

Historical Theology: The Jerusalem Council

What Is Necessary for Gentiles to Be Saved?

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Text: Acts 15 (See also Galatians 2:1-14)

Context: The growth of the Church

The growth of the gentile church was set in motion by God working in Peter's heart in preparation for the preaching of the gospel to Cornelius (Acts 10).

In addition to the conversion of Cornelius and those who were with him, there were others who because of the persecution associated with Stephen, who were scattered throughout Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch who started preaching the gospel to Gentiles and "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-26)

Acts 15 comes between Paul's first missionary journey (13:1-14:28) and his second missionary journey (15:36-18:22).

The church is growing, Gentiles are being saved God's grace through faith in Christ and in Acts 15 we see an attack on the gospel. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that "the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and then to the Greek...." (Romans 1:16-17).

So it makes sense that our enemy, through the instrumentality of certain men, would attack on the very message that is being preached in order to empty it from its power.

That is what we see happening in Acts 15.

The Need for the Council (15:1-6)

¹Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

²And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

³Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

⁴When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

⁶The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

What is at stake in accepting the premise that the Gentiles must be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved?

Galatians 1:6-9

Peter’s Defense of the Gospel to the Gentiles (15:7-11)

1. Peter’s earlier experience of taking the gospel to the Gentiles (vv. 7—9)

[Also see Acts 10:1-11:1-18 (especially Acts 10:34-48 & Acts 11:15-18)]

“...that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. (v. 7)

“And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; (v. 8)

“He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their heart by faith.” (v. 9)

2. Peter’s Conclusion/Exhortation (vv. 10-11)

A. To require the Gentiles to keep the Law as the basis for their salvation would be testing God. (v.10)

B. The Gentiles and the Jews are all saved the same way, through the grace of the Lord Jesus. (v.11)

Testimony from Barnabas & Paul on God’s Work among the Gentiles (15:12)

“...they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

James Endorsed Peter's Defense by Appealing to Scripture (15:13-18)

¹⁴...taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.”

“people” cf. Ex. 6:7; (Gr. *laos* – is used for Israel in 2:47; 3:23; 4:10; 5:12; 7:17, 34; 13:17)

¹⁵With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

¹⁶After 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,

¹⁷So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,

¹⁸Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.

Amos 9:11-12 (Isa. 45:21; Zech. 2:11)

James' Conclusion (15:19-21)

Part 1. ¹⁹Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

Part 2. ²⁰but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols

and from fornication

and from what is strangled

and from blood. (15:28-29)

²¹For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

Leviticus 17-19;

Brian Borgman summarized the heart of the message sent to the Gentile Christians, “You don't have to become Jews but you can't remain pagans.”

The Councils Letter to Believers at Antioch (15:22-29)

The letter addresses the Gentile believers as “brothers”. (v. 23)

The letter gives no support to those who were teaching that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. (v. 24)

The letter endorsed Barnabas and Saul. (vv. 25-26)

Two other men are sent along to verify the truthfulness of the letter's content. (v. 27)

The letter states the conclusion of the council's decision. (vv. 28-29)

The Impact of the Letter on the Believers in Antioch (15:30-35)

The believers rejoiced because of the letter's encouragement. (v. 30)

Judas and Silas encouraged and strengthened the believers through a lengthy message. (v. 31)

Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch and continued their teaching ministry. (v. 35)

Questions:

How does the second part of the council's decision fit with what Paul teaches elsewhere about food sacrificed to idols?

Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 10:14-11:1

Believers have freedom to eat and drink but must be careful not to cause a brother or sister to stumble. Gentile Christians are to be careful to not offer offense to Jewish Christians by what they eat.

"Truly free people are only free when they can surrender their freedom for the weak."

The attacks on the Gospel did not end with the decision from the Jerusalem Council. Paul continued to deal with this issue, as we can see, in many of his letters to the church found in various cities. Paul's persistent opponents, who have been called the Judaizers, followed him and continued to teach their message of the necessity of keeping the Law for salvation.

We will see the doctrine of justification by faith alone attacked and distorted again and again through the history of the church. This doctrine has been called the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls.

What are some of the ways we see the gospel being attacked in our own day and culture?