

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

Dr. Jack L. Arnold
Lesson #37

ACTS
The Jerusalem Council - Practice
Acts 15:13-35

When is it right to make concessions to strict, narrow-minded, legalistic Christians who are the victims of wrong teaching and straight-laced backgrounds? Should Christians give up certain practices which are not specifically commanded against in the Scripture in order to please Christians who have hang-ups with these practices? When is it right to abstain and when is it right to do certain things not clearly spoken against in Scripture? This is no small problem, even to us today, and it was one of the central issues of the Jerusalem Council. What the Jerusalem Council concluded as fact for Christians of that day can, by principle, be applied in our day, and must be applied if there is to be unity, peace and harmony in our local churches and among all the brethren of the universal church. What was concluded at that council is crucial for the furtherance of the true Christian Faith today so that we may know how to deal with legalism, taboos and the spirit of “touch not, taste not and handle not.” Legalism always kills the spirit of Christ and must be dealt with severely in our own hearts and in the life of the church.

Acts 15:13-35 deals primarily with practice, while Acts 15:1-12 dealt with doctrine. The practice, however, came as a result of a certain doctrinal conclusion. There were certain Christian legalists who were saying that a Gentile had to trust in Christ as Messiah and keep the Mosaic Law for salvation. These converted Jews propagated the false teaching that salvation was by faith in Christ plus circumcision. “And 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’” (Acts 15:1). The issue of salvation by works versus salvation by grace prompted the Jerusalem Council. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church over this matter. During the council, the Apostle Peter pointed out that the Gentiles were saved and received the Holy Spirit when they exercised faith in Christ. “. . . cleansing their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). His final point was that Jews and Gentiles are saved by the pure grace of Christ alone. “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (Acts 15:11). Grace is unmerited favor. Grace is sovereignly given. Grace is gratuitous. Grace is free. God gives grace to whom He pleases for salvation, and all those who receive Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior are those who are the recipients of God’s grace.

There are just three ways to view salvation: 1) Salvation is the product of human works alone. If this be true, then there was no need for Christ to die for sinners. Furthermore, the cross would be the great blunder of God since He would have sent His Son to die in vain if man could save himself. 2) Salvation is the product of God and

man; that is, salvation is acquired by a mixture of faith in Christ and works. It is Christ plus some human rite, ritual, act or work which saves a person. If this be true, when has a person done enough works to make him acceptable to God? What amount of works in addition to Christ does it take to save? 3) Salvation is the product of God alone; that is, man is saved by grace through faith in the person of Christ alone. It is God's grace plus nothing which saves a man and that man knows he has received grace when he bows his stubborn will to Christ in faith and repentance.

Today we have many mixtures of faith and works in salvation. We hear people say, "Believe in Christ and be water baptized. Believe in Christ and be in a certain church or denomination. Believe in Christ and keep the Ten Commandments. Believe in Christ and cut your hair, put on shoes and wash your clothes. Believe in Christ and keep my man-made code of ethics, rules or taboos." And, of course, we have the most subtle form of works in our modern day evangelical circles. They say, "Exercise your free will and then you will receive God's grace." Free will becomes a human work in this system. No, the biblical emphasis is "by grace through faith" in Christ one is saved and the whole process is a gift from God. "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Once we really understand grace we will never get hung up with rites, rituals, works and acts of men in the salvation of a soul.

The Jerusalem Council definitely concluded that Gentiles and Jews are saved by grace through faith in Christ. This is the only Apostle's Creed we can be sure the Apostles left us. What is this creed? We are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus (Acts 15:11). Having solved the doctrinal matter, there was still the need to solve some practical issues between converted Jews and Gentiles in order to maintain the peace, harmony and unity of the church.

DOCTRINE (Acts 15:13-18)

Saving the Gentiles (Acts 15:13, 14)

"And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me.'" – When the Apostle Peter had finished his great discourse on the grace of God in salvation, James, the half-brother of Jesus, who was the senior leader of the Jerusalem Council, stood up to defend what Peter and the others had been saying about Gentiles being saved by the grace of God. James was a Jew's Jew, and had been very loyal to the Mosaic Law even as a Christian. While we are not told so, James was probably the chairman of this meeting. When he stood up to speak, the people listened.

"Simon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." – Notice carefully that James addressed Simon by his Aramaic first name. He did not refer to Peter as "revered," "holy father" or "mighty vicer," but plain Simeon. Apparently Peter had no more authority at the council than James. James made it very clear that the purpose of God in this present age is to take, or call out, from the masses of Gentiles a people for His own name. God, through the

preaching of the good news of Christ, is sovereignly bringing Gentiles to salvation to be part of the people of God, the church, in this present time. What is the purpose of God in this age? To evangelize and save a people for Himself. The purpose of God is not to Christianize but to evangelize, not social welfare but spiritual welfare. Because God is taking a people from the Gentile masses, we see that it is not His purpose to make everybody a Christian, nor is it His purpose to save every person. We should not expect that in the present age everyone should be saved and we should not fold up spiritually if everyone does not believe in Christ. It has always been true that there has been an elect remnant and that remnant has only been a small percentage of the world's population. Who are the elect remnant? All who receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Some, but not all, will be saved; yet we have the confidence that God is calling out, or taking out, His own as a people for His name. For sure, this verse denies the false teaching of universalism (all men will be saved). God is taking out some but not all. Who are the some? All who bow to Jesus Christ and accept Him as sovereign Lord and Savior.

James merely agrees with Peter. Those Judaizers and legalists who said, "Without circumcision you cannot be saved," were ignoring the fact that Gentiles were already being saved. God was already saving Gentiles without asking anyone permission to do so and He was doing it without any ritual, or the Mosaic Law.

Support from the Old Testament (Acts 15:15-17)

"And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, . . ." – James made an appeal to the Old Testament to show that this activity of God in saving Gentiles was valid because it had scriptural support.

All Christian experience, apparent revivals and supposed demonstrations of the Holy Spirit should be tested by the Word of God. Unless a supposed work of grace lines up with the Bible and can be defended by it, it must be false and should be opposed. In the twentieth century, there is much activity going on which is being attributed to the Holy Spirit, but this activity does not seem to match up with what the Bible teaches. Multitudes are accepting this activity naively because it has the appearance of supernatural activity. Always check healings, tongues, visions or whatever with the teaching of the Bible and you will never be led astray by false teaching or go to extremes.

"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, IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, . . ." – This is a quote from Amos 9:11, 12. This quote is from the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) and seems to be paraphrased by James. It is accepted by all Bible scholars that this quote has something to do with the saving of Gentiles. However, all do not agree as to when this Gentile salvation is to take place. Strict dispensationalists see this quote as a panorama of future events. They claim James quoted this verse to assure the Judaizers that God had a future for Israel but not in this present age. "After these things" refers to the second coming after the church,

consisting mainly of Gentiles, has been completely formed and raptured. Jesus then will return and restore Israel, rebuild the Davidic dynasty through Christ and restore the literal physical temple. Then, through restored Israel, the Gentiles will be saved in mass during the millennial kingdom. These Gentiles are “all the Gentiles” or “the rest of mankind who seek the Lord.” It seems to me, however, that James is using Amos 9:11, 12 as a reference to the first advent of Christ and not the second advent. In the first coming of Christ there has been a restoration of the Davidic dynasty, and through the restored spiritual kingdom, the Gentiles are being saved. James is merely saying that the Old Testament supports Gentile salvation. I personally do not deny a future for Israel, but I do not find it in this verse.

This is a very difficult verse and the battle rages over how James used the Old Testament scripture. Whether he took it literally or made a spiritual application is the issue. I will leave the conclusion to your own future study.

Sovereign Plan of God (Acts 15:18)

“ . . . SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD.” – God sees every thing future. He knows what He will accomplish. He has a plan. It was part of His plan to save Gentiles and Amos 9:11, 12 supports that conclusion. Since it is God’s plan to save Gentiles, this plan should not be resisted or prevented by trying to force the rite of circumcision on them as necessary for salvation. A “by grace through faith” salvation is traced back to the eternal plan of God.

PRACTICE (Acts 15:19-35)

Concession by Gentiles (Acts 15:19-21)

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, . . .” – James’s conclusion was that Jewish Christians should not molest, disturb, harass or oppose Gentile Christians by imposing on them unnecessary rites and ceremonies. Since God gave salvation to the Gentiles by grace without observance of Jewish rites and ceremonies, the Jewish Christians must not impose the ceremonial or civil aspects of the Mosaic Law on them. Gentiles were free from the Mosaic Law, for they were not under law but under grace and they now followed the Law of Christ.

“ . . . for you are not under law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14b).

“And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, 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, that I might win those who are without law” (I Cor. 9:20, 21).

Gentiles were free from the burden of the Law of Moses but were not free from the

eternal moral law of God or the Law of Christ.

“ . . . 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.” – James strongly suggested that they not require circumcision or any aspect of the ceremonial or civil aspects of the Law of the Gentiles, but that Gentiles should make certain concessions so as not to be offensive to their Jewish brethren in Christ. Out of courtesy, the Gentiles were not to flaunt their newfound liberty in Christ but use it with some Spirit-directed restraint so as to honor the consciences of the Jews who still had many hang-ups and would not break from the Mosaic Law. It is not easy to determine what these prohibitions are and mean. There are several suggestions:

A Gentile Moral Law. The words “from what is strangled” (also in 15:29) are not found in some of the better Greek manuscripts, and if these words are dropped this could be translated: “Abstain from things contaminated by idols, and from fornication and from blood.” The word “blood” may be translated “bloodshed” and refers to murder (Gen. 9:5, 6). “Fornication” refers to sexual immorality of any kind. These things then would refer to the general moral law the Gentiles were to keep because the Ten Commandments, as part of the Mosaic Law, were no longer binding on them. While Gentiles are not under any of the Mosaic Law as such, they were to abstain from idolatry of all kinds, fornication (sexual immorality) and murder.

Practices Offensive to Jews. These restrictions for Jews primarily refer to the ceremonial and civil law in the Mosaic system that Jewish Christians would be offended at if they saw Gentile Christians practicing them. Therefore, they were to abstain and avoid these practices.

“Things contaminated by idols” refers to meat that had been sacrificed to idols. The Gentiles would take their best animals and offer them to their pagan gods. The gods who were spiritual ate the animal flesh spiritually, even though nothing happened to the meat. Then the Gentiles would take the meat and sell it in the meat market which usually was next door to the heathen temple. This was the best place in town to buy meat or to eat a juicy steak. The converted Gentiles had no real scruples about this and it was not a matter of conscience with them. However, this was very offensive to the Jews who had been brought up on a very strict diet and who had been taught to eat nothing offered to idols. These Gentile converts were to make this concession to the converted Jewish brethren, not to put the Gentiles back under the Mosaic Law but to keep from being offensive to the Jewish brethren so as not to disturb the unity, harmony and peace of the church.

There were two big questionable practices in the early church – drinking wine and eating meat offered to idols. The conclusion was that one Christian brother would do nothing that would cause another Christian brother to stumble spiritually, even though there was nothing intrinsically wrong in these acts.

“Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give

no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved” (I Cor. 10:31-33).

“Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble” (I Cor. 8:13).

“Fornication” may refer to marrying unbelievers or intermarrying with close relatives (Lev. 18). Either one of these acts would be offensive to the Jewish mind, but these explanations do not seem to give the full meaning of “fornication” which is sexual immorality and it refers to all forms of premarital and extramarital sex. It seems, in this one case, James gave a restriction concerning the moral aspects of the Mosaic Law. But why? It seems that both Jews and Gentiles would know what sexual immorality is wrong. We must understand the background to figure out why this prohibition was given. Premarital and extramarital sex (fornication and adultery) were so common among the Gentiles in that day that their consciences had been dulled. They did not see these acts as disgraceful. They were practiced without shame and without remorse. Without a written law (as the Jews had) telling these Gentiles that fornication was wrong, they did not think it was wrong. The Gentiles practiced sexual immorality as part of their pagan religions and it was part of their lifestyle. It was important, therefore, that the new Gentile converts understand the moral law of God on this matter and abstain from all illicit sexual activity.

The sin of sexual immorality causes one to destroy himself, for illegal sexual relationships destroy one’s moral fiber, mess up his emotional life and tear him up psychologically. Fornication breaks up the inner integrity of man. Christians are constantly exhorted, therefore, to flee sexual immorality.

“. . . Yet the body is not for immorality (fornication), but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body” (I Cor. 6:13b).

“Flee immorality (fornication). Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body” (I Cor. 6:18).

“Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality (fornication), impurity, sensuality, . . .” (Gal. 5:19).

“But do not let immorality (fornication) or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; . . .” (Eph. 5:3).

“For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality (fornication); . . .” (I Thess. 4:3).

Fornicators, in lands that have not had a Christian influence in today’s world, still have little conscience about sexual purity. Yet, what about so called Christianized America? America is experiencing a sexual revolution. America, in reality, is experiencing a new

rash of paganism. America is going back to hedonism and sexual debauchery. What unbelievers today call the new morality is imply old paganism. There is nothing new about the new morality, and God's judgment will fall upon this country for this blatant breaking of the moral law of God.

In college, I had a friend who was a new Christian. One day he confided to me that he had a real problem with sexual immorality but he did not see that it was such a great sin. I told him that the Bible said it was sin. He said, "I agree that the Bible says adultery is sin, but where does it say sex before marriage is sin?" He only had his King James Bible, and did not know that "fornication" meant sexual immorality. I proceeded to turn to the verses which mention that fornication is a sin. He got the point! He could not deny the clear teaching of Scripture, so he shaped up.

"What is strangled" refers to animals or birds that were killed and eaten without draining or shedding of the blood (Lev. 17:13). A Jew, therefore, would be eating blood which was strictly forbidden in the dietary laws (Lev. 17:10).

"Blood" refers to any kind of blood. It was not to be eaten or drunk. The use of blood was common among the Gentiles. They drank blood often at their sacrifices and when making covenants and compacts. Yet there is a higher reason for draining blood. The life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11, 12). Blood was given by God to sustain life and make atonement for sin. Eating or drinking blood would be very offensive to the Jewish Christian when it was a delicacy for the Gentiles.

"For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath." – Gentiles were not only to honor the consciences of other Jewish brethren, but they were also to have a good testimony among the Jews by not alienating them in the matter of scruples.

Choosing Representatives (Acts 15:22)

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas – Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leading men among the brethren, . . ." – The apostles and elders decided to send Judas and Silas, probably elders in the church at Jerusalem, to Antioch. They wanted official representatives to go to Antioch, to declare the doctrinal conclusions and the decreed practices of the Jerusalem Council. Apparently, the congregation gave their approbation to this move which the leadership had planned.

Communication by Letter (Acts 15:23-29)

"And they sent the letter by them, 'The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction had disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, . . .'" – The delegation from Antioch got what they wanted. A letter was sent out to the Gentile churches refuting the false

teaching of the Judaizers. Notice they put things in writing so there would be no misunderstanding. They shot down the Judaizers and showed they were self-appointed. It is a very serious thing to play around with a person's soul, so serious it brought apostolic rebuke and censure.

“ . . . it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.” – Notice the words “of one mind,” for there was unanimity of thinking among the leadership and congregation at Jerusalem on this matter of salvation by grace through faith in Christ and Gentile concessions.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.” – The decision of the Jerusalem Council was from the Holy Spirit and there was general agreement that what was deliberated on there was the will of God.

The Reformed Episcopal Church in America has as their motto, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” This, I believe, was the essence of the Jerusalem Council.

Congregational Reading (Acts 15:30, 31)

“So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they heard it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.” – The letter was read publicly to the whole congregation, not just to the elders. When they heard it, they rejoiced and were encouraged. It is a great relief to find out that salvation is a pure act of God's grace alone appropriated through faith in Christ alone. It is also a blessing to be willing to set aside one's freedom in Christ for the welfare of a brother in Christ.

“For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’” (Gal. 5:13, 14).

Character Building Through Teaching (Acts 15:32)

“And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.” – Judas and Silas instructed them in the Scriptures and encouraged the saints at Antioch. Much of the teaching probably centered around the freedom the Gentiles had in Christ and the responsibility they had to restrain that freedom for the unity, peace and harmony of the church. With freedom comes great responsibility.

Notice these saints did not get fidgety when the preacher went past twelve noon, for they preached a lengthy message.

Committing the Representatives (Acts 15:33)

“And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.” – Judas and Silas departed from the saints at Antioch with their affectionate regard, and with their prayers for their prosperity.

A few manuscripts say in verse 34, “But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.”

Continual Teaching and Preaching (Acts 15:35)

“But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also the word of the Lord.” – Paul and Barnabas, as probably elders at Antioch, continued their ministry there. Notice that not only Paul and Barnabas were ministering but “many others also.” They must have had a large board of elders and a large full time staff. We do not know how long they stayed in Antioch but it must have been for several months at least.

It was probably at this time that the unhappy incident occurred between Peter and Paul which is recorded for us in the book of Galatians.

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 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. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 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?’” (Gal. 2:11-14)?

The Apostle Peter came down from Antioch and at first had perfect freedom to eat with the Gentiles. He conducted himself in the spirit of the Jerusalem Council and did eat and fellowship with the Gentiles. He enjoyed a ham sandwich and was delighted to eat bacon and eggs for breakfast. He was rejoicing in the freedom he had in Christ. But the Judaizers, who paid little attention to the decree of the Jerusalem Council, continued to preach their works heresy, but now they intensified their effort in light of the Council. Imagine Peter, who made the great speech at the Council of Jerusalem and helped write the letter of freedom to the Gentiles, became afraid of the Judaizers and withdrew himself from the Gentile converts! Even Barnabas got carried away with this legalistic practice. Peter’s theology was better than his practice. He had more head than heart. Therefore Paul rebuked Peter because of his legalism. Legalism is so subtle and it crops up in so many ways. Jews were not to separate from Gentile brethren over any practices, but even Peter and Barnabas got hung up and this called for a rebuke from Paul.

CONCLUSION

The Bible tells us that God is taking out from the masses of Gentiles a people for His name according to His plan. This is the primary thing God is doing in history. Everything that happens in this world relates somehow to this great program of God in the calling out of His church.

If you are to be saved, my friend, God must call you by His grace. God gives a sovereign call but He does not answer the call. You must answer the call by faith in Jesus Christ. Is God calling you? Do you feel a struggle in your soul to receive Christ? God is calling. Answer the call by faith in Christ!