the Gospel message of salvation in the power of the Holy Spirit in significant urban centers to establish Christian fellowships led by local elders who would spread the Good News of salvation further into the regions around those urban centers.

Luke covers Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey in the first movement of part IV with four reports of proclamation from Antioch to Paphos, then to Pisidian Antioch, then from Iconium to Derbe, and finally back again to strengthen the churches. The main theme of this movement is the preaching of the Good News of salvation. The second movement in part IV of Acts, 15:1-16:4, gives us a discussion of the terms of salvation.

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ goes from Jews, used to following Old Testament requirements, out to Gentiles, for whom those requirements are quite foreign, those Gentiles quite naturally ask the question, “What is expected of me as a follower of Jesus Christ?”

As long as the Gospel stayed among Jews, much of the “How then shall we live?” was assumed, having already been worked out for generations from the Old Covenant. There was a known and recognized set of behaviors, covering all areas of life. With the Gospel now going out into a variety of cultures, the basic assumptions are challenged. “Really, are we to do that? Do we have to stop doing that?” You know, “God wants that?” Seekers and new believers will ask these questions, sometimes from willing hearts and sometimes from resistant hearts. The missionary must rethink their own behavior, asking what in my practice is fundamentally in line with the Gospel and what is from my culture. It is just the way we do it. So, the kid who grows up a Baptist, or grows up a Moravian, or grows up in some kind of Christian denomination, whether it’s in Croatia, or China, or Korea, or North Carolina, you have this pattern of what it looks like to you to live a Christian life. And when you take

that into a different culture, just like these Jewish believers are now having; they have assumed patterns of what the moral life, the good life, the God-fearing life looks like as they go into new cultures, they need to question what of this is really Biblical, and what is really in line with the New Covenant Gospel, and what is my culture: either how we do the Biblical in my culture, or simply not Biblical at all but just how we do culture.

Paul and Barnabas were answering those questions. And a segment of the believing Church in Jerusalem was not happy with how they answered those questions. So, imagine that? Christians not in agreement with how other Christians answer the question, “How then shall we live?” Shocking. The missionary expansion of the Gospel, the movement out from Jewish culture, created a set of questions that leaders of the New Covenant Christian community were now being forced to address. The whole text from 15:1-16:5 addresses this question, “What does the New Covenant Gospel message require of Gentile believers?” This movement contains four reports, just like our previous movement. We start with Antioch to Jerusalem, then the Jerusalem Council, then the Council’s letter, and finally, the return to strengthen the churches. I am going to address the first two of those reports in this lesson and the second two in the next lesson.

The first report from Antioch to Jerusalem serves as our introduction. This is Acts 15:1-5.

Antioch to Jerusalem (15:1-5)

¹ Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

This paragraph is framed at the beginning and end with a challenge to the Gospel message that Paul and Barnabas preached. So, in verse 1, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved,” and then in verse 5, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” It is not only about circumcision. Circumcision is maybe the biggest, most obvious hurdle that a Gentile is going to have to cross. And for hundreds of years, that’s what a male proselyte to Judaism had to do. But not just circumcision. That was an introduction into all of the Law of Moses. So, the whole Law is in mind here and the sect of the Pharisees are simply applying the process that they’ve always had for somebody coming into the people of God now to Christians: to enter into the New Covenant community you also have to be circumcised as a sign you’re going to obey the whole Law of Moses.

The text says, “some men came down from Judea.” On a map you might wonder where they went down to. The way we look at it, they actually went up or north to Antioch in Syria, Paul and Barnabas’ home church. Jewish convention always has us going up to Jerusalem from all directions and so also, down from Jerusalem in all directions. And Luke is following that convention.

Paul and Barnabas did not appreciate the teaching of these men who had come down from Jerusalem. They had great dissension and debate with them. When the brethren in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, I do not think they were sending them to find out what’s right. I am assuming that the church in Antioch is standing with Paul and Barnabas in the Gospel that has been preached. And they had great concern over the direction of the teaching coming out of Jerusalem. They wanted to know whether the Apostles and elders support this view that believers must be circumcised. If the Apostles and elders do support this view, we might be facing the first major split

in the Christians movement. I do not see Paul and Barnabas and the church in Antioch submitting to a Gospel that requires circumcision and Law obedience for salvation.

So, there was great joy in Antioch, and in Phoenicia, and in Samaria, along the whole road south to Jerusalem in response to the report from Paul and Barnabas about Gentiles in Asia Minor entering into the community of faith. And this is not unusual that everybody would be joyful and excited about the report of conversion. We are all glad to hear of people coming to faith in Jesus. It's the details that start getting us concerned. Years later there's this story about a Roman legion being baptized, and yet holding their sword arms above the water, so they can continue to fight. You know, they don't want to baptize that sword arm. You just hear that a Roman legion comes to faith and you're filled with joy. "That's amazing! That preaches! We'll tell other people about that!" But then you hear they held their sword arms above the water, and you wonder, "Wait a minute. What Gospel did they receive? And what kind of discipleship are they getting? I mean, who is teaching them? Are they truly saved at all? And if they are, who is telling them how they should live now that they are saved?" So, a certain group of believing Jews had considerable doubt about this liberal message of Paul and Barnabas that did not conserve Old Covenant obedience for Gentiles. They are wondering, "Are these Gentiles really saved? We don't think so, not if they are not willing to submit themselves to Mosaic Law."

Now, once in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas are received by the apostles and elders. That is a good sign. But some of the sect of the Pharisees stand up and say, "They must observe all the law of Moses." And we should not be surprised at this. Rightly understanding the relationship between Old and New Covenant is an ongoing issue for each generation. And to be honest, this is why I did a series on the Pentateuch, because I think it's a major problem in the modern Evangelical world to rightly understand the relationship between our Old Testament and our New Testament. At the time of Acts 15, thousands of Jews had come to Christ in Jerusalem. And, having received the Gospel message, they had continued to circumcise their children, eat kosher food, worship on the Sabbath. Nothing wrong with that. But how have they processed their own behavior? How do they understand this keeping of the Old Covenant during the time of New Covenant? Processing and clarifying their own understanding is now being forced on them. This is like a Southern American Christian who doesn't want their lips to touch alcohol ever going to Europe and taking the Lord's Supper and drinking wine for the first time. How does their mind process the fact that they just drank wine and now how do they rethink their commitment to never touching alcohol, as they're forced back in the Bible to reconsider the behavior they thought was clearly Christian? And as long as they were in their Southern community, there was no reason to even think about it. But now, they're having to think about it, because these look like really sincere Christian people who have wine in the church. So, as long as the Jews stay in the Jewish community, and they all follow the Law together - they believe in Jesus and they follow the Law - they are not having to fully process their understanding of their own behavior. So, now what they are learning is that this question of Old Covenant obedience has not been adequately addressed. They didn't have to.

There had been some talk about Gentiles coming to faith, a few years before when Peter went into the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius. The leadership had met in Jerusalem and discussed that experience and had affirmed the salvation experience of those Gentiles. Still, this was just one household, and they are already living in Judea, and they are already making concession to live in piety among Jews. So they're Gentiles but they sort of, kind of fit. That event forced the question of whether or not Gentiles might be born again, but it did not force the leadership to work out a theology of New Covenant obedience for Gentiles.

Later, a largely Gentile church was planted in Antioch. And the leaders of Jerusalem again affirmed the work going on there. But we still have a minority. They are still a distance from Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem do not have to really fellowship with those Gentiles of Antioch. A couple do who go visit, but it's just them. It is a lot easier to love and accept someone if you never have to live with them, or work with them, or interact with them. They're more abstract. We love our brethren over

there who do those weird things. So, Gentile inclusion has been affirmed abstractly, nor really in the day-to-day. The question of behavior has still not been fully addressed. And people are developing their own opinions. Different Jews in Jerusalem are coming up with different ways to think about this. But no event has forced those opinions to clash. They might sit around and talk about, in Bible study, whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised but nobody cares that much, because they are not trying to force Gentiles to be circumcised. Not until conservative Christians Jews go up into new Gentile communities and begin to teach in a way that is contrary to the way the Gospel message has been presented by people like Paul and Barnabas. Sharp disagreement now results, forcing the elders and apostles in Jerusalem to address further their theology of Gentile inclusion.

Peter's Possible Involvement

Even though they've already made some affirmation of Gentile inclusion, the outcome of the Council in Jerusalem is not guaranteed to be positive. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul records a lowlight in Peter's life when Peter temporarily went back on his acceptance of Gentiles. In the report, Paul used Peter's Hebrew name, Cephas, even though he was writing in Greek, he inserted the Aramaic for "Cephas", probably to emphasize the fact that Peter in this instance was putting his ethnic Hebrew identity above his identity in Christ, which lead to a hurtful rejection of Gentile brothers and sisters. Paul describes what transpired in Galatians 2:11-14.

- ¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Notice the similarities with our Acts passage. Certain Christian Jews came to Antioch. Paul says they are from James. That does not necessarily mean that James affirms their stance on Gentile obedience to the Law. It would at least mean they are in fellowship with James in the Christian community in Jerusalem. In Galatians, Paul calls them, "the party of circumcision." And circumcision is the issue described in Acts 15:1. Peter's presence is added in the Galatians passage. So, either these are two different moments of disagreement in Antioch, or Luke simply does not mention that Peter's presence in Antioch when he reports it in Acts.

In the Galatians report, Peter was swayed by these Jewish Christians from Jerusalem to separate himself from fellowship with Gentile believers.

This incident highlights an issue in early Jew and Gentile relationships that may not be immediately apparent to us. Earlier in Acts 10, the major problem the Jewish brethren had with Peter's witness to Cornelius was that Peter went into Cornelius' house, accepting Cornelius' hospitality, and so was made ceremonially unclean. Jewish adherence to Old Covenant Law required separation from Gentiles, particularly around mealtime. You know, with all the food laws. That segregation was bad enough, that Jewish Christians would segregate themselves from Gentile Christians, but what made it even worse in the house church movement of early Christianity - you know, it's bad enough that we're in the same house but we're sitting at different tables - but it is around mealtime that they celebrated the Lord's supper together. So, not only are they eating separately: they are taking the body of Christ and the blood of Christ in the symbolic remembrance separately, one for the holy Jewish Christians, and another for the, umm... partially clean? How do we say, Gentile Christians? You might be able to identify with this at your church. There is the clearly holy table. They're the people who are in. And then there's the other table for the people we're not sure about. You probably sit at one of those tables.

So, Paul has charged Peter with inconsistency, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?", meaning, if you as a New

Covenant believer do not seek to keep the whole law of Moses, why do you choose certain markers of the Law to impose on Gentiles as a requirement for table fellowship?” This issue of table fellowship is an issue of purity or cleanliness. Are the Gentiles made clean through faith in Jesus Christ? Or do Gentiles need to conform to certain Old Testament rituals in order to be truly clean?

Table fellowship then becomes a test case for what a Christian Jew truly believes about a Gentile who has received the Gospel. It is one thing to say that we accept those people in that country over there, on that side of town, but to sit down together at a meal and to enjoy one another’s company with full acceptance as brothers and sisters in Christ, that will test what you really believe about your brother or sister.

Peter was tested and he failed. He did not accept his Gentile brothers and sisters on the basis of faith in Jesus, even though he accepted that Gospel truth for himself.

The missionary enterprise among Gentiles is forcing the Jewish majority church to reconsider their answers to previous questions. “Do we really believe that Gentiles are considered acceptable based on faith in Jesus Christ? Because if we do, that means treating Gentile brothers and sisters with full inclusion as brothers and sisters, as fellow workers in the Gospel, even as elders in our churches. There is no distinction in Christ. Do we really believe that? Do you believe that? Is there no distinction in Christ? Or do we believe in two tables, a table for those who have merely professed faith; and a table for those who are fully cleansed through their obedience to certain practices?

Considering the timing of this temporary defection of Peter at Antioch, it is not easy to nail down with certainty when did this happen. Is this something Peter did after the Church Council presented in Acts 15 or before the Church Council of Acts 15?

Earlier in the letter to the Galatians, Paul describes going up to Jerusalem twice before this confrontation with Peter. He went up three years after his conversion in Damascus, and then he went up fourteen years later. Now, if the fourteen years later is fourteen years after his conversion, not fourteen years after going to Jerusalem the first time, then it was eleven years between Jerusalem trips. And this might have been a full eleven years, but since Jews used inclusive counting, it could have been part of a year, then nine full years, then another part of a year. And that, for them, would count as eleven years. But for us, it would be just over nine years.

The reason it is important to recognize inclusive dating is that the possibility of a shorter time period that’s just over nine years means the second trip Paul mentions in Galatians could have been the trip he and Barnabas made when they brought famine relief from Antioch to Jerusalem. That trip is reported in Acts 11:30. We are not told by Luke in the book of Acts that Paul at that time consulted with the apostles and elders. And in Galatians 2, we are not told that on that trip Paul and Barnabas took famine relief. So, according to what happened on that trip, they don’t look like the same trip. But both reports are brief. There is no point to mentioning the famine relief in the Galatians context. And Luke is later going to show confirmation of Paul’s ministry in Acts 15, so he does not need to mention an earlier confirmation by just a few of the leaders during the famine relief trip.

So, that Paul had such a discussion while in Jerusalem for famine relief is quite believable. Luke doesn’t say it, but it’s quite believable. Paul’s vision for Gentile missions did not come to him in Acts 13 when he and Barnabas were set aside by the Holy Spirit. That’s not the first time he thought about reaching Gentiles. Paul’s testimony about his experience on the Damascus Road confirms that Jesus told him right from the beginning that he was being to Gentiles. And he seems to have already witnessed to Gentiles in Arabia and in Cilicia. At least, that is my assumption. We do know he has already been active in the mixed Jew-Gentile church of Antioch, and he is soon going to go on his first missionary journey. So, that Paul might have wanted to discuss his call to Gentiles with the leaders in Jerusalem, while he and Barnabas were in town, makes a lot of sense. The trip described in Galatians 2 could be the famine relief trip indicated in Acts 11:30.

If these two trips are the same trip, then the confrontation with Peter likely happened before the Jerusalem Council. Peter lost his way, being persuaded by Jewish believers, but came back to a right application of the Gospel after being confronted by Paul.

Many Biblical scholars take another perspective, pointing out the similarity between the trip recorded in Galatians 2, and not the famine trip but this debate being recorded here in Acts 15. This view allows for the eleven-year time gap to be a full eleven years without using inclusive dating. And there do seem to be some similarities between the two trips.

I do not believe it is the correct view. The discussion described in Galatians 2 is with just a few leaders only. It is not described as a public council for the whole church, like the one Luke describes in Acts 15. I also think Peter would be less likely to lose his way at the pressure of men claiming to be from James if this Council had already taken place, considering that Peter and James both making public statements, and even draft a letter that contradicts the circumcision party. If we have already had this, does Peter, then, defect?

F. F. Bruce, who stands in contrast to the majority view, so you could say I am following F.F. Bruce's view, also points out that Paul's choice not to mention the Council's decision in this letter to Gentiles is quite odd if the Council has already happened. If members of the circumcision party had already been decisively refuted by a public council in Jerusalem, why did Paul not mention that in his letter to the Galatians when circumcision and obedience to Law are the exact issue causing problems in Galatia? Why not write and tell them, "Hey, we just had a big conference in Jerusalem about this whole problem, and the Apostles and the elders they all agree with us that you don't have to be circumcised to be saved"? A very good reason explaining why Paul does not mention the Jerusalem Council to the Galatians is that it has not happened, yet.

This is the possible scenario that I think fits best with the record. Paul and Barnabas brought famine relief to Jerusalem, so that's around 46 AD. This was also the trip reported at the beginning of Galatians 2, where Paul's apostleship to the Gentiles was affirmed by leaders in Jerusalem. Returning to their base in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas set out from there on a missionary journey that lasted 18 months. On that journey they established churches in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, from Pisidian Antioch all the way over to Derbe. These Galatians are not the ethnic Galatian who are to be found in northern Galatia. These southern Galatians were Phrygian and Lycaonian along with a normal mix of ethnicities you would find in any Roman city.

During the following year, Peter visited Antioch, and so did a group of conservative Jewish believers in Jesus, and they argued that Mosaic Law still applies to Jews and Gentiles. Peter was convinced for a time, until Paul rebuked him. By this rebuke Peter was restored to his senses. Also, around this time Paul received word that believers among the churches in southern Galatia had been affected by a similar argument. And with the Jewish opposition that was present there in Galatia, along with the number of Jews and God-fearers who had believed in Jesus, and along with the spiritual youth of the elders in the churches, none of whom had been long in the faith of Jesus Christ, it is not surprising that they have this same problem, this pull towards Old Testament Law and a confusion about how it applies to the Gospel. It's not surprising. Hearing this news, Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, our first New Testament epistle, to them. He can't go himself, so he writes a letter and with exasperation he confesses to them, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting God who called you by the grace of Christ for a different gospel." (Galatians 1,6) Paul doesn't go to them. He writes to them, because rather than go to Galatia and try to set things right among the churches there, Paul recognizes the need for a unifying statement with the church in Jerusalem. So, in 49 AD, three years since the famine relief trip, Paul and Barnabas return to Jerusalem to draw forth a clear position regarding Gentile inclusion from the elders and the Apostles. We want to hear what you, guys, have to say. After that decision was obtained, Paul set off for a second missionary journey, and you know what he did at the beginning of that journey. Then he visits the struggling Galatians church, as he starts with a pastoral visit before he moves into new territory.

The Two Questions of Covenant

Paul's strong language in the letter to the Galatians shows that he considers the issue raised by the circumcision party in Antioch and the similar problem in Galatia to be an attack on the fundamentals of the Gospel. The disagreement is about what enables a person to enter into and remain in a covenant relationship with God. I call this a first question issue. We covered the two questions of Covenant in our lesson on Peter at Cornelius' house. The two questions will also help us separate two interrelated issues under discussion at this Council in Jerusalem. We are discussing two things and we need to recognize that, and the two questions will help us do that.

The first question of Covenant is, "What makes a person acceptable to enter into relationship with holy God?" And how do you answer that question, what makes you acceptable. And instead of "acceptable," we could say "righteous" or "pure." "What makes a person righteous enough or pure enough to be in relationship with God?" The Gospel answers this question emphatically, "By grace through faith you are justified!" You are declared right, acceptable. You are declared righteous based on not what Jesus has done, not on anything you do. The commands of Law have no place in procuring a standing before God. You receive it passively as a gift of grace.

The second question of Covenant assumes the first, asking, "Now that I am in relationship with holy God by grace through faith, how then shall I live?" When this question is asked from the heart of a true believer, it is basically asking, "How do I love my heavenly Father? How do I serve my righteous King? How do I worship my holy God? What are the right commandments for me to follow?" This is the response of faith. It is a response of wonder at the gloriousness of God and a response of gratitude to his loving sacrifice.

Jesus declared to his disciples, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." The right response to good, valid, loving authority is obedience. That is how you love the one in authority over you. The question is not whether it is right to obey, but what should that obedience look like? What Covenant stipulations has God given to guide me in my desire to live for him? If I was a Jew living under the Old Covenant, I would rightly answer this question by embracing the commands of Moses, not as a way to justify myself, but as the right response to God in Covenant obedience. But we are not living under the Old Covenant. We are living under the New Covenant. Then circumcision, and the food laws, and keeping the Sabbath, and everything else is the right way for me to pursue life with God. But I'm not living under the Old Covenant. We are under the New Covenant. And because of this transition, the way the people of God answer the question, "How then shall we live?" now looks different.

Okay, so having defined the two questions of Covenant, we can consider their application both to Peter's situation in Antioch described in Galatians, and in the Acts 15 debate in Jerusalem. When Peter separated himself from Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, was his separation an issue related to the first question of Covenant, or an issue related to the second question of Covenant? Was it about justification, or was it about the life of a believer? Peter himself might have said that it was a second question issue. He might not have been saying that the Gentile Christians were unsaved. He might have been saying that the right way to live for God was to follow certain markers of Old Covenant Law.

Peter might have said it was a second question issue. Paul does not. Paul saw in Peter's actions an undermining of the Gospel, especially since Peter's leadership influenced others: Barnabas and other Jews. So, people were looking at Peter and making interpretations on his behavior. If Gentiles are not clean and acceptable based on faith in Jesus, then something must be added. They are lacking something. But that is contrary to the Gospel Paul had been preaching. We can add nothing else than what Jesus has done for us. Paul says to Peter during the confrontation,

"a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified."

So, Paul is taking this as a first question issue. This is about salvation. And this is Paul's concern also for the Galatians, when he writes to them and he says, "I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting God who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel." Adding a requirement of circumcision to the Gospel, or a requirement of baptism, or a requirement of any kind of discipline or ritual makes the Gospel - not the Gospel for Paul.

Now, it is possible to have a similar debate about circumcision, or food laws, or Sabbath keeping that is not a first question debate. We might all be agreeing and assume that salvation is based on grace through faith, and still be asking, what's the right place of these Old Testament commandments in the Christian life? And that's what happens in 1 Corinthians 10 and in Romans 14. Very similar issues are being addressed but as a second question issue. That's why Paul is much more relaxed in discussion about food laws and Sabbath keeping in those letters, because it's not an attack on the Gospel, but rather a wrestling with the right way to live in the Gospel. Peter's separation from Gentiles as unclean shows that the party of the circumcision were arguing something more serious that was affecting the answer to the first question: by grace through faith.

Applying the two questions of Covenant to the context of this Council, we see that the first question is definitely under debate. Verse 1, "Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" This is a salvation issue. This is a first question issue. It's about justification before God. You cannot be declared right with God without circumcision. Once we clarify our answer to the first question - that obedience to Law is not necessary for forgiveness - we are still going to have to address the follow-up question about how Old Covenant commandments apply to living the Christian life.

And this Council is going to address both of those questions in turn. We will consider the first question answer during the rest of this lesson, so a little more straightforward, but we're going to hold on to the answer to the second question of Covenant for our next lesson.

So, let's read Luke's summary of the Council proceedings in Acts 15:6-21.

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)

⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

¹² All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴ "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵ "With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ 'AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, ¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,' ¹⁸ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM LONG AGO. ¹⁹ "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

If it is correct to say that Peter stumbled in his treatment of Gentiles before this Council, he really regained his footing. He comes out strong. He is established firmer than ever. Now according to Peter,

not only is it not necessary for Gentiles to keep Mosaic law, but it is also not necessary for Jews. There are not two ways of salvation, one for the circumcised and one for the uncircumcised. Peter declares, "We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." It's the same way for Jew and Gentile.

I can hear Paul's rebuke, when Peter declares, "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" Those words match harmoniously with Paul's declaration to the Galatians in 5:1-3,

¹ It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. ² Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. ³ And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.

Peter is not just parroting Paul. He was helped by Paul to get through his theological confusion. We all need help sometimes when we get mixed up in our understanding and application of the Bible. Paul helped Peter, but Peter has had his own experience, his own walk with God, his own processing of the Scriptures regarding Gentiles. He reminds the brethren that they had already affirmed his preaching to Cornelius. And if there was any doubt whether the members of that Gentile household had really believed in their hearts, "God, who knows the heart," made very clear that these had truly been born again by filling them with the Holy Spirit and causing them to speak in tongues just as the Apostles had at Pentecost. Peter reminds them about this. That same outward manifestation of the Spirit by Gentiles affirmed they had the same internal new birth experience as the Jews. Peter reminds everyone, just as he had to remind himself, God makes "no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith." And those words address the first question salvation issue, while also pointing to the second question issue of fellowship with one another. Fellowship is no longer affected by ceremonial cleansing but stands on the basis of spiritual cleansing already received in Christ.

Luke does not need to report to us Barnabas and Paul said at the Council, describing how God was working among Gentiles. We have already read that in chapters 13-14. We know the Spirit of God was leading Gentiles to believe in Jesus. Luke moves on to the contribution of James. This is not John's brother, the Apostle James who was killed by Herod Agrippa. This is James, the brother of Jesus, who is a leading elder in Jerusalem and who appears to be acting as the facilitator of this gathering.

James affirms the testimony of Peter with these words, "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." These are important words. In this context, James uses Peter's original Aramaic name, Simeon. More interesting is the phrasing James used when he said that God has taken "from among the Gentiles a people for His name." The word used for, Gentiles, is the word, *ethne*, also translated, nations. So it's, "from among the nations a people for his name." That word, people, used here has always been equivalent to Israel. When we talk about the nations, that all the different ethnic groups. When we talk about the people of God, that's the ethnic group, Israel. And this is a deep value of identity for the Jews. In the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 14:2 we have the distinction. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the nations who are on the face of the earth." Did you hear that? The Jews are "the people" (in Greek, *laos*). They are the people who have been separated from the nations (which in Greek is, *ethne*). Two different words. The Jews were taken as a people out from the Gentiles. The Jews were accepted by excluding Gentiles. They are other. A Gentile was included by becoming a Jew. But not now. James' words - this is a really radical change for the Jews. God does not take a people out of the Gentiles, out of the nations. He takes a people consisting of the Gentiles, of the nations, of various *ethne*. It is a totally new conception of the people of God. Under the Old Covenant, the people of God were defined ethnically and geopolitically. You had to become one of them to be a member of the people of God. Those distinctions are removed in the New Covenant. The people of God are now defined as those who have believed in Jesus Christ, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or geography.

James goes on to quote Scripture in support of this conclusion. His main text is Amos 9:11-12, though the beginning of the text, “After these things I will return,” is from Jeremiah 12:15 and the end, “who makes these things known of old,” is from Isaiah 45:21. So the hearers may have picked up on that. This is a text that is representative of things that you can also see in Jeremiah, and you can also see in Isaiah. The original Hebrew text of Amos is about the restoration of David’s house after the exile. That is something more concrete: David’ house will re-establish Israel as a kingdom, and they will rule over other peoples. The Greek Septuagint translation that James uses spiritualizes the meaning. This is what he said,

AND I WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID WHICH HAS FALLEN,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’

James’ uses the text to recognize that this promise to restore the house of David is fulfilled spiritually in Jesus. He may even be talking about Jesus’, “Tear down this temple and I will rebuild it in three days.” You know, the tabernacle of David has fallen into ruins, and it’s restored. It may be true that we should even see a link to the resurrection here. David’s house is restored in Jesus who reigns from Heaven. And through Jesus, humankind can seek the Lord and Gentiles will be called by his name, not Jews alone. James is agreeing with Peter. He is giving Scriptural support. Gentiles are included as full members of the people of God by grace through faith in Jesus. This is the prophetic view of what was to be in the New Covenant.

Having affirmed the full inclusion of Gentiles, the Council has made a clear decision regarding the first question of Covenant. Maintaining certain Old Covenant markers is not necessary for salvation. The answer to that question is clear. Or it seems clear until James adds verses 19-21.

¹⁹ “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹ “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Now, wait a minute! That sounds like you are troubling the Gentiles. If salvation is by grace through faith, why does James feel the need to add stipulations? And why does he choose these particular stipulations, some which sound moral, others which merely sound ceremonial? Has James just diminished the clear move away from legalism that Peter, and Paul, and Barnabas were urging?

We will address those questions and these specific stipulations from James in our next lesson.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 15:1-21. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What are some significant differences in practice that you are aware of, either between Christian denominations in your own culture or between Christians in different cultures? (Come up with a short list that includes examples of practices some Christians would claim as necessary for salvation and some that are differences in how Christians ought to live but not issues of salvation.)
3. What behavior or practices are being required in 15:1-5 by the Christians from Jerusalem?
4. Would you describe those practices as relating to the first question of covenant or the second question of covenant?
5. Does Peter address the issue as a first question issue or a second question issue?
6. Does James’ response address the issue as a first question issue or a second question issue?
7. What stands out to you in James’ response? What further questions does James’ response create? (James’ response will be discussed in the next lesson.)