

## The Day the Church Could Have Died

- Acts 15:1-21
- When you think of the biggest days, or biggest moments in history, what comes to mind? We know that Jesus' birth, death on the cross, and resurrection are without question the three most important events in history and nothing else even comes close. But there are some others that we could put on the second tier, perhaps. The Reformation. Didn't take place on a day but over about 140 years, and it returned the church back to its biblical roots, and it put the Bible in the hands of the believers. What are some of the others? The fall of the Berlin wall. The day Germany surrendered in World War II. The invention of the printing press. Then of course there is your birthday. ☺
- I think we could add the day the Jerusalem Council met to the list of biggest days in history. What was at stake was none other than the Gospel. If the Gospel had been changed, the church would not have been able to stand. Christianity would simply have been added to the list of world religions and taught alongside all the other ways that man tries to "bind himself back" to God. (the meaning of 'religion')
- Let's look at the three groups or people who spoke. Then we will see the decision the council made that "liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God's message for all humankind." (Stott)
- **The Pharisee believers**
- Does that surprise you? They are called "some men" in verse 1. And "the circumcision party" in Galatians 2. But in verse 5, they are: "some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees." Paul was a Pharisee at one time, wasn't he? But he was a Christian now, with no adjective modifying that noun. The Christianity of these Pharisees was overshadowed by their emphasis on the law of Moses. They were demanding that every Gentile convert to Christianity must first become a convert to Judaism. "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." They were telling the Gentile converts that their faith in Jesus was not enough. They were telling Gentile followers of Jesus that Jesus needed MOSES to complete what He had done. That the cross was great, but it was the law that really mattered. Do you see what was at stake? Do you see why Paul was outraged by this? And he got even more fired up when the Judaizers were able to win their biggest convert yet to their false teaching. Peter. Peter, who had been given a vision by God and then went to Cornelius' house and led the first Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ. Peter became a member for a brief time of the circumcision party. And then, even Barnabas was sucked into the lie! Barnabas, who had traveled for two years with Paul and had seen countless Gentiles come to faith. Look at **Galatians 2:11-16**.
- Listen, saints. The Pharisee Christians looked down on those who claimed to be believers but who were not following Jesus just like they were. How about you? But think about it! The Pharisee believers weren't following Jesus the way they thought they were following Jesus, either. In other words, they were trying to hold other people to a standard that they were not and could not keep themselves! A. W. Tozer said, "A pharisee is hard on others and easy on himself, but a spiritual man is easy on others and hard on himself."
- **Peter**
- We can assume that this council happens after Paul has confronted Peter and Barnabas in Antioch, because here we see Peter standing up for the Gentile Christians. He shares three quick points like a good preacher, beginning in verse 7: 1- God chose me to share the Gospel with the Gentiles first. 2: God, the heart-knower, showed us He accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit just like He did us. 3: God made no distinction between them and us, having cleansed their hearts by faith (salvation is an inside job). Then Peter brings his sermon to a

conclusion by asking them a question that sounds a LOT like the challenge Paul gave HIM in Antioch! Paul had said: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" Peter now says, "Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"

- **Barnabas and Paul**

- Interesting that Luke changes back to the original order, with Barnabas first. And it may be simply that Barnabas was better known in Jerusalem than Paul was. But the two men speak to a hushed crowd and regale them with stories from the journey. Peter has given the theological truth that is indisputable. Paul and Barnabas now share the signs and wonders God gave along the way to confirm His Word, the greatest sign being the one that He still does every time someone believes the Gospel: He makes a new creation.

- **The Decision**

- This has nothing to do with Lebron, but it did have to do with James. We're talking about James the brother of Jesus, who would later be known in historical literature as James the Just, because of his reputation for wisdom and godliness. We know that Jesus appeared to His brother James after His resurrection, and that Paul refers to James as an apostle in Galatians 1:19. We also know that James is considered the head of the church in Jerusalem, the first among equals, as he led the church not by himself but with the apostles and the elders. (verse 6). The council has heard the Pharisee believers, and Peter, and Barnabas and Paul. You can imagine the roar in the room as the Pharisees are pushing their case hard, and Peter and Paul are pushing back, and other men are weighing in, and then James says, "Brothers, listen to me." Silence. We will look at this issue of the council and church leadership more next week, but it is such an amazing gift to have leaders who can hear different opinions being expressed, both with passion and I am sure both with Scriptures that appear to bolster their case...and cut through all of it and make a clear decision that puts on display the wisdom that is from above. James wrote about that, didn't he? "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace." (James 3:17-18) And that's what James does here. He makes peace, not through compromise, but through a clear word of testimony from God's Word. He reminds the council that the words of the prophets agree with what Simeon, or Peter has said. Then he quotes from one prophet, Amos, as a representative of all the prophets who testified that God's plan included the Gentiles.
- Look at verses 16 and 17. Whose tent was fallen? The Jews. How did God restore the tent and rebuild the ruins? Through Christ. Who would then seek the Lord? All the Gentiles who are called by His name. And that they, we, would be included in the community of believers as equal to the Jews in every way. No second floor Christians. Invited in by grace, welcomed in through the blood of Christ, with no division. This is what Paul would write to the Ephesians: ***But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*** (Ephesians 2:13-16)
- **The Letter**
- We have one more thing to discuss. The Gentiles were encouraged by the Jerusalem counsel to abstain from four things: things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, things strangled, and blood. What in the world is that all about? Well, it is not James adding to the requirement for salvation. This is not "faith plus diet = salvation." Believe in Jesus and eat this diet, and you shall be saved. No! There has been much discussion and much written about this letter that

was to be disseminated to Gentile believers everywhere, and here's the most common understanding among those whom I would trust. First, look at the three that have to do with food: things polluted by idols refers to meat that has been sacrificed to idols. Jews simply would not do it. Nor would they eat anything strangled, because the animal had not been killed properly and the blood drained. They would not eat blood. Which is why this is mentioned as a separate item. So, why would James require the Gentiles to observe these three dietary restrictions? It was NOT because these had anything to do with salvation. Instead, it had to do with fellowship. FF Bruce wrote that these requirements were to be understood "not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others, the Jewish converts, who still regarded such food as unlawful and abominable in the sight of God." Well, what about the requirement to abstain from sexual immorality? That's a good rule for all of us to follow, right? Many believe, including John Stott, that James had Leviticus 17-18 in mind here when he listed these four restrictions. Chapter 17 focuses on dietary laws. Chapter 18 focuses on irregular marriages, marrying a close relation for example, or other unlawful sexual relations, including homosexuality. So, the Gentile Christians were being encouraged, first of all, that they did not have to become Jews in order to become Christians, and that salvation was by faith alone, through Christ alone. But they were encouraged to avoid giving unnecessary offense to Jewish believers by observing these four restrictions.

- It was a big day in Jerusalem. What started as a small deception could have ended up in disaster, and changed history as we know it. Kyle Idleman told the story in his book, "Gods at War" about the time his family house-sat for some friends who were out of town. It was miserably hot and they were very excited about using the above ground pool their friends had in the backyard. Kyle said the second morning his wife woke him up and said the water level in the pool seemed a little low. So he put on his son's goggles and went out to investigate. He found a hole the size of a pencil eraser where the water was slowly leaking out. He went to the pool store down the road and explained the problem, and they said it would be an easy fix, gave him an underwater patch, and explained how to use it. He put the heavy duty glue on the patch, put on the goggles and swam down to where the hole was. When he started to press the patch against the side of pool, he watched in horror as the tiny hole started to slowly expand to the size of a basketball. Suddenly 18,000 gallons of water was rushing out and trying too push HIM through the hole! He fought the current and managed to get out of the pool, grabbed towels and tried to stuff them in the hole, but there as nothing he could do to stop the inevitable. He watched helplessly as all the water emptied out of the pool and into the back yard. His kids came out with stunned and disappointed looks, and his youngest had tears in her eyes. One of his daughters looked at him and said, "Did that really just happen?"
- Thankfully on that day in Jerusalem, what threatened the church was quickly dealt with through godly leadership and biblical truth. The church did not lose its way but prospered, the truth of the Gospel was not compromised but further confirmed, and you and I are here as a result.