

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (5-9-1999 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 15
The Council of Jerusalem

Introduction

Before carrying on with Paul's second and third missionary journeys, we are going to look at the very important Church Council. Acts of the Apostles not only records the progress of the Gospel and its triumphs, but also it faces the facts and deals with the problems of the early church. There were wayward church members, problems of dealing with those in need, debate about the kind of leaders needed.

Every church has its problems. As one church secretary said, "The only place where there is no friction is in the graveyard." Although our issues may be different from those of the early church, there is something to be learnt from how they dealt with their problems.

The problem which they faced

The problem seems strange to us, for it is a situation which would never arise here. But underneath is an important principle which we need to remember in every church in every age. Some of the Jewish members of the church were still influenced by their background. They went from Judea to Antioch where lots of Gentiles were being converted. The Jews felt that these new converts must be circumcised, i.e. keep the ceremonial law and Jewish rituals. They accepted the Gentiles – but felt that they really had to become Jews first, before they could have faith in Christ.

Christ had set aside, by His death, the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, but it took a long time for the penny to drop with many Jews. Peter had to have a special revelation before he accepted Cornelius. And even after that revelation, he and Barnabas compromised, and got in trouble with Paul.

It is not easy to unlearn all we have believed and done before coming to the Lord. These Jews were in a quandary – did a man need to be Jew before he could be a Christian? Were all races equal in the church, or were non-Jews second class Christians? Could they have meals together? Could they come to the Lord's Table together? What really is a Christian? What is the Gospel all about? The decision they reached is so important for it affected the nature and future of the Gospel. It has long been settled now and we benefit from the decision, but it was in the melting pot in Acts 15.

The issue had to be decided at the Council in Jerusalem. In leadership was James, the brother of Jesus. Known as "James the Just", he was put to death in 62AD, hurled from a temple pinnacle. He was so prayerful, that it was said his knees were as hard as a camel's. Though a Jew himself, he led the church in the direction of liberty. He taught repentance and faith in Christ were enough for salvation. He said that there was no need to keep Jewish ritual, for ceremonies were secondary, and did not make a man a Christian.

James's declaration was the Magna Carta of Gentile liberty – salvation by grace through faith. There was no further burden to be put on a man. All are equal in Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus** (Galatians 3:28). The basic issue was that there was to be no compromise about Salvation and Oneness of all believers in Christ Jesus.

Yet there was place for compromise on secondary matters, as long as the fundamental subject of salvation was not at stake. There was a need to be aware of the Jewish sensitivities and feelings and background. Out of respect for the Jews, the Gentiles were asked to abstain from four things, one of which was ethical, and three of which were ceremonial. They were to avoid immorality. Gentiles as much as Jews would know it had no place whatsoever in the Christian life. This was not an option. It was a particular danger for Gentiles, therefore this statement was underlining an important matter. It was said that in the ancient world “Innocence was not rare – it was non-existent.” Christian sexual morality was entirely new.

The three ritual demands to meet Jewish sensitivities involved the pollutions of idols (they must not eat meat offered to idols because it implied approval), and the way they killed their meat to eat. The great principle of Salvation by grace through faith was upheld, but at the same time on secondary matters the Gentiles were to be respectful of Jewish feelings. This facilitated friendship and unity. Needless offence was avoided, yet the great issue was not compromised.

The means by which they solved the problem

Here we have much to learn. The Church Council was not a slagging or shouting match. There was no denunciation or ridicule, abuse, misrepresentation or threats. Dirty linen was not washed in public. Firstly they got together in a spirit of frankness and love. They were humble, teachable, with a desire to understand and do the right thing. They appealed to the Scriptures. James quoted from Amos about the place which Gentiles would have in God's purposes and His people. They recognised that God had spoken in His Word, and they were anxious to obey it.

Throughout Acts and also the New Testament epistles, Scripture is always looked to. **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work** (2 Timothy 3:16,17). This was the mark of the early church. Like them, we need to come under the authority of Scripture in our problems.

The experience of God's dealings with them was shared. Peter related at the Council how God had blessed his ministry, and had showed He had accepted the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit. Therefore, since God had accepted them, there was no need for man to place unnecessary burdens on them. He triumphantly concluded: **We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are** (Acts 15:11). Barnabas and Paul supported Peter's argument, and pointed to God's approval in miracles and wonders through their ministry.

Having reached this conclusion unanimously, a letter of explanation was sent to Antioch, and it was received with joy. It was accompanied by Judas and Silas, who travelled with Paul and Barnabas setting off on their next missionary journey. It was

not just a cold statement, but it brought a personal touch because of the personal visit as well. Clear teaching and friendly warmth won the day.

The direction of the Holy Spirit shone through all. In the letter was the phrase **It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us** (Acts 15:28). The Holy Spirit was the real president of that Council. The men present had an earnest desire to discover the Lord's will and not to insist on their own ways. "The senior partnership of the Holy Spirit", as it has been described. How many take the partnership of the Holy Spirit seriously in their Christian life and service? And his "senior" partnership? Blessing depends on the Holy Spirit having rightful place in the life. In church growth, people are concerned with machinery and plans and schemes and men. Moody commented that often churches invite the Holy Spirit to join their committees *after* they have completed all their business. Chadwick observed that if the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from most churches, they would carry on as usual, it would make no difference.

The Holy Spirit is not just meant to help us out occasionally. He has to have His rightful place – the senior partner – directing and controlling. When churches are filled with the Spirit, they are blessed and guided. When members are filled with the Spirit, they are blessed and guided. The whole problem of self is dealt with, and the Spirit's work goes ahead unhindered. The Lord doesn't just want bits and pieces of our lives, but the whole thing. The Christian's relationship with his Lord must be dynamic, constantly and continually surrendered.

Are you Spirit-dominated, or self-dominated? In your heart of hearts, who is in the centre?

Conclusion

This was a momentous decision in the early church. Salvation was confirmed to come by grace through faith alone. They submitted themselves to Scripture, shared their experiences, enjoyed warm fellowship with others, and made the Holy Spirit their senior partner.