

Acts 15:6-41

“The Council’s Conclusion”

The conflict? Is Christ sufficient to save you in all of your sin, or is it Jesus “plus?” Does Jesus save, or is it necessary for you to be a member of a certain church, for you to be baptized, for you to keep the Sabbath, for you to remove all your make up, wear ankle length dresses, or keep certain dietary codes? Is it about what Christ has done, or about what you do *on top of* what Christ has done?

This is the essence of the conflict at hand in Acts ch 15, the gospel itself having come under attack, certain men from Judea coming to the church in Antioch teaching the people that unless they were circumcised, they could not be saved. Or to understand that another way, “The work of the cross is not sufficient to save you, you also need to do something yourself in order to secure your salvation.” So then what *is* the gospel? Is it Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Is it Christ crucified for your transgression and raised for your justification? Or is it after you’ve done all that you can do to be made right with God, Jesus will take up the rest, but that if you don’t do your part, than the cross alone isn’t sufficient? It has to be made clear, there’s no room here for debate, because if it demands something of *me* than I need to *know* it so I can get busy *about* it. But if it’s all about Him, than by that type of message (meaning you can’t be saved until you complete this list of “to do’s”) the very heart of the gospel itself is derailed, and the focus is taken off of what Jesus has *done* and places it on what you *do*, now who gets the glory, who’s truly responsible for your salvation in such a scenario?

But you see that’s the difference between true Christianity and virtually every other “religion” in the world. Religion places the emphasis upon what you do, “If you want to be made right with God you need to do this, and that, and the other thing *for starters*, and then when you’re *really spiritual* you’ll be given *these* things to do as well.” But Christianity says, “You can’t do anything that’s going to somehow merit your acceptance before God, you can’t do any righteous work, because there are none that are righteous, to the contrary all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” So as to where religion basically has God standing at a distance from *man* and man doing what he can do to close that gap until at some point God looks upon him with favor. Christianity has man standing at a distance from *God*, and God doing everything *He* can to close that gap because man is unable to. So to keep it simple, religion is man reaching to God, Christianity says that it’s God who reaches out to man. and The way that God has reached out to man is through the cross of Jesus Christ The bible says, “...*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” Rom 5:8 So that it’s all about what He’s *done*, and has nothing to do with what we *do*. But this is the conflict at hand, and the conflict is critical, because there’s no room for disagreement here, because there aren’t 2 gospels, there’s only 1. So which is it, and the reason that I’ve taken so much time on this (with regards to last week and today) is because you need to be resolved on this in your heart. Because there are plenty of people out there who want to rope you into legalistic bondage, bend you into believing that if you don’t do (fill in the blank) you’re not right with God. Question: Is there anything you have to do to be made right with God? Yes, 2 things actually, and we’ll get to that in just a minute.

But we've seen the *conflict*, now the matter will be *considered* by the council in Jerusalem, it'll be *corrected* one way or another, and the *conclusion* will be handed down to the church in Antioch. Or as we mentioned last week, from the *dilemma* to the *dispute*, which winds up being *debated*, *deliberated*, *decided* and *delivered* to the church in Antioch.

For those of you who are into the flow it goes as follows with regards to the *considering* and *concluding* of the matter. Peter will present what's happened in the *past*, Paul will present the happenings *presently*, and James will focus on the *future*.

Vs6

The key word in this vs being "consider," it speaks of, "discerning" or to "glean understanding," they came together that they might discern the situation in order to *gain* and to *give out* understanding. and We notice that this wasn't simply a one man ordeal, meaning that it wasn't something that only one man considered *individually*, but rather it was something that was weighed out before the apostles and the elders *collectively*. The bible says, "*Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counselors they are established.*" Prov 15:22 So they were seeking the witness of the mind of Christ *collectively*, wanting to know what the Spirit had to say *Personally*, looking to the counsel of God's Word *specifically*. and It's important on several matters but even more so on doctrinal issues to know that there is the unity of the Spirit, that I'm not launching out on my own, but that I'm approaching this *solidly* and that other individuals who are mature godly people are in agreement *with me*, particularly in the area of what mandates my salvation! Because that's something that needs no ambiguous strings attached. So they're hashing this thing out, out in the open where it's clear to everyone. It's not going to be a "He said, She said" kind of a deal; they're going at this thing for everyone to see.

Vs7-11

Now last week we saw how when Peter was in Antioch he was vacillating and wavering on the issue, and how Paul rebuked him in front of every one. Here we see that the rebuke took root and Peter was reminded of the fact that he himself had been used of God to lead Gentiles to Christ apart from any form of legalistic approach and God honored their faith and gave them the Holy Spirit just the same.

So after he listens to everyone disputing back and forth for awhile he finally stands up and demands their attention. But there's wisdom in that he waited to listen to both sides before he interjected. The proverbs tell us, "*He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.*" Prov 18:13 How many of us have fallen into *that* snare? You're arguing with someone over something and in the middle of what they're saying you try to cut them off and answer the matter before you've heard it only to hear them say, "That's not even what I was going to say!" and In so doing you open a whole new can of worms that you've got to deal with after you're finished with the 1st one that you were in too frustrated to hear out. Wisdom says that it's folly and shame to answer a matter before you've heard it. James said it like this, "...*let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak,*" James 1:19 and To the one who learns that lesson, mark my words it will save him *much* unnecessary grief. But Peter stands up and gives them a presentation of the past.

He recounts his personal experience with what God did in *his* life concerning His work among the Gentiles. and He reminds them of what took place with Cornelius and his family there in Caesarea back in ch 10, now that was some 10 yrs or so removed from where they were at currently. So he refreshes their memories and gives them a little history lesson. and Notice that he uses the word “gospel” in vs 7 so that we’re coming now to the heart of the matter, he says that God ordained that by his mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the *gospel* and believe. Now what was the word that they heard? Well you can read all of it there in ch 10 but the primary point that he had to share with them was of Jesus Christ “...*whom* (Peter told them) *they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,*” Acts 10:39-40 and He said, “*To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.*” Acts 10:43 That was it.

He didn’t bring up the law, didn’t mention circumcision, simply that whoever believes in Him will receive remission (that is forgiveness, or a canceling out) of sins. and What happened? They all started speaking in tongues, magnifying God, it was clear that they’d received Jesus Christ and been forgiven of their sin because God gave them the Holy Spirit, just like He’d given the Jews the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The point being that God doesn’t give the Holy Spirit to *any* who are unclean, unforgiven, or who aren’t justified in His sight. If God gives to you His Holy Spirit it's because you’re forgiven, and have been justified before Him. Now this takes us back to the 2 things you need to do to be saved, what is it that you need to do to be made right with God? Vs 7 revealed it, did you catch it? #1 Hear the word of the gospel, and #2 Believe, that’s it. God sends out the message, Jesus died on the cross for your sin, He paid the price that you could never pay, He bore every rotten, every vile, every white lie and every atrocity that mankind had ever, or would ever contrive and commit, giving His life that you might have life, pouring out His blood for the remission of your sin, now what are you going to do? Believe it and receive it? Or disregard and reject it, He’s done *everything* so that you don’t have to do *anything*, it doesn’t get any easier than that. But that’s the crossroad that humanity finds itself on, receiving or rejecting Jesus Christ there’s no in between. To the one who believes, everlasting life, to the one who rejects, everlasting separation from God, it’s up to you.

Peter’s perspective here regarding *what* God did, and *why* God did it is basically 4-fold. #1 “God knows the heart.” We spoke last week of how man looks to the outward appearance but God has never made it a secret that He looks *to* and is interested *in*, your heart. The bible says, “*He knows the secrets of the heart.*” Ps 44:21 Think about that, God knows the secrets of your heart, what it is that’s rolling around in the deep recesses that you think you keep all to yourself, God knows it.

Again the Psalmist said, “*O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.*” Ps 139:1-4 Jer 17:10 tells us, “*I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, Even to give every man according to his ways, According to the fruit of his doings.*” So God knows your heart, He knows if you’re genuinely seeking *after* Him, humbling yourself *before* Him, and are willing to receive His Son in order to be made right *with* Him. Or if you’re seeking to do this, or accomplish that, that you might somehow *impress* Him, and justify *yourself* before Him. So the 1st thing Peter points out in order that they might get beyond the surface of the flesh is that God goes much deeper than that, He knows the heart, and He deals with people on the basis of the position of their heart, not the outward conformity of the flesh to a certain set of standards. and On that basis, as God looked at the heart of the Gentiles that he ministered to He saw in them a genuine humility and willingness to receive Christ as their righteousness apart from any work of their own, how does he (Peter) know that?

By the fact that God (and This is #2) #2 “God acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit” just as He did the Jews on the Day of Pentecost. That word “acknowledged” speaks of “bearing witness” meaning that He bore witness to the right position of their hearts by, (and here’s another key word) “giving” them the Holy Spirit. They didn’t do anything to earn it, they weren’t circumcised 1st, baptized 1st or anything else. and Again this particular point is critical to his case because as I just mentioned one can’t even receive the Holy Spirit unless their heart is justified/purified before God.

Which escalates into his 3rd point in that if God gave them the same gift as He gave to the Jews at Pentecost that means that #3 “God made no distinction between us and them.”

When it comes to sin, and salvation, God makes no distinction. The bible says, “...*there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” Rom 3:22-23 The bible teaches us that scripture has condemned *all* under sin that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to *all* that believe. You see the Jews had all these legal rituals that they’d grown accustomed to keeping, the Gentiles didn’t have any of that stuff, but God didn’t make a difference between them based upon any of that stuff. All have sinned; therefore all can be saved through Jesus Christ

Which brings us to his 4th and final point, God makes no distinction purifying everyone’s heart by “circumcision” purifying their hearts by “baptism”, purifying their hearts by “keeping the Sabbath” purifying their hearts by some outward act of the *flesh*? No, #4 “Purifying their hearts by faith.”

Vs10

He says, “Look from the beginning to the end we couldn’t even keep it,” Israel broke the law even at Sinai as it was being given out as they worshipped the golden calf, towards the end of OT history there in Nehemiah 13 they were still breaking the law in not keeping the Sabbath, marrying pagan women. and The idea there is that they really didn’t keep the heart of the law (as a nation) from the beginning to the end. “So why” Peter says, “Put a yoke of bondage on them that we can’t keep ourselves.” and He says to bring them under the law is to test the Lord, or tempt the Lord in that they’re reverting to the law not trusting in the sufficiency of the sacrifice of Christ. and Peter brings them the bottom line here in vs 11, underline it, highlight it, draw attention to it because this is what it all comes down to.

Vs11

What are the essentials of salvation as it pertains to the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified? #1 Grace (vs 11) and #2 Faith (vs 9) Anything you add to that is non-essential legal bondage. What’s the bible say? “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*” Eph 2:8-9

Vs12

So after Peter portrays the past, Paul presents the present happenings, how he preached the message of *grace*, and God honored it everywhere they went. Multitudes turning to Jesus, the miraculous bearing witness to the message, (and you can read of those things in ch 13-14). Now James will set their focus towards the future.

Vs13-21

Now who is *this* James? Obviously its not James the brother of John because he’s already been martyred, the commonly held view is that this is James the ½ brother of Jesus, the brother of Jude who wrote the epistle of James. and He begins his address by pointing out the fact that God had a people among the Gentiles. Now this is interesting because the Greek word for “Gentiles” there in vs 14 is the word “Ethnos” from which we get our word “Ethnic” which just speaks of a people of a different race, or who are foreign to you. But the Jew used the term to speak of pagans, and the word “people” in vs 14 is the Greek word “Laos” which speaks of “One’s own people.” So the Jews considered themselves the “Laos” of God, and everyone else “Ethnos” but here James is saying that God is taking from the Gentiles a “Laos” for Himself. Which is to say a people who would be in everyway equal and enjoy the benefits of His love the same as Israel. Now that would blow the minds of the Jews to think that God would call take for Himself a “Laos” from the Gentiles, a people of His own just the same.

But James goes on to point out that the word of God is in perfect harmony with the reality of what’s happening, and that God taking a people for Himself from the Gentiles has a *biblical* foundation.

He quotes from Amos ch 9 to validate his point. Now listen, we've spoken of this before but you need to know any work that God is doing will either be *substantiated in or supported by* His Word. He will *never* operate outside the parameters of His Word, I don't care how spiritual it seems, or how honorable it may appear, if you can't validate it by the *Word of God*, than I'd have to seriously question if it's a *work of God*. Here once again we have the testimony of the men of God, the witness of the Spirit of God, and validation by the Word of God. and with out the validation of the Word of God, a work can't be substantiated as being *from God*, because what's my standard for discernment? The way I feel? How I perceive it perhaps? That's liable to waver minute to minute, we need a plumb line, a standard, an absolute by which we discern, its called the Word of God, and God will never go beyond the boundaries He's set (even for Himself) in His Word.

Vs 17 speaks of the fact that God had preordained to draw a people to Himself from the Gentiles and that they were to be biblically accepted *as* Gentiles apart from any outward change that would conform them to the traditions or legal code of the Jews.

Vs 18 basically says that God has said that He would do it, He knew from the *beginning* that He would do it, so why are we so surprised when He *does it!* and Vs 19 concludes that since its been apart of God's plan from the beginning, and that the word of God declares that they're accepted by God just as they are, that not only should it not be a surprise, nor should it be stifled or resisted. Notice "We should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God." That's the bottom line, Paul was right, the Judaizers were wrong, James as the chief elder laid out the final assessment, "Don't lay legal trips on people who are coming to Christ."

However, (vs20-21) though we're not bound by the Law of Moses or legalism as such, *non of us* are exempt from the higher law of *love*. and The basic gist here is that there were large #'s of Jewish people who were inundated with the law of Moses in several of these areas that there were Gentile churches. and He's saying that even though they're not bound by the law of Moses, they are bound to walk in the law of love towards the Jews lest they be stumbled unnecessarily. That's the idea behind this list of things in vs20, don't eat blood, or meat that hasn't been properly bled, don't eat meat that's been offered to idols, and stay away from sexual immorality. Now when he speaks of sexual immorality, don't think of premarital fornication, that's kind of the understanding that goes with out say, (he didn't mention stealing or murder either). Now the Gentiles did have a problem with the premarital thing so he *could be* addressing that, but more than likely he's referring to the marital standards found in Leviticus 18, which basically says, don't be marrying your sister, or your cousin, so on and so forth. Because again the Gentiles didn't really have a problem with those things in that day, (and If you get far enough south they still don't ;0)) but be that as it may, these kinds of things were absolutely abhorrent to a Jew. So the idea is, if you'll just steer clear of these things in love, it won't compromise your witness to the Jew.

Vs22

All I want you to see here is how the whole church was pleased, even those who had a problem in the beginning were able to get behind the outcome. It's so important to remain teachable and yielded to the Spirit of God moving through the Word of God, otherwise we become what the bible calls "old wineskins" unfit for use. Of course we see that this is where Silas comes into the picture who'll become a pivotal player in Paul's life and ministry in the near future. (Now most of the rest of this we can just read since it's a rehearsal of what we've already gone over.)

Vs23-28

3 Things super quick 1st of all in vs 26 we notice that the church sends out those who are tried, tested, and true to the message of Jesus Christ It's not wise to just get behind anyone who claims to be right on. Give it some time, let their heart be displayed, the bible says that we're to lay hands on no one hastily. These were men who'd risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

2^{ndly} notice in vs 28 who it was who decided the outcome, it was the Holy Spirit, and how was that decision administered? Through James, the supernatural guiding through the practical, God using ordinary people in extra-ordinary ways.

3^{rdly} to underscore what we just sort of went over, vs 29; we spoke in ch 14:1 of the need to be sensitive with our *words* in a given situation, this is the exhortation to be sensitive in our *walk* as well, that freedom from the law, is not license to sin. You might read Rom 13:8-10 regarding the law of love, and 1st Cor 8 regarding taking advantage of our liberty in Christ so as to stumble a weaker brother who may not have the same grasp of grace that you do.

Vs30-31

Talk about a "special delivery" these guys were topped out to hear that the principle of grace had been preserved, that they *were* saved, and right with God by faith in the work of Christ on the cross; alone. They needed nothing more to receive the remission of sin than to believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour.

Vs32-35

Rather than the work being *shipwrecked* by the certain men from Judea, because it was handled correctly, the work was *strengthened* as Judas and Silas exhorted the believers with the word of God, and Paul and Barnabas continued to teach and preach the word of the Lord.

Vs36-41

Interesting isn't it how that a major doctrinal dispute *about* the Lord, was settled more easily than a disagreement between brothers *in* the Lord. The bible says, "*A brother offended is harder to win than a strong city, And contentions are like the bars of a castle.*" Prov 18:19 Now no doubt God used this situation in creating a couple of missionary teams and all, and God can bring good out of otherwise unfortunate situations, but that's never to be used as casual justification for carnal division. God will hold us all accountable for the way we interact with one another and the decisions we make towards one another.

Now we know that this situation was ultimately reconciled and we'll pick up on these thoughts next time. But be careful to walk in love towards one another, be reconciled one to another, and if any one has complaint against another than even as God (for Christ's sake) has forgiven you, so you also must do.

The conclusion of the council, the decision of the Holy Spirit, the testimony of God's Word is that Jesus alone is sufficient to save you. If you've never received Christ, perhaps you've thought that you could never live up to the standard, here's the good news. The standard is accounted to you in Christ, He's done it all so that you don't have to do anything, you've heard the word, its up to you only to believe, to open your heart and invite Jesus in, believing upon Him by faith that He might save you from your sin. If you'd like to receive Christ than I'd invite you to do that right now.

Prayer points: Lord thank You that You impose no legal code upon us, that we're right before the Father not based upon what we do, but based upon what You've done. Though we're not bound by the law of Moses, would You help us to walk in the higher Law of Love, being sensitive to our brothers and sisters around us, not exercising our liberty in a manner that makes them stumble. and Help us to love one another, forgiving one another even as You, in Christ, have forgiven us.