

The Jerusalem Council: Dissension – Acts 15:1-6

By Pastor Jeff Alexander (8/26/2012)

Introduction

1. The previous chapter closed with Paul and Barnabas back in Antioch, Syria remaining “no little time” with the disciples, ministering to the saints and preparing for another missionary journey. They were basking in the joy of wonderful successes and triumphs of the gospel and, perhaps recuperating from the injuries sustained by the Jewish persecution.
2. Chapter 15 opens with a “but,” signaling that all was not joy and rejoicing. Luke now draws attention to the fact that the church was also experiencing conflicts and struggles. The setting of this conflict involves men, Jewish believers, who came from Jerusalem (comp. v. 1 with v. 24, “some men have gone out from us”) with an agenda. They were not official representatives of the church, but they seemed to be greatly disturbed by the growing influx of uncircumcised gentiles in the church.
3. Up until this time, it was not unusual for gentiles to be saved, but they were always in the minority, generally adapting to the Jewish majority. So, word of the gentile expansion of the church reached some men in Judea who took it upon themselves to visit the church and argue for their expectations of what the church should look like. They feared that things were getting out of hand and that important and historical Jewish rites were going by the wayside.
4. A discussion began in the church at Antioch that eventually turned into a very strong and emotional harangue. It reached an impasse, so the church determined to appeal to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They sent Paul, Barnabas and other elders to Jerusalem. Their resultant discussion and decision was the most important event to happen to the early church since the Day of Pentecost. Up until this time, the church has been largely Jewish in composition and culture. Now, twenty years later, the church at Antioch broke the mold, being composed of mostly uncircumcised gentile believers. To compound matters, this church had authorized a mission to gentile cities, establishing more gentile churches.
5. We need to examine this chapter carefully. At least three messages are planned to cover it. First we want to look at the issue involved in the *disagreement*. There are two major concerns that must be settled as we approach this question. (1) What was the nature of their concern that circumcision was necessary to salvation (v. 1)? (2) How could this problem be settled? What authority does anyone have to resolve such questions?

These items are the focus of today’s message as we look at three points in verses 1-6: (I.) the *quandary*, (II.) the *quarrel*, and (III.) the *question*.

In future messages we will consider the *debate* (vv. 6-21) and the *decision* (vv. 22-35). One thing is very clear. This council acted with lasting authority and the decision represents the church’s official verdict, setting a permanent precedent.

I. The Quandary (v. 1)

1. The gentile crisis in the church
 - a. Two errors are made in approaching this issue.

First, many wrongly conclude that the Jerusalem Council was concerned with the inclusion of gentiles, themselves.

Second, many see the issue as having to do with “works righteousness,” making circumcision necessary to salvation. They see it as legalism vs. grace, I believe, because of the dispensational emphasis that makes Israel and the church separate and distinct entities in their program of God. Note the following:

“It all started when some legalistic Jewish teachers came to Antioch and taught that the Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. . . God pronounces a solemn anathema on anyone who preaches any other Gospel than the Gospel of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ His Son (Gal. 1:1–9). When any religious leader says, “Unless you belong to our group, you cannot be saved!” or, “Unless you participate in our ceremonies and keep our rules, you cannot be saved!” he is adding to the Gospel and denying the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote his Epistle to the Galatians to make it clear that salvation is wholly by God’s grace, through faith in Christ, *plus nothing!* (Warren Wiersbe, *Commentary on the NT*)

While much that is said here is true, this is not the issue here. Another commentary states:

The men who came down from Judea to Antioch may well be the same ones referred to in Galatians 2:12. *They insisted circumcision was essential for justification.* Perhaps they based their theology on such passages as Genesis 17:14 and Exodus 12:48-49 (emphasis mine). (*Bible Knowledge Commentary*, by Walvoord and Zuck, Dallas Seminary).

The error of thinking that circumcision was necessary to eternal life comes from seeing the “law” in purely forensic terms. The Mosaic Covenant was the Ten Commandments. However, the Law of Moses was not a mere matter of regulation enforced with penalties, to the *guidance* of the Father for His covenant son, Israel. So, these Judeans were correct in their assumption that salvation was bound up in God’s covenant with Abraham. What they failed to understand was that the criterion for salvation was *fulfilled* and *transformed* in the one Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4).

- b. What is at stake here is not justification, but covenant standing. Salvation is to be understood as the redemption and restoration of fallen man as promise by God to His covenant community.

Through Israel’s entire history the people identified themselves as God’s covenant people through circumcision and adherence to the Law of Moses. They based their theology on Genesis 17:14 and Exodus 12:48, 49. Circumcision remained as the indispensable sign of the covenant, but it has been transformed in Christ (Col. 2:8-12; comp. Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 6:12-16). Salvation means becoming part of the true people of God in Christ who are waiting to experience the fullness of His blessing at His return.

Although God’s covenant people were primarily the physical descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel, the Lord made it clear through His prophets that gentiles also would be brought into His salvation. However, it was assumed that this inclusion would also require gentiles to submit to the same covenant standards of identification.

As the church progressed and expanded (as Jesus instructed Acts 1:8) more and more gentiles were coming into the church in their uncircumcised state. This fact was causing

increased concerns among many Jews, certainly those of the “circumcision party and converted Pharisees (possibly are reference to the same people, v. 5).

Thus, the issue at stake is what are the terms of gentile inclusion in the church? How do circumcision and the Law of Moses fit in?

Salvation is in Christ alone. No one is saved by anything but by the gracious application of Christ’s atoning work. God’s salvation is by faith in Christ plus nothing.

The concern is *covenantal righteousness*—how one’s relationship to the covenant community is defined.

2. The danger of division

- a. The men from Jerusalem were set on seeking to maintain their ancient traditions. They would not be convinced otherwise. Their error would become a major problem that would impact the gospel itself. See the book of Galatians.
- b. However, the church at Jerusalem had not sent them (v. 24). They were not there in any official capacity. This fact directs our attention to another important consideration that affects churches today. The unity of the church has been destroyed because men without biblical authority have divided the church while they sought to establish their own, not Christ’s, agenda.

II. The Quarrel (vv. 2, 3)

1. The importance of getting it right

- a. Confronting the problem with respectful debate. Paul and Barnabas entered to the fray. Paul’s experience with establishing gentile churches had brought him to understand the shift of the New Covenant away from covenantal Judaism. Thus, equipped to take on the Judaizers, Paul laid out his arguments. Paul’s epistles give us the essentials of his arguments. However, these Jewish Christians were not being convinced. The tone of the discussions became emotionally elevated. Luke uses language that emphasizes heated and energetic exchanges that had the potential of tearing the church apart.

We think that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians around A.D. 48 or 49. The Jerusalem Council met in A.D. 50. If Paul did indeed write Galatians just a year earlier, his experience with the Galatian Judaizers was still fresh in his mind. It is possible that Galatians 2:12 refers to these men.

- b. The discussion was not majoring on minors. Did the New Covenant require the same identifying features as the Mosaic Covenant? Were the outward signs of the covenant still in force?

Hebrews teaches that the New Covenant replaces the Old. Circumcision, however, is still required, but not outwardly in the flesh, it is a work of the Spirit in the heart. Baptism is now the outward sign of the New Covenant (Colossians 2:11, 12).

2. Seeking a resolution: appealing to the church at Jerusalem

a. Apostolic and elder authority

It is clear that Paul did not use apostolic authority to end the discussion. When the church at Antioch saw that an impasse was reached, they looked to outside counsel. It is interest-

ing that they sought a resolution from the very church from which the men who insisted on circumcision came. I believe that this why they appealed to the Jerusalem church.

Another matter now becomes apparent. The church at Antioch appealed to the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem to hear and discuss the issue. The Grandville Sharp rule enters here. If two nouns are joined by “and,” the first noun has the definite article, but the second does not, then both nouns refer to the same thing. In other words, “the apostles even the elders.” It is elders who deal with the problem, not the members of the congregation. Neither was it the apostles, *per se*. Apostles were elders (1 Peter 5:1).

- b. The objective: unity in the church, the whole church—Jew and Gentile. If both churches could reach agreement in the mind of the Lord, the issue would be settled and the churches would be unified. That must always be the goal when disagreements arise. The will of God must be sought.
- c. An aside (bringing joy to the brothers, v. 3)

These were Gentile areas. The churches would have been mixed churches. Their response is a prophetic reminder to the Jerusalem church. The world-wide mission started by Hellenists, is confirmed by Hellenist churches.

It is also possible that by doing this the church in Jerusalem would not be able to quietly and secretly dismiss this issue (cf. 21:18–20).

III. The Question (vv. 4-6)

1. A gracious reception (v. 4)

The whole church warmly received them and rejoiced in their missionary report.

2. Further contention (v. 5)

Converted Pharisees were the vocal group that “stood up” (opens the sentence in Greek to indicate its importance by way of emphasis) insisting that the OT, being inspired, was therefore, to be maintained! It was necessary that one both trust Jesus and obey Moses (see Gal. 5:3). This debate consumed a considerable amount of time.

3. Getting the problem before the Lord (v. 6)

That brings up an important matter, biblical church government.

All churches today fall under one of three types of government: episcopal, elder, or congregational rule. Episcopal comes from the Greek term (*episcopas*) designating the office of the pastor or shepherd. Churches began to recognize pastors as leadership extended over other pastors. Thus, churches were united under a hierarchy of men—bishops, archbishops, etc.

During the reformation, some churches recognized that the Bible taught a plurality of pastors over each church. The term, elder, translates the Greek word *presbuteros*, the term from which Presbyterians get their name because of their plurality of eldership. Congregations vote on their leaders, but the leaders govern the affairs of the church. When disputes cannot be settled, appeal is made to regional sessions, elders representing churches in that region. As one brother put it, appeal is not made to higher levels of authority, but to wider circles.

Other reformers were convinced that the whole congregation was the last word on ecclesiastical (church) authority. A vote of the members determined the will of God on matters of contention after discussion. Fifty-one percent of the church decides for the whole church. Baptists came out of congregational Puritanism.

I don't want to go into this too extensively here, but Acts 15 apparently teaches elder rule. As the elders came to a decision on circumcision, the congregations agreed and submitted to their ruling.

Lessons

To bring the issue into a modern context, consider: All salvation is a gracious work of God through the cross-work of Jesus Christ applied by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1. Before Christ, the saints trusted God's *promise* of a Deliverer who would redeem and restore them to full communion with God in the personal relationship of Father and son.

In the Old Testament, God's covenant community (Israel), in the hope of salvation, was identified by *circumcision* and *obedience* to the Law of Moses.

2. After Christ, we trust Christ now in the hope of one who *has* redeemed and restored us to full communion with God in the personal relationship of Father and Son—the full blessing of which is to be realized at the Second Coming of Christ.

In the New Testament, God's covenant community (the church), in the hope of salvation, is identified by *baptism* and *obedience* to the Law of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).