

Scripture Reading: *[Our text for this morning will be from Acts 15 but our reading will be selections from the Book of Galatians to help us understand the background tensions leading up to this first church council in Jerusalem.]*

Galatians 1:1 “Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead), 2 and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: 3 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. 6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, 7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed ...

11 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. 15 When it pleased God, ... to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, & returned again to Damascus. 18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. ...and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. ... When James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

11 Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; 12 for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.

13 And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?

...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.

3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? 2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? ...

5 Therefore He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does He do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?--6 just as Abraham "believed God, & it was accounted to him for righteousness." 7 Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. 8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed."

"The First Church Council"

We begin this morning our study of Acts chapter 15 which could rightly be called the chapter of conflicts. We will see this morning a conflict in the church and how it is resolved and then we see a conflict between Paul and Barnabas that is not as easily resolved. I faced a choice in preparing to tackle this chapter: We could go on a long but productive rabbit trail with a series of sermons on the Book of Galatians to fully understand all that was debated... Or I could preach through the text looking at the issue of the church council as a whole, which is what I have chosen to do. I did read various passages from Galatians so we could more fully understand the times in which all of this took place. *[homework?]*

There are many arguments about the chronology of these events but I am following the most straightforward way to see how Luke's account meshes with Paul's letter to the Galatians. The men who came from Jerusalem mentioned here in Acts 15 are the same group who also troubled the Saints in Galatia in the churches that Paul & Barnabas had recently established. This is why Paul wrote the letter and can say how shocked he is that they so quickly were tempted to turn from the Gospel of Grace. Paul & Barnabas spent an extended time in Antioch after their mission journey: I believe this is when Paul wrote Galatians & Peter visited Antioch.

When we consider the big picture, Peter is still being Peter in many ways! Many years earlier, God used Peter to take the Gospel to the Gentiles and he defended his actions back in Jerusalem. After the death of Herod, Peter goes back to Caesarea and then on to Antioch where he first fellowships and rejoices with the Gentiles and then pulls back when legalistic Jewish Christians from Jerusalem make an appearance and cause divisions. I believe Peter takes Paul's rebuke to heart and then becomes his defender before the Church council.

Once again an important lesson this morning will be to see how the Spirit of God uses broken vessels to move the Kingdom forward.

- What we will consider is the first church council where one of the most fundamental doctrines of the Church was affirmed: Salvation by Grace!

As we learn Church history we know many other councils would be held to settle debates about other great truths: The Trinity or the two natures of Christ. It is very difficult us in our divided age to think about how such things could happen with the Church now, but we even have a recent example with the Chicago Congress on Biblical Inerrancy that was held in 1978!

- Our hope & prayer should be that God would move in mighty ways with such councils to heal our many divisions in the coming centuries!

With that as some background let's dig into the text of Acts chapter fifteen:

Acts 15:1 "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them..."

- These are the same men who troubled not only Antioch but were visiting other churches as well and the Book of Galatians indicates just how strong the debate really was.

So the leaders of the Church at Antioch decide once again that it is time for Paul and Barnabas to take a trip... "they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question."

- The leaders at Jerusalem had affirmed Peter when he first returned from Caesarea and they had met with Paul & Barnabas and affirmed their work among the Gentiles so I think the biggest issue was whether these false teachers had the approval from the leaders in Jerusalem they claimed to have.

3 “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.”

- Once more we see Paul & Barnabas never miss an opportunity to strengthen & encourage the Saints!

4 “And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.”

- Paul & Barnabas are welcomed again and share all that God had been doing in their ministry!

5 “But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

I think there is an important lesson here about assuming what people believe: On one side of this debate Paul stood fast for salvation by grace and we see both Peter and Barnabas wavering but faithful in the end. Those who troubled those in Antioch and the other churches seem hardened in their errors and Paul has little use for them. However, it appears that we also have some Jewish believers who are honestly wrestling with the question of how Law and Grace relate and they bring their questions to the council and in the end they join with the other faithful Saints in affirming salvation by Grace.

6 “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. And when there had been much dispute...”

Some of us have had very bad experiences with church meetings and might think we have little use for them, but here we see they are important in the work of the church... There was also some very lively debate for those who get nervous around such things.

7 “And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.”

- They do not let the debates just continue to rage: The meeting is brought to order and Peter rises to speak bringing his experience to the forefront: It had been at least ten years since the conversion of Cornelius and he had wrestled with Paul over this issue recently in Antioch.

Peter continues: “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore, 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? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

- Peter brings the debate around to the central point: Are we saved by Grace or by the works of the Law?
- Do we earn our salvation in some way or is it a gift from God?
- Just as Paul had reminded him in Antioch and written to the Saints in Galatia, the Jews were never able to keep the Law so why would they want to put that heavy yoke on the Gentiles?
- Faithful Jews had come to Jesus for the easy yoke that He offered and now the Gentiles should be encouraged to do the same.
- The Council then allows Paul and Barnabas to testify:

12 “Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.”

- Peter has focused their attention on the central matter and the evidence from Antioch has been heard and now it is time for the council to reach a decision:

13 “And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 16 'After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek Jehovah, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says Jehovah who makes these things 18 known from of old”

- As we have seen Peter & Stephan and Paul do at other places here in Acts, James confirms that the Gospel was for the world!
- This still leaves the tough question of how these Gentile converts relate to the Old Testament Covenant?

James continues: 19 “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

- The 1st point is the easy one: They are saved by grace and we should not trouble them!

However, why James then adds some things for them to follow and preaching about Moses has caused a couple of thousand years of controversy & debate! I won't pretend that I can solve it all here in a few moments, but I do believe it is much simpler than most have made it:

- First and foremost, I do not believe we can see this as some sort of compromise...

Well we can't go along with requiring circumcision but here are some other things from the Law that you need to keep to be saved. Circumcision was the focus because the core debate was really over whether the Old Covenant continued or if Jesus had in fact fulfilled all that was required in the Old Covenant and given us life under His New Covenant blood which we celebrate at this Table!

Circumcision was the sign of membership in the nation of Israel...

- And now baptism was the sign of membership in the New Covenant:
-- The circumcision of our hearts!

So neither side would have been happy if James was saying don't worry about circumcision, let's talk about some other things to keep from the Law.

- James says we should not trouble those who are turning to God: Those Gentiles who have received the gift of faith do not need to join the nation of Israel nor keep ANY of the Law to EARN their salvation!

Both Paul and Peter argued powerfully that NO Jew had ever been able to carry that heavy Yoke.

- BUT, if they are turning to God then they are really children of God and thus they will act differently!
- As Jesus said, “If you love me keep my Commandments!”
- Jesus NEVER said if you want to be saved, here at the three, or ten or a thousand things you must do.
- BUT IF we are saved, then we love Jesus because He first loved us and as a result we desire to keep His commandments.
- What would Paul and Barnabas have thought if James had suggested that they simply tell those new Gentiles converts, “OK you are in by Grace so it does not much matter how you live now, you still get to go to heaven!”

There have been endless debates about whether James is sneaking in some principles from the Law, establishing new rules for Christians or just confused because some of his items appear to be from the Law and other not. Well, obviously such a debate did not break out among those directly involved... So perhaps we should try to see it more from their perspective:

22 “Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”--to whom we gave no such commandment—“

There are two important points to notice here:

- The men troubling the Gentile Saints were NOT sent out officially by the Jerusalem leaders
- AND they were teaching that people had to keep ALL of the Law.

25 “it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. 30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. ”

- Peter nor Paul nor Barnabas objected to the decision of James and the Church in Antioch receives it with great joy!

I would argue that the simplest way to understand this is that it really is no different from Jesus saying, “If you love me keep my Commandments.” The ‘necessary things’ that are listed are telling them to stay away from the three major stumbling blocks that had always troubled God’s people: Idolatry, sexual sins and violence. These had always been great sins even among the people of God and have always been great sins in the world.

- Why would the Gentile Saints be encouraged by this admonition?

Because it addresses the areas they would have been struggling with:

- Imagine the temptations they faced coming from idolatrous cultures that saw temple prostitutes as a common practice.
- We know from the art of the era that sexual sins of that day would have made the sexual revolution of the sixties look virtuous.
- Think about Roman soldiers and leaders who came to Christ after being a part of one of the most brutal regimes to ever rule on this earth?

The bottom line is that telling these new Saints to avoid idolatry, sexual sins and violence was simply stating the two Great Commandments that Jesus taught in a negative way: Reminding them to “love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind & strength & your neighbor as yourself.”

Finally there are many who think the reference to not eating or drinking blood HAD to be some reference to the Old Testament laws and rituals.

In fact this simply goes all the way back to the command given to Noah for all mankind that we are to remember that the life is in the blood:

- This is the life of men who are made in the image of God...
- And ultimately it is the blood of Jesus who saved us from our sins.

So what does all this have to do with us you might ask?

As I mentioned, we need to remember how the principles used during this important council helped to solve a major problem in the early church...

- Because I must remind you that we still have problems in the Church today!

But in closing I want to go back where we started to remind us that we should also be greatly encouraged by the decision of James and the letter sent to these early Gentile churches. We read various passages from Galatians to better understand the debate and to see how passionate Paul was about his convictions.

However, if we continue on into chapter five & six we see how Paul ends up in much the same way James and the Council did with their letter: *[I find it interesting that in all my reading this week no one suggested that Paul's letter might actually have been taken to Jerusalem, but that is certainly possible]*

I will leave you this morning with Paul's admonition to the Saints in the region of Galatia, to the young Saints in the Churches Paul and Barnabas had recently founded:

Galatians 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. 2 Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. 4 You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. 5 For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love... 13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another! 16 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ..19 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, 21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24 And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

6: 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. 9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. 10Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Communion Meditation: I Corinthians 11:

"16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. 18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? 19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? 23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify."