

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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The Council at Jerusalem

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The Dispute about Circumcision ([15:1-5](#))

It was difficult for some Jewish Christians to accept that Gentiles could be brought into the church as equal members without first coming through the Law of Moses.

Because of this, some held a negative opinion about Paul and Barnabas' missionary endeavors. On their first missionary journey, they founded churches among the Gentiles without "bringing them under" the Law of Moses first. The thinking was "Jesus saves us, but only after we have done all we can do to keep the Law of Moses." Paul & Co., on the other hand, taught that a person could be right with God solely on the basis of what Jesus had done. This was an issue that went to the core of the Christian faith, and it had to be resolved!

How might Satan seek to take advantage of situations like this?

Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them: Their first response was to try to persuade their opponents. In taking this approach, Paul and Barnabas showed that they had truly pastoral hearts. They loved their brothers enough to confront and correct those who insisted on teach a false doctrine.

...Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem: When persuasion didn't settle the issue, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by the apostles and elders. They couldn't just agree to disagree on this issue, because it was at the core of what it meant (and means to this day!) to be a disciple of Christ!

So who exactly were the ones who determined that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem? The text implies that it was the church in Antioch collectively, probably specifically the leadership there.

They caused great joy to all the brethren: As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they found many other Christians who rejoiced at what God was doing among the Gentiles, even as some of the Pharisees who opposed Paul and Barnabas, who would have been well known for their high regard for the law, continued in their fervent desire to obey the law as a way to be justified.

There is a parallel in the fervor of the two sides here. It's not unusual when there is division in the church for both (or all) sides to fervently believe they are defending the faith in its purest form. We saw in Lystra that Paul and Barnabas could not and would not allow the pagans to merely add Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. They *commanded* that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God (14:14-15). Similarly, these Christian Pharisees were arguing, too, for an uncompromising boldness of faith: turn to Jesus, and keep God's laws in the greatest detail.

Paul himself being a former Pharisee would have understood that position, but he also knew that Jesus was his salvation, not merely a part of the way to his salvation. In Galatians 2:16 Paul writes: *"...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."*

It is necessary to circumcise them: The Christian Pharisees taught two things. First, Gentile converts must be initiated into Judaism through circumcision. Second, Gentile converts must live under the law of Moses if they were to be right with God (and embraced by their Judeo-Christian community!)

We can imagine how they would have even made a case from the Old Testament for this teaching. They might have said Israel has always been God's chosen people and that Gentiles must become part of Israel if they want to be part of God's people. One can hear them quoting passages like Exodus 12:48-49 and Isaiah 56:6. These passages might be quoted to say that the covenant the Gentiles were invited to join was a covenant of circumcision.

The Jerusalem Council ([15:6-11](#))

...The apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. These leaders came together to decide the issue. They didn't just let the issue sit, nor leave it up to the conscience of each believer. This matter was too important for that. Are Christians made right with God by faith alone, or by a combination of faith and obedience of the Law of Moses? Is the work of Jesus by itself enough to save the one who trusts in Jesus, or must we add our work to Jesus' work in order to be made right with God?

Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago...: Peter, as one of the leading apostles, rose up to state his opinion. He begins with a history lesson, recounting the work God had already done. He then made the point that God had fully received the Gentiles apart from their being circumcised. If God had acknowledged these Gentiles as full partners in His work, then why shouldn't the church? If God received them, so should the church!

In stating, "Made no distinction between us and them," Peter made an important point that came straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle: do not call any man common or unclean (Acts 10:28). The Gentiles, who the Pharisees considered to be inherently "common" or "unclean" (in the sense of unholy), had in fact been made holy and clean. He explains how the heart is purified: by faith, not by keeping of the law. If they were purified by faith, then there was no need to be purified by submitting to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses. Christians are not only saved by faith; they are also *purified* by that faith.

Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Peter wisely answered another objection with this rhetorical question. The Pharisees might ask, "What's the harm in bringing Gentiles under the Law of Moses?", but Peter points out that the law was a yoke which neither their ancestors or they themselves were able to bear!

Throughout the Old Testament, from beginning to end, Israel could not bear the yoke of the law. The Pharisees made a critical mistake; they looked at Israel's history under the law with nostalgia, not the clear light of truth. If they had carefully and truthfully considered Israel's failure under the law, they might not have been so quick to seek to put Gentiles under the law.

Peter concluded with the observation that it is through grace that all are saved – both Jew and Gentile – and not by obedience to the law. If we are made right with God by grace, then we are not saved by grace and law-keeping.

Then all the multitude kept silent and listened: This shows that even though there had been much dispute, these men were all of an honorable heart. They were willing to listen, and to be persuaded if wrong. Just like our political climate today. Oops, no, never mind, not like that at all!

James Speaks ([15:13-21](#))

James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me.” This James was not the apostle James, whose was martyred in Acts 12:2. This was the one traditionally known as James the Just – the half-brother of Jesus (Matthew 13:55), the brother of Jude (Jude 1), and the author of the book of James (James 1:1). He was a leader, respected as chairman of this council, and had a pastoral heart. These things seem to count for more than his familial relationship with the Man Jesus.

The Greek word for Gentiles, also translated as “nations”, is *ἔθνη* (eth-nay). The word for “people” in this passage, however, is *λαών* (lau-own). The Jews considered themselves the *λαών* of God, and would never count themselves among the *ἔθνη*. For them these were contrasting words. So, it was a challenge for them to hear that God visited the Gentiles (*ἔθνη*) to “take out of them a people” (*λαών*)!

With this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: James judged this “new” work of God by the way any work of God should be judged; he looked to the scriptures.

Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name: The passage James quotes here (Amos 9:11-12) actually says that salvation will come to the Gentiles. This demonstrates that what God did among the Gentiles had a Biblical foundation.

Are there any teachings or practices that we today consider as being “pure”, even though they may not be based in scripture?

Martin Luther became famous (or infamous!) in no small part because he knew that councils should have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with Scripture.

Therefore I judge: This phrasing implies that James had a position of high authority in the church. He is sometimes called the “Bishop of Jerusalem” because of what we read here.

The Greek phrases it as “I determine” or “I resolve”; James was speaking for the assembly. Others either argued on the subject, or gave their opinion; James alone pronounced the definitive sentence. It seems clear that James’ leadership was supported by everyone present.

...We write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols....: James’ decision that Gentile believers should not be under the Mosaic Law was also given with practical instruction. The idea was that it was important that Gentile believers did not act in a way that would offend the Jewish community in every city and destroy the church’s witness among Jews. This instruction was not about their salvation; it was about their witness to the world around them.

Some of the commands dealt specifically with the eating habits of Gentile Christians. Though they were not bound under the Law of Moses, the Law of Love told them, “Don’t unnecessarily antagonize your Jewish neighbors, both in and out of the church.”

When speaking to sexual immorality, we shouldn’t think that James simply meant sex outside of marriage, which all Christians (Jew or Gentile) recognized as wrong. Instead, James told these Gentiles living in such close fellowship with the Jewish believers to observe the specific marriage regulations required by Leviticus 18, which prohibited marriages between most family relations. This was something that would offend Jews, but was common in non-Jewish cultures, and therefore which most Gentiles would think little of.

To send chosen men of their own company to Antioch: The Jerusalem council wisely sent two members of its own community with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch, the place where the whole dispute arose.

A Letter to the Gentiles (15:23-29)

They wrote this letter by them: The letter communicates the decision of the Jerusalem council, that Gentiles should consider themselves under no obligation to the rituals of Judaism, except the sensitivity which love demands, in order to preserve the fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers.

This letter was written specifically to the churches where Jews and Gentiles mixed together with the potential of tension and conflict. It was not addressed to every Gentile congregation.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us: James voiced the decision of the council, but the unity behind the decision was one of several evidences that it was the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit spoke through James and confirmed it through others.

Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch ([15:30-31](#))

When they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter: One can imagine how the Gentile Christians felt, wondering how the decision might turn out. How relieved they were to see that the principle of grace had been preserved! They heard that they were saved and right with God, just as Paul and Barnabas had preached and taught.

Judas and Silas: These two served in Antioch as visiting ministers from Jerusalem. Then Judas returned, leaving Silas in Antioch for future ministry.

Contention over John Mark ([15:36-41](#))

Let us now go back and visit our brethren: Paul did much “pioneer” evangelism, where he preached in places where there was yet no Christian community. But he also understood the importance of strengthening and encouraging those who were already Christians. That was the initial motivation for the second missionary trip.

John called Mark: John Mark had previously left the missionary party under what seemed to be less than honorable circumstances (13:13). This probably made Paul unwilling to trust him on future endeavors.

It’s interesting that early in this chapter there was large, exceedingly important dispute, and no small dissension over it, as it was an important doctrinal matter. And that matter was resolved! But here the sharp contention seemed less important and more personal, and it is not really resolved.

Barnabas was John Mark’s cousin (Colossians 4:10), and since Barnabas had such an encouraging, accepting character (Acts 4:36, 9:26-27), it is easy to see why he would be more understanding towards John Mark than Paul was.

They parted from one another: So, Paul (accompanied by Silas) and Barnabas (accompanied by Mark) split, each going out to different fields of ministry.

Luke doesn't give us a clue as to who was right and who was wrong in this dispute between Paul and Barnabas. But Paul eventually came to minister with John Mark, and valued his contributions to the work of God (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:24; 2 Timothy 4:11). We don't know if it was Mark who changed or Paul who changed. Perhaps God had a work to do in both of them!

Paul chose Silas: Silas (also called Silvanus) became an important part of Paul's team in doing the work of the ministry. Some things we know about Silas:

- He was recognized as a leader (Acts 15:22)
- He was a prophet (Acts 15:32)
- He was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37)
- He probably spoke Greek (comparing Acts 15:22 and 15:32)
- Silas wrote out one of Peter's letters (1 Peter 5:12) and maybe some of Paul's (1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:1)