

The Jerusalem Council | Acts 15:1-35

Introduction:

In 1799, during an archeological dig, a stone was found that contained basically the same message in three languages: Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics, ancient Egyptian Demotic script, and ancient Greek. This gave a means to decipher ancient texts from Egypt which were done in hieroglyphics, opening the doors to hundreds of years of ancient Egyptian history closed to the modern world before this. This discovery was a history changer.

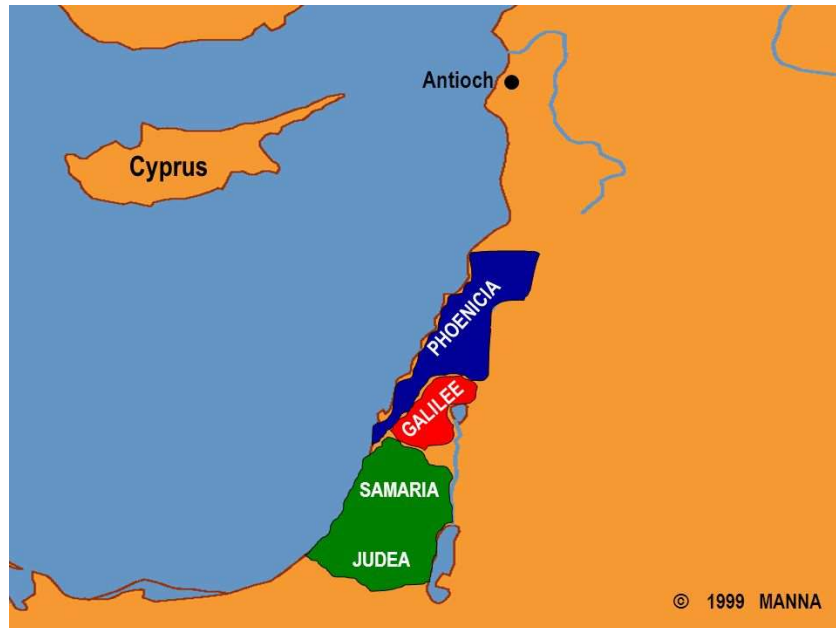
There have been many significant history-changing moments in the life of the church. In 1054 the Eastern Church and Western Church went separate ways, mainly because of their disagreement on governance of the church. This is known as the Great Schism. In 1517 a Roman Catholic Monk by the name of Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, or issues, against the church of his day, leading to what would become known as the Protestant Reformation. These were history changers.

In Acts 15 we find the first history changer in the church. A council is assembled in Jerusalem to deal with an important issue in the life of the church: what to do with Gentile converts. The outcomes of this council will forever change the direction of the church. This council changed the way you and I worship and come into the church, so this is an important study even to this day.

Who Can Be Saved? – Acts 16:1-5

1. Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch teaching a Gentile congregation how to be Christians. Visitors come from Judea teaching a certain message. What was their message? (vs. 1) What are the implications of this teaching?
2. How do Paul and Barnabas react to this teaching? (v. 2) Why did they respond this way?

3. How does Paul describe these teachers in Galatians 2:4? (⁴This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves.¹) What does Paul see at issue?
4. What other action is taken when these “false teachers” arrive? (v. 2)
5. On the way to Jerusalem the delegation share in Samaria and Phoenicia what God is doing among the Gentiles. How is the message received? Why?



6. What are Paul and Barnabas doing in verse 4? Who are they giving their report to?
7. Who stirs up trouble according to verse 5? What is the issue they bring up? How is the opposition described in verse 5?

As spiritual fathers to the Gentile converts, they would not see their liberties encroached upon. They had told the Gentiles that if they believed in Jesus Christ they should be saved; and now to be told that this was not enough to save them, except they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses.²

¹ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Ga 2:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² Henry, M. (1994). [Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: complete and unabridged in one volume](#) (p. 2129). Peabody: Hendrickson.

The Council Convenes – Acts 15:6-12

8. The apostles and elders gather to consider the matter. The topic about who can be saved is hotly debated. Who stands up to give testimony? (v. 7) Why should he be a spokesperson in this matter?
9. Verse 8 is a key verse, and one worth memorizing. What proof does Peter give that Gentiles are included in God's plan of salvation?
10. What is the message of verse 10? What does he mean by "a yoke"?
11. What is Peter's conclusion about salvation? (v.11)
12. In verse 12 we read that Paul and Barnabas recounted the signs and wonders done through them among the Gentiles. How does this fit in with Peter's conclusions (vss. 8-11)?

The Final Word Goes to James – Acts 15:13-21

13. Who is the last to speak? (v. 13) Who is he, and what makes his word so important? (ref. Galatians 1:19)
14. Simeon, in verse 14, is likely Simon, as in Simon Peter. James recounts how Peter's testimony was that God called Gentiles to be His people. How does James verify what he is saying? (cf. v.15-17)
15. James cites Amos 9:11-12 from the Greek version of the Old Testament. How will God restore the house of David according to these verses? What is the point of his quote by James?
16. What three things does James suggest should be passed on to the Gentile believers? What does he not mention? (vss. 19-20)

17. It has been suggested that what James describes is not Gentiles living “like” Jews but “among” Jews. What is the difference and why is this significant? What is James’ idea of the church as reflected here?

The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers – Acts 15:22-35

18. Verse 32 tells us that the council chose to send a delegation back with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. Why would they do this?
19. Verses 23-29 tells of a letter that will be sent to the Gentile believers. It endorses the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, and is confirmed by two more witnesses, Judas and Silas. Verses 28-29 is the heart of the letter: what is said there to the Gentile Christians?
20. How was the letter received in Antioch by the Christians there? (vss. 30-31) Why would this be such good news?
21. What additional role did Silas and Judas perform besides being witnesses? (v. 32) When they left, what was their relationship to the church of Antioch? (v. 34)
22. What did Paul and Barnabas do after the message was delivered to the Christians of Antioch? (v. 35)

Conclusion:

It is not surprising that there were people in the Jerusalem church who were strong advocates of the Law of Moses but ignorant of the relationship between Law and grace. These people were Jews who had been trained to respect and obey the Law of Moses; and, after all, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews had not yet been written! There was a large group of priests in the Jerusalem assembly (Acts 6:7), as well as people who still followed some of the Old Testament practices (see Acts 21:20–26). It was a time of transition, and such times are always difficult.

What were these legalists actually doing and why were they so dangerous? They were attempting to mix Law and grace and to pour the new wine into the ancient brittle wineskins (Luke 5:36–39). ... They were rebuilding the wall between Jews

and Gentiles that Jesus had torn down on the cross (Eph. 2:14–16). They were putting the heavy Jewish yoke on Gentile shoulders (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1). ... They were saying, “A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian! It is not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses!”³

We can see how significant this council was, as it once and for all set down the truth that we need not convert to Judaism first to be a Christian. We are saved by faith in Jesus alone – not Jesus plus something else (ie. The Law). Though this may sound very basic and straight forward, this kind of reasoning can creep into the church today. We may hear messages that say we need Jesus and works; Jesus and miracles; Jesus and certain practices like Baptism, Speaking in Tongues or church membership.

May we never forget the words the Apostle Paul would later pen to the believers in Ephesus:

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, p. 461). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.