



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Council at Jerusalem, Part 2

The Council Issues its Decision

Acts 15:12-35

November 4, 2007

- I. **The Apostles Address the Council** [vv. 7 – 21]
 - a. **Peter** [vv. 7 – 11]
 - b. **Paul and Barnabas** [v. 12]
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I. The Apostles Address the Council [vv. 7 – 21]

- a. **Peter** [vv. 7 – 11]
 - The first apostle to rise up and address the Council of Jerusalem was Peter.
 - Peter’s argument was simple, yet biblical. According to Peter, God had chosen to use him to carry the Word of God to the Gentiles so that they might “hear the word of the gospel and believe.”
 - Not only this, Peter observed that, in the home of Cornelius [Acts 10] when the Gentiles believed in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, God demonstrated His acceptance of them “by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did” to the Jews in Acts 2 at Pentecost. Not only this, but the giving of the Spirit to the Gentiles was manifested in the same way as it was with the Jews: the speaking of tongues [discernible foreign languages].
 - Finally, God did all of this **apart from the physical act of circumcision of the Gentiles.**

- Therefore, according to Peter, “we [the Jews] will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they [the Gentiles will].” As a result, **the Jews should not demand that the Gentiles be circumcised because God does not; for salvation is wholly an act of God’s grace.**

b. **Paul and Barnabas** [v. 12]

- The next individuals Luke records that address the Council were Paul and Barnabas.
- These two men had recently returned from their first missionary journey where they had preached the Gospel throughout the Greek-speaking Gentile world. The Lord had performed signs and wonders through them, thus authenticating that they were, indeed, sent by God and empowered by Him to proclaim the Gospel message.
- Luke then writes in **Verse 12**, “[after Peter spoke] 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.”
- In other words, just as Peter had born witness to God’s acceptance of the Gentiles through the signs and wonders in the home of Cornelius, so Paul and Barnabas shared a similar experience among the Gentiles in the first missionary journey.
- Thus, Paul and Barnabas were, indeed, **witnesses to God’s acceptance of the Gentiles.**
- Yet, the Council does not end with the “eyewitness testimonies” of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas.
- The last person to speak was James, likely the leader of the church in Jerusalem and the one who represented the Jewish Christian body in the city.

c. **James** [vv. 13 – 21]

- James would later earn the name “James the Just” as he soon gained a reputation for godly righteousness in his personal and ecclesiastical dealings. He was one of Jesus’ half-brothers and likely was saved through one of the post-resurrection experiences of Christ [Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 15:7].
- Luke writes, in **Verses 13 – 14**, “After they [Paul and Barnabas] had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, ‘Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.’”
 - James opens by referring to Peter by his Hebrew name, Simon, [or more accurately, Symeon].
 - James then speaks of God “taking from among the Gentiles **a people for His name.**”

- This phrase, “a people for His name” is certainly significant. The word “people” [Greek, *laos*, λαός] is used throughout Scripture in reference to the people of God [Acts 7:34; 13:7].
- Furthermore, in the [Greek translation of the] Old Testament, the term “people” refers to the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people [Deuteronomy 26:18-19; 23:8-9; Psalm 135:12].
- In Zechariah 2:11, the prophet foresees the day when the Gentiles will *become* the people of God, just as the Jews were in the Old Covenant:

“Many nations will join themselves to the LORD in that day and ***will become My people***. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent Me to you.”
[*emphasis added*]

- Ultimately, however, James is equating the call of the Gentiles through Jesus Christ to the call of the Jews in the Old Covenant. For James here states, “God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.” In Deuteronomy 14:2, with reference to the Jewish nation, Moses writes, “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 peoples who are on the face of the earth.”
 - In other words, what James is doing is establishing, just as Peter did, that the Gentiles were called by God in the same way as the Jews and, as a result, He accepts them just as He does the Jewish nation; for “He made no distinction between us [the Jews] and them [the Gentiles], cleansing their hearts by faith.”
 - James’ words also bring to mind the words of Jesus in John 10:16: “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd.”
 - The “other sheep” are the Gentiles, and it is Christ who brings them ...for He “**must bring them also.**”
 - Not only this, but the “one flock” is the Church with Christ as its “one shepherd” and Head.
 - Who is man, therefore, to tell God that He is in error for fulfilling His word?
- Then, James proceeds to use the Scriptures to explain ***why*** and ***how*** the Lord called the Gentiles.
- James continues, stating **Verse 15**, “With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written...”

- James' point is clear: the inclusion of the Gentiles into the "flock" or "people" of God is not some "divine afterthought;" rather, it was God's plan from the beginning, revealed through the prophets hundreds of years earlier, that the Gentiles would be brought in to God's fold.
 - Not only this, but James' words demonstrate the consistency of Scripture; that the working of God in the first century [and in the New Testament] is always consistent with the Old Testament text.
- After introducing the Old Testament text ["the words of the Prophets agree"], James quotes from **Amos 9:11-12** [Verse 18 is likely taken from **Isaiah 45:21**]:
- "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,
So that the rest 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 long ago.
- In this passage, the prophet Amos prophecies the rebuilding of the "tabernacle of David which has fallen..." The LORD promises to "rebuild its ruins and restore it..."
- This speaks of not only the birth of Christ, but His resurrection as well.
 - As the Puritan Commentator Matthew Henry writes, "When the royal [Davidic] family, that had been as a cedar, was cut down, and only the stump of it left, almost leveled with the ground and lost in the grass of the field (Daniel 4:15), yet it shall sprout again (Job 14:7) [this is why Jesus is called the "branch" from the "root" or "stump of Jesse"]; nay, it shall grow out of his roots, which are quite buried in the earth, and, like the roots of flowers in the winter, have no stem appearing above ground. The house of David was reduced and brought very low at the time of Christ's birth, witness the obscurity and poverty of Joseph and Mary. The Messiah was thus to begin his estate of humiliation, for submitting to which he should be highly exalted, and would thus give early notice that his kingdom was not of this world."
 - Yet, not only does this passage speak of the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David through the birth of Christ, it also speaks of the rebuilding of the tabernacle through the resurrection of Christ:
 - At the beginning of John's Gospel, the apostle writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." [John 1:14]. Literally, "...the Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us..." For

Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the tabernacle... Immanuel, God with us.

- In the Gospel of John, when Jesus cleanses the Temple, the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” [John 2:18], to which Jesus replied, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” [John 2:19]
 - John, then, adds the following commentary: “But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.” [John 2:21-22]
 - In other words, Jesus was stating that the Temple, the tabernacle of His body would be torn down by men; but, God would rebuild it in three days... He would raise from the dead.
 - Just as Peter declared in Acts 3:14 in Solomon’s Portico: “and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.”
- Yet, James does not stop with the promise of God to rebuild the tabernacle of David. For He says, “[I will restore it (the Tabernacle of David)] **So that** the rest of mankind may seek the LORD. And all the Gentiles who are called by My Name...”
- In other words it is **because of** and **through** the raised Tabernacle, that is the Resurrected Christ, that all Gentiles “who are called by My Name” will believe.
 - All Gentiles [just like the Jews] who are called by His Name will believe through the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.
 - This is, indeed, the Grace of Jesus Christ spoken of by Peter previously.
 - Notice as well the parallel between “all the Gentiles *who are called by My Name*” in Verse 17, and Peter’s words in Solomon’s Portico in Acts 13:48: “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” “As many as were appointed to eternal life” are the same as those “who are called by My Name.”
- Therefore, James’ quoting of Amos 9 fulfills two purposes. It demonstrates *why* the Lord called the Gentiles – **to fulfill the Scriptures**...and *how* He did so – through the work of Jesus Christ – the “rebuilt” Tabernacle of David.

- Following his reference to Amos 9, James stated **Verses 19 – 21**, “Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 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. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

- James begins by stating, “It is my judgment...”
 - In the context, here, the Greek phrase translated “my judgment” [*ego krino*] means, more accurately, “It is **my conviction**.” The idea is that James is stating his personal conviction or strong belief.
- Then, he states, “we do [should] not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles...”
 - Most certainly James is establishing his agreement with Peter, Paul and Barnabas. He is saying, in effect, “We should not place the yoke of the Law upon them and force them to be circumcised.” “We should leave them alone...for they believe in Jesus as the Christ because of the grace of God...just like us.”
- However, James continues and gives three abstentions that seem, at first glance, rather out of place and inconsistent with the words of Peter. James states, “...they [the Gentiles] should (1) abstain from things contaminated by idols; (2) abstain from fornication; (3) abstain from what is strangled and from blood.
- Although these abstentions may seem strange, John Stott puts it this way: “At the same time, having established the principle that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, without works, it was necessary to appeal to these Gentile believers to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow-believers by abstaining from a few practices which might offend them.”

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- The first abstention involved “**things contaminated by idols.**”
 - In the Ancient Near East, pagans would often sacrifice food to their false gods and then sell the meat in their temple “butcher shops.”
 - In the Old Testament unequivocally condemns idolatry and all things associated with it [Exodus 20:3; 34:17; Deuteronomy 5:7].
 - Therefore, the eating of meat offered to idols was strictly condemned by Jewish tradition.
 - This remained a major issue in the Early Church, and even Paul had a great deal to say about it in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:14-33.

- The second abstention is **fornication** [Greek, *porneias*].
 - In the Ancient Near East, pagan worship often involved intercourse with Temple prostitutes. The reason for this was because one of the blessings sought by pagans was often fertility. Therefore, pagans often worshipped pagan fertility gods through intercourse with Temple priestesses, who were essentially prostitutes.
 - The context here, however, specifically related to a forbidding of “all the irregular marriages listed in Leviticus 18.” In particular, it forbade “marriage within degrees of blood-relationship or affinity forbidden by the legislation of Leviticus 18” [F.F. Bruce].
- Finally, the Gentiles were to abstain “**from what is strangled and from blood.**”
 - This is most certainly a reference to Old Testament dietary restrictions (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 7:26; 17:10-14; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23; 15:23; 1 Samuel 14:34; Ezekiel 33:25).
 - As Darrell Bock writes, “Leviticus prohibits eating blood or meat that has not been properly drained of blood. This reflects a Jewish concern over the sacred nature of life as possessed in the blood.”
 - Consequently, animals who were killed by strangling still had the blood in them, therefore, it was an abomination to eat the meat.

Leviticus 17:14: “For as for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, “You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.”“

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- James concludes his words **Verse 21**, saying, “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”
 - The idea, here, is that because Moses [the Torah] has been preached in every city for generations, the Jewish sensitivities are well known throughout the Near Eastern world. It is not as though the Gentiles were ignorant of the Jewish practices.
- Once again, as John MacArthur rightly states, “To needlessly violate the Mosaic sanctions would destroy the church’s credibility with unbelieving Jews and also offend believing ones. It would be an abuse of the freedom in Christ believers enjoy (1 Peter 2:16).
- It is essential to understand James’ words in light of their historical context as well. The Council of Jerusalem likely took place around 48-49 A.D. Thus, the Temple was still

standing, the sacrificial system was still in practice, and as a result, many Jewish converts still maintained their commitment to Jewish laws and customs. It was a matter of their conscience. However, in A.D. 70, the Temple would be permanently destroyed, and consequently all activities associated with the Temple, to include the sacrificial system, would cease. After this point, Jews would no longer see themselves primarily as Jewish [as it was impossible to uphold the Mosaic Law without a Temple or Tabernacle], and the sensitivities to “things Jewish” would not be nearly as important.

- ❑ Example: One of my Hebrew professors in seminary refused to eat meat that was not well done. In other words, if it still had any trace of blood in it, his conscience kept him from eating it. Although he was a believer in Jesus Christ, he based this on the Old Testament Law, in Leviticus 17:14. This was his conviction, and in such a case, it should be respected on the basis of Christian unity.
- ❑ Regrettably, however, many Christians today care more about exercising their Christian liberty than acting in a way that is sensitive to other believers’ consciences.
- ❑ Paul warned against such “logic” in his first epistle to the Corinthian church:

1 Corinthians 9:19-23: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

1 Corinthians 8:13: “Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”

- ❑ James’ message, then, was that the Jews should not “trouble” the Gentiles with regards to circumcision, as both Jew and Gentile are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gentiles, on the other hand, for the sake of the overall unity of the Church, should refrain from those things that would hinder not only fellowship with Jewish Christians, but the continued spread of the Gospel to the Jewish people.
- ❑ F.F. Bruce writes, “The abstinence here recommended must be understood...not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others, *i.e.* of the Jewish converts, who still regarded such food as unlawful and abominable in the sight of God.”
- ❑ Again, these abstentions were temporary, but necessary, as Church was still in her infancy.
- ❑ Certainly, James’ words point ultimately to the primacy of love in the life of the Church. Just as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 13:1: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.”

- ❑ This love is no emotional feeling; but, rather, a commitment to sincerely put others above oneself for the sake of the Gospel of truth.

Richard Baxter, the seventeenth century [1615-1691] English Puritan, wrote, “In necessary things, unity; in doubtful [or disputed] things, liberty; in all things, charity.”

- ❑ It is our love for one another and our genuine unity within the Body of Christ, despite our many differences, that should serve as one of our greatest witnesses to the world.

II. The Council Issues a Letter to the Church at Antioch [vv. 22 – 29]

- ❑ After James’ words, Luke writes **Verses 22 – 23** that the apostles and elders, “with the whole church” decided to send a letter to the churches in the Gentile world, beginning with the **church in Antioch, the center of Gentile Christianity**.
- ❑ In the first part of the letter, **Verse 24**, the apostles and the elders disassociate themselves from the Judaizers who went to Antioch, declaring that the Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved.
- ❑ Then the apostles and elders, **Verse 25**, mention their unity, stating that they have “become of one mind...” and that Barnabas and Paul, and those sent with them, are the ones chosen by them and authorized to speak on their behalf (as opposed to the Judaizers who were not).
- ❑ Not only this, but Barnabas and Paul have proven their commitment to the Gospel and the Gentile mission as they “risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” **Verse 26**.
- ❑ Then the apostles and elders state **Verse 28**, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:”
 - As apostles in the first century who possessed special apostolic authority, the Holy Spirit spoke through these men in a manner that was unique to that time [the first century church].
- ❑ In the letter, the apostles and elders reiterate the words of James **Verse 29**, and end the letter, stating, “...if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”
 - Such a closing seems to indicate that these abstentions were commendations rather than actual commands.

III. The Church at Antioch Receives the Letter and Rejoices [vv. 30 – 35]

- In **Verse 31**, when the Church at Antioch received the letter, “they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”
 - It is rather interesting that if most churches today received such a letter we would become angry, as it actually **restricted what they could do**.
 - Yet, it seems that the Church in Antioch was concerned about the essentials of the Christian faith and the unity that resulted from a commitment to such truths.
 - It seems that they were more than willing to respect the convictions and consciences of others for the sake of Christian unity.
- Then Luke writes, **Verse 32**, that “Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.”
 - As is so often the case in Scripture, the encouragement here comes from the proclamation of the truths of God [“...being prophets themselves...encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message...”].
- After spending time in Antioch, the prophets were sent back to Jerusalem “in peace” **Verse 33**, although it appears that Silas remained **Verse 34**.
- Luke concludes this section, **Verse 35**, stating, “But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.”
 - After this great conflict with the Judaizers, which led to the Council of Jerusalem, the truth of the Gospel was defended and the Word of the Lord continued to prosper.

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- Read **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**.