

I. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-29)

The gospel's ever-broadening reach was bearing fruit in every place – among the circumcised sons of Israel and Gentile proselytes, but also among uncircumcised Gentiles who had no prior knowledge of or connection to Judaism and the God of Israel. More and more people who were Gentiles *indeed* were coming into God's covenant household, and the increase of uncircumcised believers in the Church brought with it increasing concerns and tensions. No such difficulties existed at the beginning and early on, for every believer in Jesus Christ was either a Jew or Gentile proselyte to Judaism. The Church was homogeneous in the sense that it consisted entirely of individuals who bore the historical identity markers of the people of God: All were connected to the covenant father Abraham by coming under the knife of circumcision, and all were connected to his corporate seed by coming under the Law of Moses.

For most of its brief history the Church hadn't been concerned about uncircumcised Gentiles – initially because there were no such persons in its ranks, but, more importantly, because of the presuppositions held by the community of believers.

- For two thousand years God's covenant people had been delineated by circumcision. This physical sign was fundamental to the Abrahamic Covenant, so much so that it constituted the covenant's obligation of obedience (Genesis 17:1ff). No person – not even Abraham's descendents – could stand under the covenant without being circumcised. On the other hand, all who bound themselves to Abraham through circumcision had a right to the covenant blessing and inheritance God had given him.
- So also, when Abraham's covenant line was later corporatized in Jacob's twelve sons, God formalized His covenant relationship with that corporate body through the instrument of the Mosaic Covenant (Law of Moses). Circumcision continued to be the central identity marker of the covenant people, but now their national identity – with respect to God, themselves, and the nations around them – was defined and governed by a national covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant – with its focal point in circumcision – was administered to Abraham's physical covenant descendents through the Sinai Covenant (cf. Exodus 3:1-17 with 6:1-8 and 19:1-6 as the prelude to 20:1ff).

Over Israel's entire history circumcision and allegiance to the Law of Moses had identified God's covenant people, whether Jew or Gentile. And framed by that definition, Yahweh had also promised a Savior to Israel who would come and restore the hearts of the children to the fathers, making Abraham's descendents his sons indeed. But as Gentiles had shared in the Abrahamic blessing from the beginning, so it would be in the time of Messiah's restoration. The prophets were united in that vision, and the early Church was well aware of it. For those Jews and proselytes who knew the Scriptures, the notion of Gentiles sharing in Messiah's salvation was not the least bit troubling; quite the opposite, it demonstrated God's faithfulness to His promises.

This is an important observation, for many Christians wrongly conclude that the matter of concern in the Jerusalem Council was the mere fact of Gentile inclusion in the covenant community. But the preceding discussion – not to mention Luke's account itself – shows that conclusion to be erroneous; far worse, it distracts from the true concern.

The issue that provoked the council wasn't whether or not Gentiles had a place in God's covenant household, but what constituted the terms of their inclusion. In that regard, it wasn't a question as to whether the Gentiles needed to believe in Jesus Christ as God's Messiah; the early Church readily acknowledged that faith in Him was necessary to membership in the community of the New Covenant. What they struggled to understand was how the other historical grounds of covenant membership played into the fulfillment that had come in Christ.

1. Although the council was convened at Jerusalem, it had its genesis in Antioch in Syria. After Paul and Barnabas' return from their first mission, some brethren from Judea came to visit the saints in Antioch and began promoting the idea that circumcision was necessary to salvation (15:1). When the two apostles became aware that this was being taught, they openly and adamantly opposed it – not so much because they had just experienced God's salvation coming to multitudes of uncircumcised Gentiles, but because they understood the fulfillment and transformation that had come in Christ.

Once again, many have simplistically and wrongfully concluded that Paul and Barnabas were opposing the promotion of an overt “works righteousness.” The question of righteousness was certainly at the heart of the debate, but not in the legal sense of how a person “earns” his salvation. *The question concerned covenantal righteousness:* how the covenant community is rightly defined and delineated.

- a. The Judean Christians weren't insisting against Paul and Barnabas that the Gentiles (and by implication, the Jews) needed to earn their salvation by undergoing circumcision. They didn't view circumcision as a human “work” that profited for personal righteousness; this sort of thinking has been imposed on the text by Christians who conceive of “law” in purely forensic terms. These Jewish Christians thought of circumcision *covenantally* – that is, as the covenantal sign by which a person becomes a participant in God's covenant with Abraham and obtains the privilege of fellowship with Him (Genesis 17:1-7). By insisting upon circumcision, the Judean brethren were simply upholding the continuity of the covenant sign that had always identified God's covenant household.
- b. They understood and acknowledged that faith in Christ is crucial to being saved, but they equally recognized that salvation is connected with the Abrahamic promise. God's ancient oath to Abraham was that His blessing would flow to all men through *him*, and since that time men became sharers in Abraham – and therefore partakers in his mediated blessing – by taking upon themselves the covenant sign that marked Abraham's own flesh.

The Judean visitors weren't contending for salvation by works, but for salvation as being bound up in Abraham and God's covenant with him. In this contention, they were absolutely correct; *what they failed to understand is that the Abrahamic criterion for salvation – like every component of the salvation history – had not only been fulfilled, it had been **transformed** in the singular Son of Abraham.* Circumcision remained the indispensable sign of membership in God's covenant household, but circumcision as transformed in Christ (Colossians 2:8-12; cf. Romans 2:28-29 with Galatians 6:12-16).

2. Paul and Barnabas engaged the issue openly and enthusiastically, but what began as a discussion soon devolved into dissension and heated debate. Before long, two things became clearly evident to all parties: The first was that this issue is of grave importance, not only to the well-being and harmony of Christ's Church, but to the gospel itself. But for all its importance, these saints were unable to arrive at a consensus concerning it. Paul and Barnabas were persistent and no doubt careful and precise in their argumentation, but the brethren from Judea remained unconvinced. Everyone recognized the gravity of the matter, but they couldn't agree on its resolution.

As a result, the congregation decided to send a delegation to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders there to get their input (15:2). They selected Paul and Barnabas, along with several others, to carry out this mission, and the group departed for Jerusalem. Their journey took them through Phoenicia and Samaria, and Luke seized upon that time to set the context for their work in Jerusalem.

- a. As they traveled west and south, the delegation sought out the churches along the way, drawing upon their hospitality and ministering to them in return. While that ministry would have had various elements, Luke noted only the encouragement and joy Paul and Barnabas brought to the saints by their testimony of God's work among the Gentiles (15:3).
- b. In this way Luke highlighted the fact that Gentiles coming to faith in Christ was still a new and localized phenomenon in the Church; most of the believers – who were Jews and proselytes – hadn't yet been confronted with uncircumcised Gentiles in their congregations. The churches of Phoenicia and Samaria rejoiced in the apostles' news, but that which provoked their joy was also a portent of sober challenges looming on the horizon.

Soon all the churches would face the quandary of Gentiles in their ranks and would find themselves embroiled in the same debate that had occurred in Antioch. While the mission of the Jerusalem delegation was devised as a simple consultation, the orientation of Luke's account shows that he recognized – as did Paul and Barnabas – the magnitude of the issue at hand; God's ingathering of the Gentiles had only just begun, and the Church needed to come together in a uniform understanding of it and response to it.

3. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, the delegation immediately sought an audience with the apostles and elders of the church. Once again Luke underscored the universal scope of the problem by noting that Paul and Barnabas soon found themselves embroiled in the same dispute they had left unresolved in Antioch. Interestingly, this second debate brought in the corollary issue of the *Law of Moses* (15:4-5). This seeming addition of a second Gentile obligation was really only the recognition of the implication inherent in the demand of circumcision: Circumcision was the fundamental identity marker of God's covenant people, but the relationship it signified was defined and administered through the Law of Moses. Circumcision marked out God's own; the Mosaic Covenant ordered their lives with Him. In that regard circumcision and the Law of Moses were mutually implicating. The obligation of the one implied the obligation of the other.

A contingent of believing Pharisees enlarged the debate in Jerusalem, but essentially only reiterated the contention of their Judean brethren before them. At bottom, both groups shared the same conviction, and for reasons that, by now, should be quite evident: These individuals, like the majority of their Jewish counterparts, were looking at the Gentile question with eyes framed by the lens of the Old Testament salvation history.

If the delegation had anticipated only a quiet, informal consultation with members of the Jerusalem leadership, this renewed dispute made them realize that a more decisive resolution was required. Thus a formal council was convened to look into this matter and provide concrete instruction and guidance to all the churches.

4. The council brought together the leading authorities in the Church – including the Twelve apostles – but even then resolving the issue proved challenging. For the third time Paul and Barnabas found themselves involved in a divided gathering and passionate and prolonged debate. After listening to the discussion, Peter rose and made his contribution, the focal point of which was his experience with Cornelius and his household (15:7-10).

He reminded the assembly of what they already knew, namely that God had called him to bring to these Gentiles the word of life in Jesus Christ. The God who'd determined to grant salvation to Israel intended that this salvation should come to the Gentiles as well. Moreover, the instrument of salvation for the Jews – faith in Christ through the preached gospel – was the same for the Gentiles. Peter's experience in Cornelius' house had shown him that God makes no distinction between men: He had cleansed those Gentiles' hearts by faith in the same way as the Jews and proselytes at Pentecost and thereafter. Ethnicity, heritage and practice mean nothing to God; He deals with all men as *men*.

Salvation had come to the Gentiles in exactly the same way as to the ethnic children of Abraham. That in itself demonstrated the lack of distinction in God's saving purpose and work. But the greatest proof was the fact that God gave His Spirit to those Gentiles just as He had to the Jewish assembly on the day of the Spirit's outpouring. Pentecost was as much a Gentile phenomenon as a Jewish one; in fulfillment of the prophetic word, God was now pouring out His Spirit on all mankind.

Lest the men of the council miss Peter's point in rehearsing the Cornelius episode, he made it explicit (15:10-11). God had saved that assembly of Gentiles *as Gentiles*: He didn't demand that they be circumcised, but had saved them through faith and given them His indwelling Spirit. Moreover, every single Jew – men who possessed circumcision and the Law of Moses – had been saved in precisely the same way, proving that those things have no relation to salvation. The Jewish brethren assembled there had to concede that fact with respect to themselves; how could they not do so with respect to the Gentiles?

5. Peter had laid a foundation and Paul and Barnabas proceeded to build upon it, reinforcing his argumentation by recounting all that God had done through them among the Gentiles of Asia Minor (15:12). As He had with the sons of Israel and the Samaritans, He attested His gospel to the Gentiles by working mighty signs and wonders in their presence, giving the greatest show of His power and purpose by bringing multitudes from death to life.