

## ACTS 15.1-35

By way of background, need to read Gal 2.11-14 first, assuming written before this Council (in Acts 15).

2 groups and 2 questions:

1. The unauthorised “men from Judea” (vv. 1, 24) who taught that Gentiles weren’t saved unless circumcised.
2. The “believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v.5) who didn’t deny that the Gentiles were saved, but insisted that they still needed to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, i.e. to become Jewish proselytes

1. The question of whether Gentiles could be saved apart from circumcision seems to have already been resolved by the leaders in Jerusalem. When, in ch 11, Peter reports back on what happened to him (vision) and to Cornelius (angelic visitation, gift of the Holy Spirit), those in Jerusalem “fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.’” Thus Paul rightly refers such teachers (of the need to be circumcised to be saved) as “false brothers” in Gal 2.4.

2. The question of whether - after coming to faith, being baptized and receiving the Holy Spirit – Gentiles still needed to become proselytes to Judaism, being circumcised and obeying the law of Moses (i.e. the ceremonial aspects – circumcision, purity, festival and sabbath-keeping - which set Jews apart as God’s people), was quite a different matter.

There are two issues involved:

- a. If Gentiles are to become members of God’s people, surely that means becoming Jews (who alone are called God’s people till now)
- b. If Jewish believers are going to share table fellowship with these new Gentile ‘brothers’, the only way they can do so without becoming defiled/unclean is if the Gentiles are circumcised and obey the Law.

i.e. there are two separate (though related) issues:

- Soteriological (salvation): clear
- Sociological (life/fellowship together): unclear

The first has been answered, but the second has not. It is a reasonable and serious question, because:

1. Circumcision was the outward sign and identification mark of God's covenant people. Circumcision central to Jewish identity (Gen 17.9-14; "the circumcised" = Jews, see 10.45)
2. Promise to Abraham that through his descendants all nations/people blessed inextricably bound up with covenant and its sign – circumcision
3. Nothing Jesus had taught gave any reason to believe that the requirement of circumcision had been relaxed or abrogated
  - ⇒ In light of scripture and tradition, going to take some very special and undeniably God-given revelation to set aside requirement of circumcision. (i.e. Peter's testimony)

Both questions needs to be answered once and for all because they are:

- A. Dividing Jewish believers, e.g. Paul and "Judaisers"
- B. Bringing division to the new churches in Antioch and Galatia, disrupting the unity and fellowship Paul and Barnabas had achieved between Jew and Gentile (Gal 2.11-14)

NB. The "party of the Pharisees" had influence and was clearly intent on imposing its view on both Jewish believers and new Gentile converts, probably mainly to guard Jewish sensibilities. Thus they stirred up trouble in the synagogues in Antioch, and in Galatia. Even Peter and Barnabas are intimidated by them and go against what they know to be true: Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to join God's people. James seems to have shared their view at some point prior to the Council in Acts 15 (see Gal 2.12)

- ⇒ Whilst Paul and Barnabas come to the Church in Jerusalem to resolve, once and for all (by formal decree), the issue of salvation apart from circumcision, the Council is immediately forced to address the second issue too. Fortunately, if circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses is not required for table fellowship, it certainly isn't for salvation, i.e. both birds will be killed with the same stone, as indeed happens.

## The Jerusalem Council/Synod: process and outcome:

A. Much debate! Frank exchange of views.

B. The key leaders speak.

Peter stands up and gives testimony from “the early days”, i.e. c.10 years earlier when God chose him to preach to the Gentiles (Cornelius), that they might believe.

- Focus on faith: believed because heard the word of the gospel
- Focus on the heart:
  - “And God, who knows the heart
  - having cleansed their hearts by faith
- God 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,

⇒ why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

i.e. the Law (see Luke 11.46; Matt 11.28-30), which esp. burdensome for ordinary people (v’s Pharisees)

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

i.e. the circumcision that matters is the circumcision of the heart, which only God can do – by grace – for Jew and Gentile. Cf. Deut 30.6; Jer 4.4; Rom 2.29

=> The Gentiles come in *as equals* in their own right, by faith in God’s grace (not by becoming Jews first)

3 things unite Jew and Gentile in a common experience:

1. Faith in God/Jesus
2. Receiving of the gift of the Holy Spirit
3. God’s cleansing/purifying of the heart

Barnabas and Paul relate what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

James gives his judgment. The testimony of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, experience of God's salvific work is in accordance with the scriptures, specifically the prophecy (in LXX) of Amos 9.11, 12. God had promise:

- a. To "rebuild David's fallen tent" – fulfilled in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, David's greater son, and
- b. To "take from them (i.e. the Gentiles) a people for his name." i.e. the chosen Gentiles are God's people in the same way as the Jews are. They are integrated into God's people (as Gentiles), not assimilated (as proselytes) – Dunn.

But it is through faith in the Davidic Christ that (and any who seek the Lord v. 17a) they come

NB. the restoration of Israel leads to the salvation of the nations.

He judges that believing Gentiles should not be "troubled" (with circumcision or observances of the law which distinguished Jews), "but we should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood".

i.e. the four things associated with worship in pagan temples.

=> the one thing required of Gentiles is that they make a complete break with their pagan past.

Idolatry = the great danger, incl. emperor worship.

It is enough for Jews to observe the Mosaic law and maintain their identity – "for Moses has been proclaimed in synagogues from ancient generations". The Mosaic law is not in danger of being lost or not having its observers.

No wonder the Antioch church rejoiced!

James makes the call on his own, but it clearly received unanimous support (or at least no open dissent).

There is complete unity about how the judgment of James will be delivered, and presumably about the content of the letter (vv. 22-23, 25).

- C. Letter and envoys sent with B & P to Antioch. Reinforces the authority of the Jerusalem church.
  - a. = pastoral letter with authority in the name of apostles and elders
  - b. Addressed to the Gentiles as "brothers"

## Key points

1. The Jerusalem synod's stance:
  - a. Acknowledge the clear initiative of God (vv. 4, 7-10, 12, 14, 16-18, 28) "who knows the heart" regarding the inclusion of Gentiles, particularly his gift of the HS in response to faith in God. V. imp that it is God's initiative.  
Not only does God know the heart, but he cleanses the heart – of both Jew and Gentile, making no distinction (v.9)
  - b. Confirm from Scriptures: the restoration of Israel coincides with the inclusion of Gentiles as a people "called by my name"
  - c. Confirm salvation is from the Jews, the Jewishness of Jesus, and "to the Jew first", but ask no more of Gentiles than a complete break with the idolatry, i.e. Gntiles need not become Jews.
2. Apostolic authority and exclusive prerogative to determine doctrine. Peter's vision = critical, as is James' judgement. Note too Jesus' authority given to Peter (Matt 16.17-19) and the Apostles (Jn 16.12ff.) The early church listened to its leaders: Peter, James, Paul & Barnabas
3. Both a letter and envoys to deliver and speak to it. In contrast with those who caused trouble, who were not sent, Judas and Silas *are* sent by Jerusalem Church
4. Emphasis on consensus/unity, of both leadership and church as a whole. Even the troublemakers are either swayed or acquiesce.  
Dunn: "the discussion and decision seem to reflect a genuine willingness to come together on both sides... the decision is presented as a genuine consensus and not as a power play by one faction dictating its will to the rest."
5. Censure of those who had caused trouble (no authority to speak)
6. Affirmed love and respect for Paul and Brnabas who do come with authority and backing of Jerusalem Church

How important was this decision itself?

- Confirmed that salvation is by faith in Christ alone, apart from works
  - Confirmation that Christianity is not a sect of Judaism, that all people are equal in God's eyes
  - Affirmed sovereignty of God and outworking of his plan as foretold in scriptures
- ⇒ We can trust God's word that "one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess..." His kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven!

Other implications for us:

1. *How* we make decisions on doctrine and praxis
2. *Who* has authority to decree
3. Scripture-tradition-reason-experience
4. Faith and culture (boundaries)