

The Jerusalem Council: Part 3 – Decision (Acts 15:19-30)

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (9/9/2012)

Introduction

1. Review

- a. The Jerusalem Council was convened to address the teaching of certain men from Judea, who came to the gentile church at Antioch of Syria, that in order to be saved, the gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. This teaching was opposed by Paul and Barnabas but was unresolved by a lengthy period of debate and dissension.
- b. Because of the impasse, the church decided that the matter should be presented to the elders of the Jerusalem church for resolution. Paul, Barnabas, and some of the elders from Antioch traveled to Jerusalem. They were received and welcomed by the church and after given their report concerning the work among the gentiles, certain believers who were converted Pharisees (as was Paul) insisted that the gentiles be circumcised and ordered to follow the Law of Moses.
- c. Finally, the elders convened to discuss the matter, which also led to an extended discussion. After an undisclosed length of time, Peter rehearsed his experience with the conversion of gentiles in the house of Cornelius. This event set the precedent for work among the gentiles because the Holy Spirit demonstrated that God was saving them as gentiles. Prior to the gospel of Christ, gentiles could be saved and included in the kingdom of God by becoming Jews through circumcision and embracing the Law of Moses. No gentile could ever be saved and remain a gentile. Now gentiles were being saved as gentiles. Peter's experience settled the matter. No one could question the clear evidence that God was saving gentiles without their becoming Jews. Paul and Barnabas supported that testimony by citing their own experiences in which God manifest His approval with signs and wonders.
- d. James, the half-brother of Jesus and, obviously, leading elder at Jerusalem, called for the decision of the council. Pointing to Peter's experience as proof that God was now visiting the gentiles to take out of them a people for His name, James cited Amos 9:11, 12 as agreeing with Peter. The question was closed and a decision reached—"My judgment (Gk: *krino*, "to examine something and pass judgment on it"—courtroom language) is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (v. 19). This is not merely an opinion of James. He is speaking for the council and is giving the ruling, if you will, of their consideration.

2. Three contextual issues:

- a. Any interpretation of the Scripture must address all concerns in the context of the whole, both narrowly (Acts 15) and broadly (the whole of Scripture). Scripture is its own interpreter.
- b. The questions to be interpreted
 - 1) What was the question that the council considered? What must a gentile do to be saved?
 - 2) The second contextual problem is James' use of Amos 9:11, 12. Luke does not explain how James understood that text to prove his conclusion. What did James understand about the restoration of David's fallen tent and the present ingathering of gentiles?
 - 3) The third contextual issue is in our focus today; the imposing of four obligations on the gentiles. Certainly, one understands that there are obligations to one's identification with

Christ through the gospel. Releasing the gentiles from obligation to circumcision and law keeping must not result in antinomianism (no law). This imposition of responsibilities also raises questions: (1) Why these particular items? (2) What is involved in these four items? How does this fit with Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 8:1-8, 10:25-27.

I. What the Council Imposed

1. Typical explanations

- a. The "moral principle" interpretation—each prohibition is addressed in the 10 Words.
- b. The "ceremonial law" interpretation—each points to central features of the ceremonial law. Even the order of the prohibitions (v. 29, cf. v. 20) is found in Leviticus 17 and 18.

2. Problems with these typical explanations

- a. The issue has to do with what is expected of the gentiles—what is necessary for them, not what is suggested that they might be less offensive to others.
- b. They do not answer the question: what must a gentile do to be saved?
- c. These interpretations would not satisfy the objectors who insisted upon circumcision or answer the question of keeping the law.
- d. They focus solely on outward acts and seem to throw gospel and New Testament teaching concerning the church out the window.
- e. It makes James self-contradictory in first releasing gentiles from the Mosaic Law then, in turn, obligating them to it again.
- f. How does James get that understanding from Amos 9?

3. The proper interpretation—must reconcile the whole—a litotes, a negative injunction to highlight its positive character—obedience to King Jesus.

- a. The ingathering of the gentiles is a consequence of the restoring of David's tent—the Messianic kingdom, the consummate form of David's kingdom. Jesus rules over a composite kingdom and unifies it by His lordship over His subjects and their consequent devotion to Him.
- b. The four-fold prohibitions are a composite and should be regarded as representative, not exhaustive. They should be seen, not as specific charges, but as indicating a way of life.
- c. Specifically, they address the problem of man as *idolater*—the way he thinks and lives in his estrangement from God. These prohibitions address that realm and were forbidden to Israel because Israel was to live before the nations as devoted to the true God. Note how New Testament writers focus on this matter (I John 5:21; Rev. 2:14, 20).
- d. We are to live out our salvation in obedience to Christ (Phil. 2:12, 13), not in a legal sense of keeping rules and observing prohibitions, but as Paul, himself, describes in Philippians 3.

II. Living in the Fullness of Jesus (Philippians 3:1-21)

1. Paul's warning (vv. 1-6)
2. Paul's testimony (vv. 7-14)
3. Paul's challenge (vv. 15-21)