

The First General Assembly

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn this evening to Acts chapter 15, and looking at this passage we read down as far as verse 21, but we'll also make a reference to Galatians chapter 2, the short passage we read there as well.

When was the first general assembly of the church? That's a question you could take back to the Old Testament, because, as we were singing in fact in Psalm 122, very often the gathering of the Lord's people down through the years of the Old Testament were referred to as the assembly. They were the assembly of the people that worshipped God, but they were confined, the worshippers of God, by and large, apart from select individuals, to the Jewish people, to the Hebrew people.

And if you think of a general assembly as an assembly of people who are Christians from various parts, and different races and backgrounds, then you can argue that Acts chapter 15 is the first general assembly of the church, because it includes representatives of the Gentile Christians in Antioch, and also the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem.

And it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that this general assembly, as the first general assembly of the church, was the most important one in its history.

[1 : 32] Now that's really saying a lot, because there were councils afterwards that set doctrines regarding the person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, all the things that needed to be formulated into doctrinal statements, some years after this, of course, hundreds of years after this sometimes.

But in many respects, this general assembly was the most important one that ever took place in the history of the church. Because the question at issue was one that really was a threat to the entire gospel.

And not only was it a threat to the gospel, it was actually a threat also to people's understanding of what the church was, the nature of the church, and particularly the unity of the church, as comprising both Jews and Gentiles, or Gentiles as well as Jews.

The question actually arose, the issue arose, from the conversion of Gentiles. There had been isolated Gentile people converted down through the centuries, but there were very much isolated cases.

Whereas in the time of the apostles, subsequent to the Lord sending the Spirit at Pentecost, many, many hundreds, if not thousands of Gentiles, had by this stage been converted.

[2 : 57] Antioch in Syria, is the place mentioned here, where Gentiles were being converted in great numbers. And in that setting, the question at issue was, should these Gentiles actually have to be circumcised?

Should they be required to be circumcised? In other words, come to have what essentially had been given by God to the Jewish people, to distinguish them, to be a mark that they bore, that showed them to be His people, and that was in fact itself a sign of the covenant.

Should Gentiles, who never did belong to the Jewish people, and were of a different background of course, should they be circumcised? Was it enough for them that they be received into the church and baptized, or should they also have these marks that the Jews had had down the centuries? And that may seem, at first sight, to be a relatively minor thing. What difference does it make, whether Gentiles are circumcised or not?

It makes a huge difference, when you see the point, the way it was being put. It wasn't simply a question of, should they be circumcised or not?

[4 : 22] The question at issue was, this is required for salvation. It is necessary, in order to be saved, that a Gentile convert comes to be circumcised.

In other words, you really have, also along with that, the idea that, unless a Gentile person comes to be circumcised, as well as making a confession to be saved, or to be baptized, indeed, unless a person comes to be circumcised, and indeed keep the law of Moses, they don't properly belong to the church.

So that's why I'm saying, it had to be, it was an issue of critical importance to the gospel. What does the gospel emphasize, in terms of what a person needs, in order to be accepted fully, by God?

Is it faith in Christ? Or is it faith plus circumcision, and the works of the law of Moses? What does it require, to belong to God's church?

Is it faith in Christ? Or is it faith plus works? Faith plus becoming a Jew, by virtue of being circumcised.

[5 : 43] These were the issues, these were the great issues, these were the foundational issues. That's why this assembly, this general assembly, was really critically important, for the whole future of the church, from this time on, down through the New Testament age, right through to our own day, and the end of the world.

What was the issue at stake, in more detail? Well, look at the way, the request came, the request came from, from the Christians, in Antioch.

Here were Paul, and Barnabas, having travelled on, to Antioch, and, there, they, arrived and gathered, the church together, you see, at the end of the previous chapter, when they arrived there, in Antioch, they gathered, the church together.

That's important, that Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, is actually saying, that it was, the church, they gathered together. It wasn't just Jews, it was the church. And they declared, all that God had done with them, how he had opened, a door of faith, to the Gentiles.

And there remained, no little time, with the disciples. But, some men, came down, from Judea, and were teaching, the brothers, unless, you are circumcised, according to the custom, of Moses, you cannot, be saved.

[7 : 03] And after a time, of discussion, and indeed, dissension, and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas, and some of the others, were appointed, to go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles, and elders, about this question.

In other words, they commissioned them, they were the commissioners, from this Gentile region, to come to Jerusalem, where the apostles, James, and others were, and where they were going, to deal with, this critical question.

And they commissioned, these disciples, these, those who were named, Paul and Barnabas, and some unnamed others, to go up, to the apostles, and elders, about, this question.

And so, they reached Jerusalem, and they were welcomed there, by the church. Now you can see, what it is saying there. Some men had come down, from Judea, and were teaching, the brothers, unless you are circumcised, according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

It didn't just say, they weren't just saying, you cannot really fully belong, to the church, they were going much further than that. They were saying, you cannot actually be saved. You cannot have full acceptance, with God.

[8 : 13] You cannot have a standing, with God, where you are regarded, as approved, accepted, righteous, accounted, as saved, unless you be circumcised.

It was, a pressure group. A pressure group, that were insisting, on this particular matter. Now, there is an argument, that says that, this is, the same thing, that is described, in Galatians, chapter 2, where Paul is saying, when Cephas, that's Peter, came to Antioch, I opposed him, to his face, because he stood condemned, for before, certain men came from James, he was eating, with the Gentiles, but when he, when they came, he drew back, and separated himself, fearing, the circumcision party, that's this pressure group, and the rest of the Jews, acted hypocritically, along with him, so that even Barnabas, was led astray, by their hypocrisy, but when I saw, that their conduct, was not in step, with the truth, of the gospel, that's the critical phrase, Paul, although he was junior, to Peter, in terms of years, as a Christian, he stood, up to Peter, face to face, because what was at stake, was the truth, of the gospel, when I saw, their conduct, was not in step, with the truth, of the gospel,

I said to Cephas, before them all, if you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile, and not like a Jew, how can you force, the Gentiles, to live, like Jews, now there are some, would argue, that that's not, that that didn't happen, at the same time, as what, Acts 15, at the beginning of the chapters, described, but certainly, it's the same issue, and there's a good argument, that that in fact, is the same issue,

as Acts 15, is talking about here, those who came down, from Judea, they claim to be, from James, but in verse 24, of Acts 15 here, you actually find, that James is saying, or the letter, that they sent, since we have heard, that some persons, have gone out from us, and troubled you, with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them, no instructions, they said, we've come from James, and James, is one of the chief apostles, but what James was saying, when he, dealt with it here, in the Jerusalem council, we gave them, no such instructions, to say such things, in Antioch, to Gentile Christians, and, the sad thing was, that Peter, and then Barnabas, and others, had been taken in by this, they had succumbed, to the pressure, that's what really, we're told here, that they had actually, been taken aside, and feared, those who were of, the circumcision party, they gave in to, the pressure, that they, these people, were putting them under, and, they then, stopped associating, with the Gentiles, and eating with the Gentiles, and that effectively, was saying, in an outward fashion, a demonstration, that, the Gentiles, aren't fully part of the church, so we're not eating with them, they don't actually belong, in the same way, as we Jews do, that's the impression, that was given, that's why Paul, was so annoyed about it,

Paul was indignant about it, and indeed, when you read, his letter to the Galatians, and what had subsequently, happened in Galatian, in the Galatian churches, quite some time after that, he is so indignant, because, what they had done, was really, attack the very heart, of the gospel, how is a person saved, how is a person justified, before God, is it by faith, in Christ, alone, or is it faith, plus, something else, that's what they were saying, so they sent, Barnabas, and Paul, and others, to Jerusalem, that brings you, to the council, or to the general assembly, here itself, they were welcomed, but, then you have, an account of, the deliberations, of the general assembly, and there were four reports, or four speeches, at least, that you could say, were reports, if we keep to, the kind of language, you use for general assemblies, nowadays, the first speech, and the first report, was, from believers, who belong, to the party, of the Pharisees, they rose up, and said, it is necessary, to circumcise them, and to order them, to keep, the law, of Moses, you see the word there, it is necessary, how that fits in, with those who had gone, to Antioch, and said, unless you are circumcised, you can't be saved, what they were saying here, as they stood up, in the general assembly, was in line with that, they were saying, this is absolutely necessary, this is something, that needs to happen, without it, they are not, saved, it is necessary, to circumcise them, and to order them, to keep the law of Moses, you see all the, the various laws, that God had given, to the people, through Moses, that's necessary, they were saying, in other words, they were going to view, the Gentiles, really as, a kind of sect, of the Jews, they would need, to be circumcised, so that outwardly, they would be taking on, this Jewish sign, of circumcision, and therefore, they would be regarded, as a section, of the Jews, and therefore, they belong to the church, in that way, that of course, is a great, mistake, because the Gentiles, at every right, to belong to the church, on the same basis, as the Jews, by being believers, in Christ, by faith, in Jesus Christ, and when they had finished, their contribution, it's interesting, to see how it's, recorded by Luke, just as it happened, then,

Peter, stood up, now, this was some, perhaps, ten years, after the incident, that Galatians, records for us, some years, afterwards, but, in any case, Peter stood up, and, this is what he said, brothers, you know, that, in the early days, God made a choice, among you, that by my mouth, the Gentiles, should hear, the word of the gospel, and believe, and God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them, the Holy Spirit, just as he did, to us, and he made no, distinction, between us, and them, between us, and them, having cleansed, their hearts, by faith, that's the first thing he said, God gave them, the Holy Spirit, just as he gave, the Holy Spirit, to us Jews, he didn't make, any distinction, he didn't actually, keep back, something from the Gentiles, that he had already, given to us, the Jews, he made no distinction, whatsoever, and in fact, their hearts, came to be cleansed, just as our hearts, were cleansed, by the Holy Spirit, by faith, and by the Holy Spirit, coming to, to them, as he did to us, no distinction, whatsoever, and then he comes, to verse 10, now therefore, why are you putting,

[16:01] God to the test, by placing a yoke, on the neck, of the disciples, that's the, Jew, the Gentiles, that neither, our fathers, nor we, have been able, to bear, he says, he says something, that, very, very interesting, here were these, Jewish, Christians, saying, this party, of the Pharisees, no, these Gentiles, they need, to be circumcised, otherwise, they can't be saved, and they can't, properly belong, to the church, unless, unless, they have, circumcision, and unless, they are, ordered, and promised, to keep, the law, of Moses, Peter, is saying, our fathers, our Jewish, ancestors, how, were they saved, they were not, saved, by the works, of the law, that, that's, what

he's, really meaning, when he says, why are you, putting God, to the test, by placing, a yoke, on the neck, of the disciples, the Gentiles, that neither, our fathers, nor we, have been able, to bear, none of us, as Jews, would be able, to be saved, by keeping, the works, of the law, why then, do you insist, on this, for these Gentiles, and he went on, to conclude, but we believe, that we will be saved, through the grace, of the Lord Jesus, just as they will, that's what it comes down, to Peter was saying, forget about, requiring, the works, of the law, and circumcision, as well, when you ask, the question, how, were we saved, by what means, were we saved, what was required, of our fathers, as Jews, in the generations, before us, and into the midst, of time, in the Old Testament, right back, as far as you can go, what was required, of them, in order, that they be saved, the works, of the law, no, faith, we've been looking, at Abraham's life, and, we're coming, next to the point, where it's, re-emphasized, by God, or emphasized, by God, very clearly, to Abraham, that, his acceptance, and, the fulfillment, of the promises, through, faith, in God's promise, he took him out, and he showed him, the stars in the sky, and he said, like this, shall you see it be, and Abraham, believed,

God, and it was, accounted to him, for righteousness, no law, no works, of the law, no, no, no, salvation, by circumcision, by faith, by faith, in God, and in this word, of promise, and then, the next speech, the next contribution, was, from Barnabas, and Paul, Barnabas, as mentioned first, probably, because he had been, longer associated, with, the Gentile, Christian, movement, than Paul had, but in any case, the assembly, fell silent, and you see, it's so interesting, that, you know, we, we're used nowadays, to listen to, or to see, the proceedings, of our own, general assembly, by video link, or by, by online link, anyway, you can actually, see it as it happens, you see the people, who are speaking, and you can actually, see things just live, well, it's almost like that, as you find this, record of, of Luke, and writing, the book of Acts, here he is, taking us through, step by step, of this general assembly, just as it happened, and included, our teachers like this, all the assemblies, just like you're watching it, on, on your TV screen, or on your computer screen, all the assembly, fell silent, and they listened, to Barnabas, and Paul, as they related, what signs, and wonders, and wonders,

God had done, through them, among the Gentiles, now that's all, that's said there, about them, they obviously, contributed, much more, than is recorded, in these few words, but that's all, it's said, then when they, had finished, the fourth, contributor, was James, this was James, the apostle, James, the Lord's brother, the James, in all likelihood, who wrote, the epistle of James, that you find, in the New Testament, and it could be said, if we want to keep, the imagery, of general assembly, that James, was the moderator, of this general assembly, because he, as he stood up here, he stands up, and he comes across to you, as the person, who is really, moderating the assembly, he's the chair, of the assembly, he's the one, who's steering, the business, he's actually, listening to the other, contributors, and now he's coming, to sum up, the whole of the proceedings, and what does he say, he says, brothers listen to me,

Simeon, that's Simon, that's Peter, has related, how God first, visited the Gentiles, to take from them, a people for his name, now that's, the first thing, that's of interest, because all the way, down to the old testament, a people for his name, or a people for himself, is a description, that God often uses, or the Bible uses, for the Jewish people, who had come to know, the Lord, and to whom the Lord, had given all of these, privileges, and promises, and ceremonies, and all the things, that associated, that they associated, with being the people of God, and indeed things, which distinguish them, from all the other peoples, of the world, but you see, here is James saying, that God first, visited the Gentiles, to take from them, a people for his name, in other words, James is actually saying, what God has done, with the Gentiles, is make them, his people, just as much, and just as equally, as he has made us, Jews, his people, they are, his people, they are for his, name, just as we are, and, with this he said, the words of the prophets, agree just, as it is written, and they quoted from, the prophecy of Amos, in chapter 9, verses 11, to 12, now, it's important, of course, that he, found this, in scripture, that, the conclusion, the assembly had come to, was not one, that seemed just good, to themselves, it wasn't just, their best opinion, it was in fact, something, that scripture, itself, had many, many hundreds, of years, before this, actually set down, it was something, that God, had stipulated, in other words, the issue, of whether, the Gentiles, would belong, fully, to the church, or not, the issue, of whether, they would need, to be circumcised, and keep, the law, of Moses, or not, had actually, been decided, long before, the Gentiles, were converted,

God, had decided it, and he had, stipulated that, through, the likes, of the prophet Amos, this wasn't something, the New Testament, church, had invented, this wasn't something, that these, that group of apostles, themselves, without, any previous, information, had decided, on, themselves, God, had already, decided, for them, it was written, in scripture, therefore, he gave his judgment, this was his ruling, my judgment, is, that we should, not trouble, those of the Gentiles, who turn, to God, but that we should, write to them, to abstain, from the things, polluted, by idols, from sexual immorality, from what has been, strangled, and from blood, difficulties, with that, but it goes back, to Leviticus, and to stipulations, that were given, their things, which were, not necessary, for salvation, and yet, because of Jewish, scruples, he was advising them, that this was, something that, they would need, to consider, because Moses, has in every city, those who proclaim him, for his read, in every Sabbath, in the synagogues, that was the decision, of the General Assembly, in Jerusalem, what does it matter, why have we spent, what was it, about half an hour, 25 minutes, at least, going over, the record here, of the Jerusalem Council, how this request, had come from Antioch, the question at issue, the way they had dealt with it, in this General Assembly, the view, first of all, of that party, of the Pharisees, who were Christians, but, who insisted, that what, was necessary, was that they be circumcised, the Gentiles, then there's Peter, and then Paul and Barnabas, and lastly, [25 : 09] James, what does it matter, to knock free church, in 2014, well, the abiding relevance, of their decision, is critical, for us today, for two reasons, or in regard, to two things, first of all, salvation, is, by Christ alone, through faith alone, now that, must never change, or else we've changed, the gospel, we have changed, our understanding, of the ground, on which a person, comes to be justified, and therefore, accepted, with God, we are accepted, for the sake of Christ, we have imputed, to us, the righteousness, of Christ, we receive, that by faith, and everything, you actually add, to that, whether it's circumcision, or the law of Moses, or both of these, together, is really saying, effectively,

Christ, alone, is not, enough, that's, that's, why it's serious, that's, why it's, important, that we understand, these issues, as they happened, in those days, and why, they are still important, and critical, for our day, because, there are many, forms, of, Christianity, that will still, insist, that certain, works, are necessary, in order, to be saved, and, the teaching, of the Jerusalem Council, of the writings, of the Apostle Paul, especially, as he wrote, subsequent to this, is that, a man is justified, a woman is justified, by faith, in Christ, without, the works, of the law, in other words, our acceptance, with God, our being, fully part, of God's church, is not, due to race, it's not, due to history, it's not, due to background, it's not, due to language, it's not, due to culture, it's not, due to dress, it's not, to our appearance, it's not, to what we wear, to church, it's not, to what our, cultural habits are, it is, Christ, alone, and if we, insist, that anything else, is added, to Christ, then we are, actually, attacking, as these, people were, the very, heart, of the gospel, the very, crux, of our standing, with God, there are, very many, different kinds, of legalism, but one of them, is the idea, that Christ, plus something, which is, it's a very subtle thing, we can, on the one hand, in our, in our heads, have absolutely, no, uncertainty, at all, that Christ, alone, is all, that we require, as the ground, of our salvation, and faith, in Christ, is all, that's required, as the means, by which, we come to be saved, but then, all of us, have scruples, of some kind, from time to time, and certain parts, of the church, will have scruples, about certain things, how do we keep, the communion, how do we baptize, what sort of clothes, do people wear, to church, how does one, dispense, the sacrament, of the Lord's Supper, and, various other things, like that, what form of worship, do we use, and sadly, some groups, down through the course, of history, it's not a new thing, it's a very old thing, have insisted, than, unless things are done, exactly our way, because we believe, that our way is scriptural, then these, other Christians, are kind of, second class, or certainly beneath, what we would regard, as proper Christians, they are proper,

Christians, if they have faith, in Christ alone, for salvation, that's all, that's required, to be saved, and if they are saved, they belong, to God's people, there may be, many ways, in which people, need further education, for things, that are not essential, to salvation, but let's never, make these, part of the crux, of how we are accepted, with God, and let's always be, very careful, never to import, things, which are of, secondary importance, and make them, of primary importance, because that has always, been destructive, down through the years, that's the first thing, salvation, by Christ alone, through faith alone, the second thing, is that God's people, are one body, by the Holy Spirit, verse 9, that's what, Peter was saying there, he made no distinction, between us and them, having cleansed, their hearts, by faith, what is it, that gives us, fellowship together, as

believers, is it outward ritual, is it dietary laws, is it certain ceremonies, which we insist on keeping, what is it, that gives us, true gospel fellowship, with Christians, in Africa, with Christians, in Coria, with Christians, in China, with all of these, different cultures, so, so very different, to ourselves, and who observe, ways, and means, of doing things, as far as, their church activities, are concerned, very different, from ours, what is it, that gives us, fellowship with them, it's what's in here, it's not, what's outward, that's what Peter, is saying, he made no distinction, between us, and them, having, cleansed their hearts, by faith, fellowship, is a matter, of the heart, not of outward ritual, that's why you can, go to places like,

Africa, and Korea, and, involve yourself, in things, which are done, very differently, to ours, and still, you know, you're in the presence, of God, and that you're, sharing fellowship, with the Lord's people, because their hearts, and your hearts, have been cleansed, by the same, Holy Spirit, that's what unites, it is outward things, very often, that divides, I'm not saying, we're not saying, at all by that, that our own way, of doing things, is unimportant to us, that our form of worship, is unimportant to us, that our method, of administering, the sacrament, of the Lord's supper, or baptism, is unimportant to us, what we're saying, is that essentially, at the core of things, spiritually, what joins us together, as Christians, with other Christians, is not these things, it's the Holy Spirit, cleansing our hearts, living in our hearts, and by faith, in God, that's what we possess, and that's where, we are united, it's the purity of heart, the purifying of the heart, by the Holy Spirit, that makes fellowship, possible, but that doesn't go far enough, because what the Jerusalem,

[33 : 15] General Assembly, insisted on, is that fellowship, fellowship, between Gentile Christians, and Jewish Christians, because their hearts, are cleansed, by the same Holy Spirit, fellowship between them, is not just possible, but, essential, it is inescapable, it is unavoidable, it is a sin, not to do it, that's why, we said at the beginning, this was the most important, arguably, the most important, General Assembly, of the Church, ever, because it really, set, these foundational things, right here, at the beginning, of the New Testament Church, things, which need, to be maintained, and which have lasted, down to the present day, which are as important, to knock, free church tonight, as they were, to the Antioch Christians, and the Jerusalem Christians, in the days, of the Apostles, let's pray,

Lord our God, we do give thanks, that your word, has recorded, these crucially, important events, and done so, in a way, that we recognize, as your own word, your own will, your own authority, we give thanks, for the clarity, Lord, with which, the ground of our acceptance, with you, is shown to us, in your word, and we give thanks, for the way, in which you, jealously guard, that great truth, that we are accepted, with you, for the sake of Jesus, and on the basis, of all that he has done, and that we are not, to add, or to take from it, at the peril, of the gospel, Lord help us to, to be clear, and to be consistent, and to, stand, wholeheartedly, for this truth, the truth, that you have committed, once for all, to your people, and which you have charged, us to maintain, to declare, to witness to, in our own age also, help us to value, those who belong, to your church, of whatever background, or race, they may be, help us to rejoice,

Lord, in meeting, those who belong, to you, from other parts, of the world, those who are very different, to ourselves, and yet share, in the same blessings, of that one Holy Spirit, and have that same standing, in the one Lord, Jesus Christ, O Lord, our God, we give thanks, for the way, in which the, one Father, through the one Son, and the one Holy Spirit, has come to form, the one church, that bears his name, help us Lord, we pray to continue, to have that sense, of privilege, of belonging, to that church, on that same basis, be with us now we pray, and accept us, hearing our prayers, for Jesus sake, Amen.