

God's Unstoppable Mission, Part 3: The Jerusalem Council

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Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] This is, in a sense, a slight detour from Paul's missionary journeys. But as I hope we'll see, and as Bob was alluding to, this is crucial to the mission of the church and to the continued unity of the church.

As I was thinking about it this week, I was thinking about a couple of parallels. One which I guess is in many of our minds. Think about the Brexit discussions. The sort of years of intense debate and discussion that's going on.

And that makes sense because it's a huge moment in our national political life. Because it's setting the course of how the UK relates to the rest of Europe at a political and economic level.

That's not something you do casually. So there's lots of discussion. How are we going to relate from this point forward, together, or separate? The other thing that was in my head, slightly more mundane perhaps, think about when those ancient golf clubs began to change their membership rules.

So for generations, for decades, for centuries, men only, and then they allowed access to women. It was not easy for everybody to embrace that change of membership.

[1 : 16] There was a certain expectation that this club looked a certain way and felt a certain way. And to bring that kind of change was great progress for some, really challenging for others.

When we come to the Jerusalem Council, it's like both of those things, but much, much bigger and more radical and more significant. It's the Jerusalem Council that really enables Christianity to be a truly global religion with a vision big enough to include Jews and Gentiles in the one church.

And this is a radical change from the way things were in the Old Testament. You know, you read the Old Testament, you find that there is a, I suppose, a large day, a trickle of believers who join the Old Testament nation of Israel to become part of the people of God.

But when they did that, they had to be circumcised as the sign of the covenant. They had to live under the law of Moses. But now, in the New Testament, the gift of the Spirit, the sending of the apostles on mission, especially with Paul, people are being brought into the church.

And baptism is the only sign. The people are becoming Christians in other parts, and their national identity is being retained. They're not having to come to Israel.

[2 : 40] They're not having to become Jewish. So this is a huge change in how church membership happens. And so at stake in the Council of Jerusalem is this.

It's, can faith in Jesus alone be the basis for the church and for unity in the church? And there were some who were challenging that idea.

Can you follow Jesus as God's promised Messiah and Savior without becoming a Jew? And again, there was much debate and discussion about that.

As Bob read for us, we discovered that there were two groups on either side. And there was lots of debate and discussion so that they would be clear on God's vision for God's church.

John Stott, in his commentary on the book of Acts, famously wrote this. And so the issues and the implications were important then, but they remain important for us today as we think about our place in God's mission.

[3 : 59] So let's look at the first five verses to give ourselves an understanding of why the council took place. On trial really is the idea, or two competing ideas, is the church built on grace or is the church built on law?

Verse 1. Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

So Antioch, as we remember, is the sending church of Paul and Barnabas. So it becomes, in a sense, the center for this new understanding that people are saved by grace and there's no need to become Jewish to be part of God's church.

And this idea is clearly creating shockwaves back in Jerusalem. And so we read of the emergence of this group that we sometimes call the Judaizers, and they're saying, yes, you need Jesus, but you also need circumcision.

You also need to be under the law of Moses if you want to be saved. If you're here when we studied Galatians, it's the same group causing problems there. They're thinking, is the Gentile mission?

[5 : 11] Yes, that should happen. Of course, the good news should go out beyond Israel, but converts must then become Jews. And as we saw, as we looked at the letter to the Galatians, the gospel is at stake.

This isn't a matter of secondary importance or church practice, and it's kind of neither here nor there. What they're saying is, Jesus, yes, he starts your Christian life, but you need the law of Moses to finish the Christian life.

You begin with grace, but then you need to add law. You need to add merit. You need performance. Verse 2, we discover, unsurprisingly, that Paul and Barnabas disagree strongly.

And so the church in Antioch, they decide that they should call a council, a church council in Jerusalem. And they then send Paul and Barnabas along with some others in order to get to the heart of the issue.

So this council at Jerusalem is going to deal with the essence of Christian truth. Can I be saved by God's grace alone, simply by trusting in the finished work of Jesus, or do I need to add something?

[6 : 28] Is the death and resurrection of Jesus enough to deal with my sin and to bring me back to fellowship with God, or do I need to add some extra religious works and ceremony?

And tied up with that is the idea, can a person from any country, any culture, any background, be part of the Christian faith through trusting in Jesus, or are there extra steps required as a person need to become Jew?

So we can see, I hope, that the Jerusalem council is something that really matters in terms of setting the course for our understanding of what's at the heart of the Christian faith and what's at the heart of the church.

So that's what's on trial. Is church about grace or about law? So let's see how the Jerusalem council decides. The way Luke records this for us in verse 6 to 18 is he gives us, in a sense, three key witnesses who give testimony to the fact that God's church absolutely is built on God's grace.

The first defense witness to this idea is Peter. Peter makes four clear and crucial points. First one is in verse 7.

[7 : 44] 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 belief.

So there's the first thing. This is God's choice. This new reality isn't Paul and Barnabas' thing. This is God's choice, God's purpose. And so Peter can say, remember that God sent me from Jerusalem to bring the good news to the Gentiles so that they might believe.

So God's choice is behind this. Another piece of evidence that he points to is God's gift. Verse 8. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us.

So here is Paul remembering his own experience. Acts chapter 10. He goes to the house of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, and he brings the message of Jesus and Cornelius and his household.

They receive the Holy Spirit. That there's no distinction between the Jewish Christians and this non-Jewish Christian. And that has been the pattern of New Testament mission ever since.

[9 : 06] That the sign of God accepting someone, the sign of someone having true faith, is the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is what Jesus promised. So Peter says, remember, God promised that. Jesus spoke about it.

We saw it. The next piece of testimony that Peter brings, verse 9, he speaks about God's washing. Again, he made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

So one of the big issues between Jews and Gentiles was the purity laws. And Peter is following the pattern of Jesus, who reminded people in his day that purity is not an external thing.

It's about a change in people's heart. And so Peter is standing up at this council. He's saying, it's Jesus' death for sinners that creates the internal purity that we need.

And that's where fellowship can happen. It's not who does this washing and who doesn't do that washing. It's have we been washed? Have we been made clean by the saving work of Jesus?

[10 : 12] And he's saying for Jews and Gentiles, there's evidence that that's true for both. And then the last piece of evidence that Peter brings as he goes to speak about God's grace.

It's verse 10 and 11. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

No, we believe it's through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are. So again, this takes us back to Galatians. In Galatians, we discover that for Old Testament Christians, for Jewish Christians, for Gentile Christians, it's always been a case that a person is saved by God's grace.

It was never about keeping the law well enough to be accepted. God's standards are perfect. He is holy. That's never going to be the way it works. It's always about God's kindness, sending Jesus to do what we can't do, taking the punishment that we should take to allow us to be welcomed by God.

And so Peter is very careful all through his testimony. He said there's no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. We've been washed. We've received the Holy Spirit. And we're all saved by grace.

[11 : 29] It's compelling evidence from a key leader in the church. The second witness for the defense is Paul and Barnabas.

Verse 12, the whole assembly became silent as he listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

So what they focus on is the miracles that they have performed on their mission. We've read about some of those in earlier chapters and Acts. And Paul and Barnabas, like John's gospel, make the point that the miracles of Jesus and the miracles of the apostles stand as signs, signposts.

Here is a sign that this is where God's kingdom is. God has been working in power. Here is proof that God approved of the message of Paul and Barnabas.

So they're saying you're saved by grace and by grace alone. And then God enables them to do miracles. And that's a sign that their testimony, their message is approved of by God.

[12 : 40] That's very strong evidence to support the idea that God's church is and always has been built on grace. And then there's a third defense witness.

James, the leader, it seems, of the church in Jerusalem. And his key point, he goes back to what Peter has just said. And he says, what Peter says absolutely ties up with what God had said in the Old Testament.

That's the direction that God always intended things to go. So verse 15, or verse 14. Simon is described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

The words of the prophets are in agreement with this. And then he quotes from Amos chapter 9. Amos chapter 9 pointing forward at this stage to a time when God would restore his people.

They had experienced exile, but there would be restoration. And that restoration would include people from other nations. God's kingdom was always to be bigger than just national Israel.

[13 : 49] Because God is a missionary God. God's plan has always embraced the nations. All the way back from when God made that promise to Abraham in Genesis chapter 12.

All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you. So this is a new age of salvation in the New Testament with the coming of the Spirit. But it's not a new plan of salvation.

Always saved by grace. The plan was always bless Israel that they would be a light to the nations. Bless one for the sake of many. When we think about this in the context of a council making decisions.

We've got to say there's a great team to have fighting your corner, isn't it? You think of the struggles that Theresa May has had to get any sort of backing either in Parliament or in the EU.

She would do anything to have people like this with this kind of gravitas speaking for her position. But it's great to see three apostles who've got different ministries operating in different contexts in different places.

[14 : 56] But they have the same gospel and they have the same understanding of God's mission. This is something that's not up for negotiation. There is no deal.

There is no movement from this position. God's church is built on grace. It doesn't matter what pressure comes from culture external to the church.

It doesn't matter about alternative voices within the church. God's words they stand on is to be the final word for the church.

You can see that they will not bend at one iota to their opponents. God's church is built on the finished work of Jesus.

It's built on his cross and his resurrection and what that means for us. It means redemption is accomplished. And it is applied to us by the Spirit.

[15 : 54] And it's not applied to us because we deserve it. It's applied to us because of God's mercy and God's loving kindness. So this is the core of our mission. Now these guys were working in different contexts in different places.

So how they would communicate that is different. And we see that as Paul is on his mission. When he speaks to people who know the Bible really well, he speaks one way. When he speaks to people that don't know the Bible, he speaks another way.

But the content doesn't change. Still the gospel is the heart of it. And that's the same for us. But, you know, we say things differently to an eight-year-old or to somebody where English is a second language.

Or somebody who's never read the Bible. Or somebody who knows a lot of the Bible. But we always want to be gospel people. We always want to be that you're saved by grace. Through faith in Jesus alone people.

So that's their testimony. And straight on from the testimony, Luke records the verdict. James, having spoken, then calls the verdict.

[16 : 57] Verse 19. And the verdict is that grace means we are all one in Christ Jesus. It is my judgment, therefore. Love these words.

That we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. He has no doubt on God's purpose. He has no doubt that faith in Jesus is bringing Gentiles into God's kingdom.

That the grace of God is at work. That it's creating unity between Jew and Gentile. And the implication, then, is that we should not make it difficult. We shouldn't add extra qualifications that are going to become an unnecessary burden.

So then we need to ask ourselves, well, why? So he said that. We shouldn't make it difficult. But why, then, does he immediately go to verse 20 and verse 21? 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.

Don't make it difficult. But then straight away, it sounds like extra rules they must keep. And so maybe we need to ask ourselves, is this a little bit of double standards?

[18 : 14] Is this inconsistency? What's going on here? Why is James issuing this instruction? Well, I think it's to do with the importance of church fellowship and church unity.

James, I think, is writing for the sake of the conscience of his fellow Christians who are also Jews. And he's asking the Gentiles to avoid practices that would make fellowship, especially sharing meals, a challenge.

You know, this is a new reality. This is not a straightforward, okay, the Jerusalem Council has issued its verdict, so let's just share life together as Jew and Gentile. It's a complex thing.

And so for the sake of conscience, James asks that those things that the Gentiles know are so difficult for people who have lived under the Jewish law, like blood and food polluted to idols, if they could refrain from that for the sake of church unity.

So in a sense, they're not commands, it's requests. We request that you do these things so that the sharing of food will be easy, so that the visible expression of fellowship in the gospel will be easy.

[19 : 33] That the church in various locations can bear testimony to the fact that Jesus really does make very different people one. And then we see the outcome of the council as the letter goes out.

We see what a difference it makes in terms of fellowship in the gospel of grace. They write this letter, and within the letter we see lots of bridges rather than barriers to fellowship.

They want to talk about how they are united together. So some examples, verse 23, how do they identify themselves?

The apostles and elders, your brothers. What do they say about the Judaizers who brought this message, unless you're circumcised, you can't be saved?

Verse 24, we've heard that someone out from us without our authorization and disturbed you. They were claiming to be speaking for Jerusalem. Clear message from Jerusalem, they're not.

[20 : 40] This is not part of God's purpose. Verse 25, we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends, Barnabas and Paul.

Barnabas and Paul, who are talking about this message, it's all about grace. Who were seen as rivals by the Judaizers, but to the true church, their dear friend.

Notice too that they say in verse 27, we're sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. They show them the honor of sending two of their spokesmen to make sure that there's no possibility for misunderstanding.

That the church in the Jerusalem, the church in Antioch, the church worldwide, is united. When they're united by faith in the Lord Jesus. So Judas, Silas, Paul and Barnabas and others head back towards Antioch.

What happens when the message gets to Antioch? Verse 31, the people read it and were glad that it's encouraging message. And then we see fellowship begin to work itself out in practice.

[21 : 48] Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. Because after spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who'd sent them.

So they're welcomed in and they're willing to share hospitality. Whereas before they would have real difficulty. But now they know that this is God's plan. And they're sent back to Jerusalem with the blessing of peace.

So here is the gospel creating a sense of fellowship and unity between different churches with different cultures. Now that is the Jerusalem council.

We recognize its significance. What are some of the implications for us today as we try and pull back and pull to our own day? And I think one thing that we learn from it is that it's important for the church always to guard the gospel.

To understand that that is the only basis for unity and fellowship. And that's not a given. There are lots of voices that would say that anybody who claims to be a Christian church, that we should all just get along.

[23 : 00] Really our theology doesn't matter too much. What we think about Jesus or the Bible. Well it's a second we should just all get on. But what's clear from Paul and Barnabas and the council of Jerusalem is that we need to be united on truth.

We need to be clear on what Jesus has done and the implications. The only message that we can unite around is that Jesus has completed the work of salvation.

And that we receive it as a gift of faith and through grace. So we must guard the gospel. We also discover from the Jerusalem council that fellowship requires flexibility.

And we see this from the first request of the church in Jerusalem. Without compromising the gospel. We must be flexible in order to enable unity across cultures and backgrounds.

Truth doesn't bend. But love bends. And so we must be able to make sure that we're not so bound to our culture or to our practice or to whatever it is that we struggle to unite with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ.

[24 : 26] So tied up with that we must be aware of barriers and instead be looking to build bridges. And again that's what we see from the apostles. That's what we see from the church council of Jerusalem.

Things like avoiding Christianese. You know that way of talking about our faith and about talking about Christianity where maybe we take a Bible word out.

A word that's really remote to lots of other people and we don't explain it. Or where we use a lot of jargon whether we're talking to insiders or outsiders. Where we maybe struggle to articulate simple truths clearly.

I think sometimes it does us good to try and think about how would I share my faith with somebody who has never heard anything from the Bible.

Who doesn't know anything about Jesus. It would be a good thing to write it down. If I had three minutes with somebody. What would I hope to say to them about God? God the creator.

[25 : 30] About the love of God. What would I hope to say about us as people? How would I communicate the fact that we have wandered away from God.

That God made us for a relationship. But we are running from the God who loves us. How would we explain who Jesus is and why he came. In a way that people could understand.

And that they would understand the importance of responding. Sometimes we need to just take a step back. And think about how we talk about our faith. So that we're careful to be accessible.

And I think that's true for us as individuals. I think it's true for us as a church. To be careful. To be accessible. And intelligible. I mean that's one of the things that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians.

That somebody should be able to walk in off the street. And while yes of course church is going to seem strange to people. If they're not used to coming to church. It's unusual for a group of people to sing together.

[26 : 31] It's unusual for people outside of a university context perhaps. To listen to someone teaching from a text. So there's always going to be a certain amount of disconnect. Or struggles to overcome.

But we shouldn't add extra barriers. By making it seem really distant and remote. We need to appreciate that people coming into a church.

Are stepping out of their comfort zone. Someone said it like this. Imagine if you were taken from your usual routine. Of going to Sainsbury's every week. Or Aldi. Or wherever you go for your shopping.

And then you were taken to a foreign supermarket. Let's say one of the Asian supermarkets around here. Imagine how instantly. Well I'm just going to speak for myself. How instantly uncomfortable you'd be.

You'd have no idea. What you were purchasing. You'd have no idea how to cook. The things you hoped to purchase. You'd be really out of your comfort zone. And it's important for us to remember.

[27 : 28] That it's a big jump for people to come to church. We need to be careful. To be accessible. And intelligible. I think one of the implications that we get from the church in Jerusalem.

The council of Jerusalem. Is that we are to create space. For people to enjoy a Christian community. That one of the goals of the council was unity and fellowship in the gospel.

And so practically as Christians and as a local church. We must be creating spaces where new people can enjoy Christian community. Whether that means opening our doors and inviting people in.

Whether it means opening our hearts so that we are on the lookout for new people and welcoming them. We need to be creating those spaces. And I think just as the church in Jerusalem was celebrating what God was doing.

In terms of building a church that was bigger than just national Israel. I think we should celebrate being part of a global multinational church.

[28 : 36] That was one of the goals of our missions day. That we'd remind ourselves that we're part of something much bigger. God's church is much bigger than we think. All of these things are made possible because of the events of this council.

So in our mission we need to remember what started the council in the first place. We need the truth that God saves people through his grace.

And it's all about trusting in Jesus. And in terms of the implications we need a love that pursues unity. We need a practice that makes it easy for others to know and worship God with us.