

The First Church Council in Jerusalem; Paul's Second Missionary Journey Begins

Acts 15

Acts 15:1-5: *“And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.⁴ And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.”*

Background Notes

Some men came to Antioch and began to teach that Gentile believers were not truly saved unless they also were circumcised, according to the Law of Moses. These men were Christian “Judaizers.” Although they were true believers in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, they believed that even Gentile believers had to keep the Mosaic Law. If you were an uncircumcised Gentile, you had to be circumcised – or you weren't really saved. This was a direct frontal attack on the gospel of God's grace. Paul and Barnabas disagreed strongly, and debated with these Judaizers.

As a result of this disagreement, the church leaders at Antioch decided that Paul and Barnabas and a few of the other leaders should go up to Jerusalem and meet with the apostles and Jerusalem elders to get this problem settled. So in 49AD, the first Church Council was held in Jerusalem. The subject was the requirements for Gentile believers to have equal status and full fellowship with the Jewish believers in the Church. What about circumcision? What about the dietary laws of the Mosaic covenant? Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem for the council.

Doctrinal Points

1. The first Church Council affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith alone.

Acts 15:6-21: *“Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.⁷ And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.⁸ So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged*

them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us,⁹ and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?¹¹ But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

¹² Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.¹³ And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me:¹⁴ Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ¹⁶ ‘After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; ¹⁷ so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things.’

¹⁸ “Known to God from eternity are all His works. ¹⁹ Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰ but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

After much debate, Peter stood up and said, “You know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.” Peter was referring to his ministry at the home of Cornelius, where Gentiles believed and were brought into the Church (Acts 10). No one could deny that their salvation was the work of God – either at that time, or now at the council. The uncircumcised Gentiles were saved in exactly the same way as the Jews were saved, and their salvation was confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

After Peter’s speech, Paul and Barnabas showed how God had confirmed their work among the Gentiles with signs and wonders. Then James summarized the situation and drew the Council to a conclusion by referring to the prophet Amos. He showed that God’s intentions were to include the Gentiles in the future, according to Old Testament prophecy (v16-17).

James did not say that the prophecy of Amos was being fulfilled at that time, in the early Church. No, the “rebuilding of the house of David” is not a reference to the Church at all. It refers to the restored nation of Israel that will turn back to the Lord in the future. James’ point was not that the prophecy of Amos was being fulfilled in 50AD, but that God’s program for the future included Gentiles, according to the prophecy of Amos. Thus Gentiles should be included in the Church without further requirements.

James concluded: “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v19). In other words, circumcision was not a requirement for salvation, and Gentile believers were on an equal footing with the Jewish believers in the Church. The rest of the leaders of the Council agreed with James. Thus the first Church Council affirmed that salvation is by grace through faith alone.

2. The first Church Council advised that separation from certain things is proper for Christian living.

Acts 15:22-35: *“Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. ²³ They sent them the following letter: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law” —to whom we gave no such commandment—²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.*

³⁰ *So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. ³² Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. ³³ And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. ³⁴ However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”*

The conclusions of the first Church Council were put in writing and sent as a letter to the local churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. In order to show unity, the letter was sent with Paul and Barnabas and some brothers from the Jerusalem church. Notice verse 25: *“It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord.”* The council was of one mind – there was unity on these matters.

And notice verse 28: *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden.”* In other words, Gentiles do not have to be circumcised in order to be saved. However, the leaders at the Council advised all believers to not to eat anything that had been offered to idols, not to eat blood from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. “If you keep yourselves from these,” they said, “you will do well.”

Why did the Council add these stipulations? It was not for salvation, because salvation is by grace through faith alone. This advice was for proper Christian living - and it's still good advice for proper Christian living today! Abstaining from foods sacrificed to idols removed stumbling blocks and barriers so there could be happy fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul showed that food dedicated to idols was not contaminated, but if eating it would stumble and offend other believers, we should abstain from eating it for the sake of fellowship. This principle certainly applies today in reference to maintaining happy fellowship.

Abstaining from sexual immorality seems obvious to us, but loose sexuality of all kinds was a way of life for many Gentiles. The point here is that even though the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament did not apply, the moral laws of God certainly did.

Refraining from eating the meat of animals that had been strangled and did not have the blood drained was a law that went back to the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 9. The Noahic Covenant came before the Mosaic Covenant. It was made with all mankind - and it has never been nullified, even to this day. So there were no inconsistencies in the council's conclusions and advice for the Gentile Christians. The first Church Council advised that separation from certain things is proper for Christian living.

Practical Application

Don't quit because of a split.

Acts 15:36-40: *"Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus;⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."*

At the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance and bring him along. But Paul said "No way!" because Mark had deserted them on the first missionary journey. The disagreement was so great that team of Paul and Barnabas split up. Barnabas took John Mark with him to Cyprus while Paul took Silas and departed for his second mission trip, after he was once again commended to the grace of God by the church at Antioch. Who was right -- Paul or Barnabas? There was probably fault on both sides, but at least neither one of them left the ministry. In fact, as a result of the split, **two** missionary teams went out from Antioch!

Christian splits are never pleasant, whether they involve individuals, ministries, or churches. Unfortunately, when there's a split, some Christians "throw in the towel." They quit because they're disillusioned and just don't want to serve the Lord any longer.

Listen - don't quit because of a split! Let God pick up the pieces. Look for His guidance, and let Him continue His work in you and through you. Don't quit because of a split!