

Conflict & A Council

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[0 : 00] So welcome here for this Sunday, June 8th. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. So this morning we're continuing in our ongoing sermon series, Acts to All the World.

! And through this series, we're exploring the New Testament book of Acts. In our sermon last week, we recognized that Paul and Barnabas concluded their first missionary journey together by returning to the church that had sent them. Do you remember that?

And an important part of that return visit was reporting back on what had happened on their trip. So it goes by pretty quickly in Acts 14, verse 27, but Paul notes that God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

Maybe you remember that from our passage last week. And in our study in Acts so far, we can actually recognize the conversion of many Gentiles. So here's a few. Sergius Paulus was a Roman official who accepted Christ.

In Acts 13, verses 6 to 12, we hear his story. Many Gentiles in Antioch of Pisidia, Pisidian Antioch, we learn that they received Christ. Acts 13, verses 42 to 49.

[1 : 15] And the Greeks in Iconium, we also learned about. Acts 14, verse 1, we talked about them. They received Jesus as well. So, audience participation question.

You ready? Don't cheat. Don't jump to it. Just let me ask the question. Raise your hand if you identify as a Gentile believer.

Wait. Wait. So this is a follower of Jesus that has no Jewish roots. So raise your hand now. No Jewish roots.

Gentile believers. Okay. Some people are not putting their hands up. That'll be a different conversation later. So have a look. Raise your hands again. Everybody have a look around.

Okay. We see it, right? Nobody looked around. But trust me, there's lots. Following some of the instructions, but not all.

[2 : 15] Noted. So we're actually looking at Acts 15 this morning. And yes, it's the whole chapter. So don't panic. I'm going to read it for us.

But grab a Bible. Acts 15, the entire chapter. So you can follow along in your Bible if you have one with you. Or grab one from the pew in front of you. Acts 15. It's easy to find.

Comes between 14 and 16. And so don't panic. As I said, I'll identify some highlights from the passage afterwards. Then we'll consider the concepts from it.

And how they apply to us today. So I did consider, do I just say, well, I'm speaking, I'm preaching from Acts 15 this morning. You get after it later. Nah, I've had pastors do that.

Preachers do that. And do you do it after? Not usually, right? Let's say head shakes. Nah, not really. Or I could have said, well, here's a chunk, and here's a chunk, and here's a chunk.

[3 : 14] And I find that that could be distracting. So again, Acts 15, the entire chapter. And I'm going to read it, and now I do need to put my glasses on for this part. Acts 15.

Let's hear that now. Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers. Unless you were circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

[4 : 23] The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving his Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No. No. We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling them about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up.

Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written.

[5 : 38] After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago.

Continuing, James says, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. Then the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men and sent them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They chose Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. With them, they sent the following letter. The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings.

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends, Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[7 : 07] Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements.

You are to abstain from food sacrifice to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell. So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Sometime later, Paul said to Barnabas, let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preach the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.

[8 : 15] Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it was wise to take them because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.

They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord.

He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Acts 15. Our sermon this morning is titled, Conflict and a Council.

It wasn't long before the question of Gentiles in the church became an issue, and here we are. Jewish believers and leaders began to question a few things.

First, should Gentile believers be accepted into the faith without converting to Judaism first? Right? They saw or they perceived that might be a requirement, that someone who wanted to follow Jesus needed to be a Jew first before they could become a Christian.

[9 : 25] Then, should Gentile believers be required to be circumcised? And that's only a part of the law of Moses, right? So again, they're looking at examples, outward examples, outward requirements that people could see that would then be able to be connected with faith, with following in Christianity.

So some argued that circumcision was necessary. So we hear in Scripture about adult males being circumcised. Ouch. for gentlemen, I don't know if you remember it.

I thankfully do not. I think most males do not, which is by the grace of God, I guess. And others, though, countered this argument. They said that salvation was by Christ alone.

That's an amen, right? Is it, though? Let's look at it. So you may remember when we left off last week that Paul had remained in the church in Antioch for a long time.

Now, Scripture doesn't give us a timeline, but it's a long time. And it was there that this conflict really began to start to percolate, began to boil. So let's look at some of the highlights that we can see from this passage this morning.

[10 : 44] How did this conflict start? Well, we learned that a group of men came from Judea, and they were teaching that the Gentiles could not be saved without circumcision.

Period. End of sentence from their perspective. And then we heard that Paul and Barnabas disagreed, right? They did not agree with this perspective. So Paul and Barnabas were then sent to Jerusalem, and they were accompanied by, Scripture says, certain others, such as Titus was one of them, to talk to the apostles.

They were sent as a delegation to talk to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. On the way there, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, and they described the conversion of the Gentiles as they went.

They were telling the story of what God had already done among these people. And that news we hear brought joy to the believers who heard it along the way. So since these men who came from Judea caused this disturbance, Paul and his companions went to Jerusalem.

The prominent city in that region, in the Judea region, to find the source of the problem. They're not going to sit back and say, okay, well, these guys were wrong.

[12 : 01] They actually, it's quite fascinating, actually, they dig into it a bit and say, okay, well, where did this come from? So there's a root to this perspective.

There's a root to this movement of sorts. And so where did it come from? We're going to find out. So their investigation actually led to a gathering of leaders that's come to be known as the Council of Jerusalem or the Jerusalem Council.

And you can Google it and there's some highlights in history. It's a prominent event in the early church. So it began with preliminary meetings where this delegation of Paul was formally received by the church as a whole.

The early church did that, right? They received people in, blessed them, welcomed them, and then sat down and listened to what they had to say. So the church as a whole welcomed them, including the leaders and the apostles and the elders who were there.

Then as we noted, remember last week, one of Paul's missionary priorities, he gave a report to the church of everything that God had done through him.

[13 : 10] Do you remember that? That was a priority that we've identified in Paul's ministry. So we recognize that those who had very specific perspectives wasted no time in objecting to the approach that Paul and Barnabas had taken in their ministry to Gentiles.

Right? When people don't like something, they tend to stir it up. Right? They tend to try and tear it down. So it shouldn't surprise us then that our passage this morning mentions that the group of objectors were, do you remember, connected to the Pharisees.

There's a shocker, right? So as you may know, the Pharisees were a Jewish religious group that emerged during the second temple period. And these folks were known for their strict interpretation and observance of the Mosaic law.

So they saw the law and observance and obeying the law as more important than faith in Christ, particularly, including both the, so they, they prioritized the religious traditions, the religious rules and guidelines that were both written and passed down orally from the Old Testament. So they were, they viewed themselves, the Pharisees, as the keepers, the protectors of the faith in this hard and legalistic view of the rules.

[14:35] So this group that's mentioned in Acts 15 may have been Pharisees who became followers of Jesus. So they began with that really strict view and then bridged it into their faith in Christ.

So this group, as we heard, was very vocal that Gentile believers should be, and we could even say must be, circumcised, must keep the law of Moses, and then the apostles and the elders of the church met to discuss this issue, Jerusalem Council.

Galatians 2 gives us some additional insight into Paul's perspective on this issue and his conviction that grace, this is a message that Paul delivers over and over and over, grace, not a person's actions or works, were the key to salvation, period, for Paul.

Galatians 2 also shows how some believers tried to compel Titus, a Gentile believer, to be circumcised, but Paul said, no, that's not happening.

So what was their response to this? Well, we hear that there was much discussion, right? People like to discuss when they're passionate about things, but then Peter gets up to speak to the gathering and if you caught that James refers to Peter, it says, Simon, Simon Peter, right?

[16:03] So he recounted how God had chosen him to be the first to preach to the Gentiles. Do you remember that about Peter? And that God had shown his acceptance of them, the Gentiles, by giving the Holy Spirit to them when they professed their faith.

That was the trigger, right? We receive the Holy Spirit when we profess our faith in Christ. And Peter points out just as he did with Jewish believers, right?

So Peter says, the Holy Spirit comes when professing faith in Christ, Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter. So it was the faith that the Gentiles, believers, that God had seen their faith, and he, through that, purified their hearts, right?

There weren't these steps that God required for them to follow. So then, I love this, Peter switches into conviction mode, right? He explains a little bit, and then he begins to challenge the people who are naysayers.

And he says, what does he say? He says, don't test God, right? Have you ever had somebody say to you, yeah, you're trying to test God by what you're doing? Wouldn't that make you feel uncomfortable?

[17:18] Right? That feels like standing against God and saying, no, I got it right, you got it wrong. So Peter switches into that intense mode of conviction. And then he says, why would we seek to put a burden on Gentile believers that we, ourselves, Jewish believers, couldn't have possibly hoped to live up to?

Right? He says, that is not, that was never God's intention. The message that was, was that God's grace and unconditional love for both Jew and Gentile believers were only available through faith in Jesus.

Period. They weren't secured, that salvation, that faith, was not secured by any degree of rule following. So I think lots of people, I was thinking of this as I was working on this sermon this week, I think lots of people think Christianity is all about rules.

rules. Do you feel that sometimes? Do you feel judged? Do you feel, oh, I can never possibly live up? I don't pray well enough, I don't give enough, I don't, the list goes on and on and on, right? Is that God's voice? Or is that your own voice in your head saying, well, I've got standards for myself. Remember, this is a long time ago, probably, when I last said this, that God's bar for you is not your own bar.

[18:52] God loves you, God cares for you, God welcomes you, God's grace is enough. So all of these standards that we set, are they fair?

Are they accurate? I'd say no. So then we learn, after Peter gives this perspective, we learn that the whole assembly, we don't know how many people, but probably a big gathering, this was an important topic, they became quiet.

So as they listened to Paul and Barnabas testify about the many miracles God had done through them to the Gentiles, the group fell quiet.

How do you argue that, right? How do you argue against that? So this was more evidence of God's love and grace towards Gentile believers. believers. So who is James' brother?

Jesus. So this is James, the brother of Jesus. So James gets up to speak, right? We go through the agenda of the meeting and James is next.

[20 : 02] Peter has spoken. So Jesus' brother had become the leader of the church in Jerusalem and the author of the book of Genesis.

Wrong! Yeah, lots of times the author, their book bears the name. So he reminded the group, he gets up and reminds the group of what Peter had said, right?

He's backing Peter up and he also reminds them of the words of the Old Testament prophet Amos. Did you catch that? he's talking about the covenant promise of Gentiles being part of God's plan all along.

This is not a new thing. This is not God suddenly saying, oh, I forgot about the Gentiles, right? Oh, I forgot about them. We should probably grandfather them in at this point.

Not at all. Always part of the plan. And that this was now that plan being fulfilled. So as the head of the Jerusalem church, it would have been James' role and his right to render a final judgment on the issue.

[21 : 11] So he's heard all the evidence, both sides. So James concluded two things, at least two things, a few things. They shouldn't cause unnecessary trouble for the Gentiles who are turning to God, right?

He's encouraging the people not to get in the way of what God has planned to do in and through the Gentiles. Instead, they sent two leaders, church leaders, Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, back to the churches in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia with a letter to the Gentile believers in those communities.

Lots of scripture is letters, right? Lots of scripture is letters from Paul to churches, being less than happy with them. Do you think we should get a letter? Maybe we should get a letter.

So the letter that was sent to these Gentile church communities included an apology, first of all, right? Included an apology for any confusion or concern that had been created by Jewish believers who came on their own volition.

They were not sent by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Hey, Gentile believers, actually, we missed a bunch of steps that you need to follow now. Not at all. So this letter came from Jerusalem as an apology and a clarification.

[22 : 38] So the letter made it clear that those who caused the trouble did so without any authority from the community, from the church leaders in Jerusalem. The message of the letter also freed the Gentile believers of any obligation to be circumcised.

But it did give some requirements. It asked that they abstain from food sacrifice to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.

So one commentary I read said that if Gentile Christians would abstain from those practices, those four things, they would do two things for themselves.

They would be pleasing God, seeking to honor his commandments, and they would also get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ, because they would be seen to be making an effort of sorts.

So the observances outlined in the letter would go a long way in keeping peace between Jewish and Gentile believers. So there were other observances, obviously, that were deemed inappropriate for believers, you can imagine what they might have been, but the Jews were particularly concerned with the four that were outlined in the letter, that's why they were there.

[23 : 59] So with the testimonies of Paul and Barnabas and Peter and James, and supported by God's approval through miraculous signs and these prophetic scriptures, we heard the words of Amos, the conflict came to a quick resolution for the time being.

So what was the result of all of this? Paul and the delegation from the Jerusalem church returned to Antioch to deliver this letter to Gentile believers and we hear that the people who received it were grateful, probably relieved to some extent, right?

This debate over circumcision and the legalistic requirements for Gentile believers could have split the church. Can you see that?

not only that, but imagine if they had held to a legalistic view the Jewish believers that they sought to impose unfairly onto the Gentiles, would they, Gentile believers, have said, not worth it and

walked away?

Paul and Barnabas and the Jews in Antioch made the right decision. They sought counsel from God's word and from God himself.

[25 : 19] So this conflict over circumcision and the law illustrates the challenges faced by the early church, some of them. The challenge of the transition from old covenant, right, Mosaic law, to the new covenant fulfilled in Christ, the messianic covenant.

The challenge, another one, of accepting those who may have been considered by the Jewish people, the Jews who became Jewish Christians, to accept and allow people in who they would have deemed to be unclean, somehow less than, but allow them into the same community, church community, this new church community.

But these challenges were largely overcome, in part, due to Paul. Paul. He was a man who, before his conversion, had been, no shock, a Pharisee, remember?

He referred to himself at one point early on as a Hebrew of Hebrews, meaning he was a rule follower, right? He followed the law, he knew the law.

He hated the early Christians. He persecuted and made it possible for them to be killed. And yet, Paul, the same man, used to be Saul, became an apostle specifically to the Gentiles.

[26 : 50] God has a great sense of humor, doesn't he? A man who God called and worked in and through Paul to bridge the gap between Jew and Gentile, fulfilling what Jesus did, died to accomplish on the cross, to bring peace between Jew and Gentile, to bring peace between all people, and to unite them into one new body.

So this ought to remind us, those of us who are Gentiles, how blessed we are to come into the fellowship of God and his people. We are his people too.

So the passage we've looked at together this morning teaches us about resolving conflict. It teaches us about standing firm in truth.

And it teaches us about preserving unity in the face of challenge. It also highlights, I believe, the power of God's grace over often rigid human traditions.

Christians. The Jerusalem council affirmed that salvation is a free gift available to all of us by God's grace alone, not something that is earned by works or by keeping laws.

[28 : 18] We've also recognized the importance of wise, spirit-led leadership in resolving church conflicts. The church is strongest when its leaders submit to the authority of God.

True unity is built on a balance of conviction and compassion. Can you see that? But that must not come, that balance, those two things, must not come at the cost of biblical truth.

God's word is our rock. So this also demonstrates in my mind that unity is not just about being right. Can you see that?

How often do we seek to be right? To use our convictions, our perspectives, our passions to try and arm wrestle someone else into submission.

Because unity is about showing love. Now, do you remember the question I asked when we started this morning? I asked how many of us identify as Gentile believers.

[29 : 28] And for those of you who didn't look around, it was a lot. So without these hard conversations and the desire of the early church to remain unified in seeking God and being faithful, the road to being, to following Christ could have been potentially much more challenging for us, for you, and for me.

Thanks be to God for making a way through faith in Jesus, to be welcomed into his family, making a way for each of us and ultimately all people to spend eternity with him.

Amen? Amen. Amen.