

UNSTOPPABLE

GOD'S WORK
IN THE WORLD

CHURCH CONTROVERSY, IMAGINE THAT!

Lesson 5

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DEVOTIONAL

Church fights and controversies are the stuff of legend. In fact, they go back to the very beginning of the church era. This week we will look at the first dispute of grand significance that arose, threatening to undercut all of the early positive effects of the gospel mission.

With the center of Judaism being in Jerusalem—the place also of the death and resurrection of Christ and the Day of Pentecost—it is no wonder that the church in that city would be seen in the earliest years as the “mother church” most embedded with authority. There too remained the bulk of apostles and earliest disciples. We would be accurate as well to say that there also remained the largest number of Jewish background Christians who retained many affections for their history and past.

These Hebraic Christians had already made some big personal changes and shifts in thinking and belief, having accepted the minority position within the Jewish community that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. They had accepted His new teaching of grace and payment as the ultimate sacrifice for sin. But more changes were on the horizon for them, coming in reports of a great influx of Gentiles to faith also in Jesus. That Gentiles would become proselytes to Judaism and align with the idea of the God of Israel as the one true God was nothing new. But to see so many accepting the teachings about Jesus and seeing a ministry that was developing more directly to reach them apart from pure Jewish roots ... well ... this was more change than some were ready to receive. This was more than just shifting gears, this was a matter of replacing the entire engine and drivetrain!

Questions were raised as to what elements of the past should be retained, whereas as others were now to be replaced or modified. And sure enough, for certain traditionalist Judaizers, the entire issue of circumcision and legalistic keeping of the Law was raised as something still necessary— to both be in right relationship with God and to live appropriately. The issue really hit the fan in Antioch as we read at the beginning of Acts 15.

I'll say it again—I just love Paul's boldness; and really, he has to have New Jersey roots! But Paul understood that this particular issue was not the typical church fight about the color of the carpet, the thermostat setting, or the volume of the worship team. No, this issue about demanding Gentile believers to observe Jewish prescriptions cut to the heart of the gospel message of faith alone. It was bringing a “works” perspective into both salvation and sanctification. This could not be tolerated, and it had to be resolved. The problem was not only in Antioch, but it too was a divisive issue in the newly-founded churches of the first missionary journey.

The need for a definitive word had to involve the primary players and personalities of the first church and followers of Christ in Jerusalem. The excellence of the Antioch church is seen in the wisdom of the decision to send not only Paul and Barnabas to share their stories, but other witnesses as well who could collaborate the truth.

This gathering is known as “the Jerusalem Council” in church history (occurring probably in the year A.D. 49).¹

OPEN IT

1. **What types of things do you have strong opinions about? Are you more prone to keep these opinions to yourself, or do you tend to make your feelings heard?**

READ IT

Acts 15:1–35

EXPLORE IT

2. **What teaching created problems for the church?**
3. **Who gathered in Jerusalem to address this issue?**
4. **Which four disciples emerge as leaders during these meetings?**
5. **What does Luke say the outcome of this meeting was in verses 19–20?**
6. **What did the church do to spread the word about what transpired in Jerusalem?**
7. **What was the response of the church when they were told about the conclusions that were made in Jerusalem?**

¹Devotional by Randy Buchman found @<https://devotionalstsf.org/2017/07/03/church-controversy-imagine-that-acts-151-5/>

APPLY IT

JERUSALEM, WE'VE GOT A PROBLEM!

To some early Christians it seemed the gospel had leaped out of its corral and was galloping across the world landscape like a herd of mustangs—beyond control, free, and wild. Wonderful things were happening among non-Jewish people. Strict Jews who believed in Jesus were happy when the first Gentiles found the Lord. But then they watched as changes took place that made them extremely uncomfortable.

From childhood it had been drilled into them that circumcision was the symbol separating God's people from pagans. Naturally, they expected believing Gentiles to start acting like Jews! This set up a showdown that led to another important turning point in early Christianity. The shoot-out at the Jerusalem Council lets us observe a fine example of creative conflict resolution.²

But what was a beautiful scene at the end of Acts 14 soon became ugly in Acts 15. All did not remain well, for soon some troublemakers came down from Judea. The result was a potential threat to the health and harmony of, not only their church, but the church at large. Simply put, the gospel came under attack from within. These troublemakers were known in the vernacular as “Judaizers.”

These “men” (v. 1) were the individuals that Paul spoke of so despairingly in his letter to the Galatians. They were false teachers who were attempting to undo the gospel. By their reshaping of the gospel they were perverting the good news into bad news. That is always the case when anything is added to the gospel truth that we are saved by grace alone. These men were teaching that Moses must complete what Jesus had begun.³

8. What do we know about the church's ministry since Acts 10 that would make such teaching poison for the church? How might the Gentiles have felt as they encountered such teaching?

9. This type of teaching is still prevalent today. What extra things do some add to the gospel? Why is such teaching attractive to so many people today?

² Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts* (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 3202-3206). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

³ Sermon by Doug Van Meter Found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/by-grace-alone/#fn-3828-1>

John Stott summarizes the seriousness of this issue when he writes,

“The issue was immense. The way of salvation was at stake. The gospel was in dispute. The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined.”⁴

10. While the issues precipitating this church crisis seem out of place today (i.e. circumcision and customs of Moses), what things are causing issues for the 21st-century church?

11. The church addressed this situation by gathering together and coming to a consensus and speaking with one voice regarding the issue at hand. Is this type of gathering possible today? Why or why not?

Throughout history there have been many such Councils, in which leaders in the church at large have gathered to settle matters of doctrinal and ecclesiastical dispute. The two most famed have been those at Nicaea and Chalcedon. In these councils, major heresies, which attacked the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, were rejected and biblical orthodoxy was upheld.⁵

12. It seems like we are living in a post-denominational world where church independence is sought. What pros and cons come from being formally disconnected from other churches? What value is there for the church to gather and speak with one accord?

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 243.

⁵ Sermon by Doug Van Meter Found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/by-grace-alone/#fn-3828-1>

13. Look over the convening of the church leaders in Jerusalem. What can we learn about their time together, and what practical lessons can we learn when it comes to conflict resolution?

LOOK WHO'S TALKING!!!

By verses 6 and 7 the Council has convened, and there has been much debate. No doubt some of the hotter heads had said some things for which they were already sorry. Perhaps there were even times of chaos before Peter rose to speak. Knowing Peter, he probably could not sit still any longer.

First, he recalled his experience with the Gentiles: *“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith”* (vv. 7–9). He was referring to his ministry years earlier in seeing the Gentile Cornelius and his entire house receive Christ and the Holy Spirit through faith. The conclusion? *“[God] made no distinction between us and them.”* Then came Peter’s stunning pronouncement: *“Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are”* (vv. 10–11).

Peter affirmed his perplexity as to why the Judaizers would saddle anyone with the Law. They themselves could not bear it, so why heap it upon others? God had given them the Law as a schoolmaster to lead them to Christ by demonstrating at every turn they were sinners in need of mercy (see Galatians 3:23–25; Romans 3:19–20). They transgressed the basic commandment to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and their neighbor as themselves daily. The conclusion of all this? Grace alone! *“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”* Every person—the Ph.D. and the least-taught child—comes into God’s family the same way—solely by the undeserved kindness of a forgiving God!

With the conclusion of Peter’s speech, a turning point came, as evidenced in verse 12 by the multitude’s silence. We learn when we listen. During that silence, Barnabas and Paul seized the moment and verified what Peter had said by relating the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. The miracles of their first missionary trip were recited, and the Council was awestruck.⁶

14. Peter’s speech clearly communicates that the gospel has “no strings attached.” What concerns cause Christians to add steps or hoops for people to go through in order to get to God?

⁶ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire* (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 3587-3606). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

15. Read Galatians 2:11–14. What did Peter do that made Paul so angry? What can we learn about our own Christianity through this unfortunate situation with Peter?

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

“Controversy and religious strife, no doubt, are odious things; but there are times when they are a positive necessity. Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth. There is a vast amount of maundering, childish, weak talk nowadays in some quarters about unity and peace, which I cannot reconcile with the language of St. Paul. It is a pity, no doubt, that there should be so much controversy; but it is also a pity that human nature should be so bad as it is, and that the devil should be loose in the world. It was a pity that Arius taught error about Christ’s person: but it would have been a greater pity if Athanasius had not opposed him. It was a pity Tetzal went about preaching up the Pope’s indulgences: it would have been a far greater pity if Luther had not withstood him. Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in every age has to be defended and maintained and it is nonsense to ignore it.”⁷

16. In both Acts 15 and Galatians 2 we see Christians debating and disagreeing with each other quite vigorously. How can this type of activity be both a blessing and a curse to a church? How can a church foster a healthy dialog and decorum when differences arise?

17. James finds an obscure passage of Scripture from Amos 9:11–13 that seemingly spoke to the situation that the church was facing. How can this approach of using the Bible to substantiate our position have merit? What pitfalls must we be leery of when using this approach in our debates with others?

⁷ J. C. Ryle *Light From Old Times*, Banner of Truth Trust (2015), p. 391

Erdman summarizes James' counsel with these words: The decision, suggested by James, and accepted by the council, included three points⁸:

Liberty: (15:19); the law of Moses need not be kept and could not be a ground of salvation. This decision was the "Magna Carta" of Christian liberty (Gal. 2:15–21).

Purity: (15:20) Liberty is not license, but a life of holiness, by faith in Christ (Gal. 5:13–26).

Charity: In matters of indifference let us not needlessly offend those who prefer to observe certain forms and ceremonies (Gal. 6:2).

18. How would these conclusions of James' help bring unity and order to the church? Which one is most needed in the church today? Explain your answer.

19. Once the church came to an agreement, they sent men to spread the word. We are told in verses 30–32 that Christians rejoiced and were encouraged by the news. How does unity among leaders bring about such a response to those who are following?

20. When we fall under the banner of grace, we are free to let some things go for the sake of unity. What do you need to let go this week for the sake of unity?

⁸ Charles R. Erdman, *The Acts: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 125.

Note: This study was compiled, and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroups