

ACTSFACTS

C@G Supplementary Study Notes for ACTS

Message #33

“THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL” (Acts 15:1-21)

Paul and Barnabas had arrived back in (Syrian) Antioch after completing the First Missionary Journey (14:26-28). They rejoiced together in all that God had done and how large numbers of Gentiles had become followers of Jesus (Christians).

And Luke says that they “*stayed there a long time with the disciples*” (14:28). We don’t really know how long that was, but it was, undoubtedly, a good time of recovery after the rigorous demands of their journey and, most likely, it gave them time to continue to encourage and minister to the young believers in the church at Antioch.

However, this time of relative peace and stability came to a close with what Luke then speaks of in **Acts 15:1**....

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

THE CONTROVERSY

Why was this teaching so controversial? Because it contradicted the message that Paul and Barnabas (and others) had been proclaiming...that Salvation was by God’s GRACE, not by anything that man did.

What these “false teachers” were saying was not just about circumcision as a simple medical procedure. It was really about making the Gentiles adhere to the strict Law of Moses before they could be considered to be saved.

In other words, it was like demanding that Gentiles become Jewish before they could become Christians!

These teachers, looking through the traditional Jewish lens, view Gentiles as ceremonially unclean (or, unacceptable to God). They think that, in order to be saved, they need to be circumcised as part of obeying the Law of Moses. They seem to have a legitimate theological concern, but they have come to the wrong conclusion.

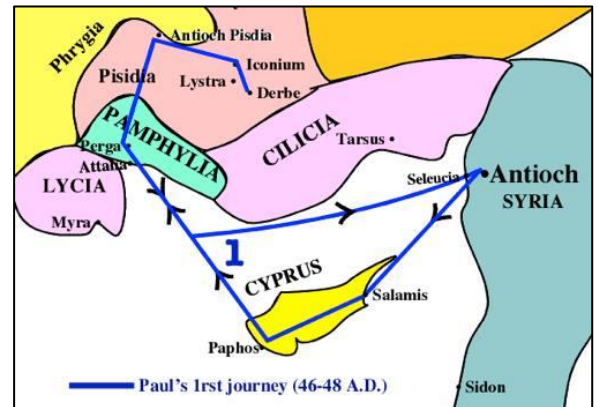
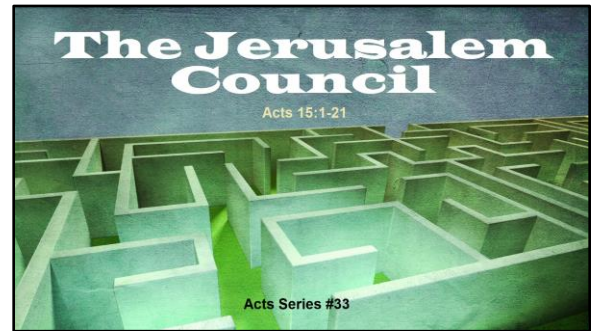
Have you ever experienced deep theological divisions/disagreements in a church? What were they? And how were they responded to/resolved?

What theological differences are enough to break fellowship with people, and which are not?

This was a fundamental issue for the early church. And, so, the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas (and some others....including Titus? – Galatians 2:1,3) to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders there to find out what their position on this matter was.

THE COUNCIL

In the early centuries of the Christian church, there were several “Councils” established to deal with various issues and erroneous teachings about Jesus (eg the Councils of Nicea 325 AD and Chalcedon 421 AD). However, the Council of Jerusalem was the first and most significant of all because it addressed the most important doctrinal question of all...**What must a person do to be saved?**



If you were to ask someone (outside of the church) that question, how might they respond?

Often, responses to questions like that include things that people “do”. In other words, it is whether someone is a good person and does good works that they earn their way to heaven. But, if that is the case, then it is not by God’s grace....and this is what the Jerusalem Council was called to discuss and decide.

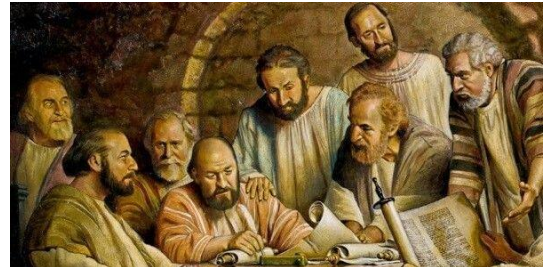
The debate looked something like this: **GRACE vs GRACE + LAW**

So the Council (apostles and elders) met and there was much discussion.

PETER - Then Peter stood up and made his appeal (Acts 15:6-11). Peter referred to his own conviction from God on this issue of the gospel being available, equally, to the Gentiles. He had received his vision from the Lord and had experienced the encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10). In **Acts 15:10** Peter makes a startling admission.....

“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?”

What Peter was saying was that the Law had never saved a single Jew, so why should it be placed as a condition on the Gentiles?



The truth is that the Law of Moses never had the power to cleanse and make someone righteous. Paul explains this in his Letter to the Romans.

Read Romans 3:20-25. What is it that brings righteousness? _____

Then in **Acts 15:11** Peter makes a key statement:

“No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, JUST AS THEY ARE!”

Look up these verses, too:

- **Acts 4:12**

- **Ephesians 2:8-9**

- **Romans 11:6**

Why do you think it is so hard for people to accept that we are saved by grace, and not by what we do/do not do?

PAUL & BARNABAS – Then Paul and Barnabas added their personal testimonies of how God had been at work amongst the Gentiles and how He had shown His approval and acceptance of them through the same types of signs and wonders that the Jewish believers had experienced.

JAMES – Finally, James (the half-brother of Jesus) rose up and addressed the Council. He was the leader of the Jerusalem Church and was probably chairing this meeting. His comments bring a definitive and unifying conclusion to this Council discussion.

Citing the previous points made by Peter, etc, as well as the prophecies of Scripture that referred to the Gentiles being accepted by God, James makes this statement:

“It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19).

James is clearly affirming the doctrine that salvation is by the grace of God, extended to sinners and appropriated through faith in Jesus Christ alone....not by any act/works of man. Grace alone!

Are there times when we are guilty of adding things to the simple Gospel message?

Sound theology should usher believers’ hearts into greater worship of God, strengthening and encouraging the faith of the body. How should we respond to the doctrine of salvation by grace?

We could say that the Jerusalem Council won victories on several fronts: It definitely proclaimed the liberty of the gospel (salvation by grace alone) without any man-mandated conditions; it appealed for respect and sensitivity of believers from different backgrounds to one another; and it drew a clear line in the sand: Christianity was not just a sect, or extension, of Judaism but was something altogether distinct and different.