

Unity and Concession

Text: Acts 15: 1-21 (15:22-35?)

What are we on about as a Church?

How do we decide what's central to our life together?

What is there that we must have if we're to be a truly Christian Church?

What are the guiding principles that govern our life together?

They're the sorts of questions that arise out of today's passage from Acts 15.

No sooner have Paul and Barnabas arrived back at Antioch and reported to the church how God has been working through them and has opened a door of faith for the Gentiles, than trouble arises.

Trouble that's, in fact, triggered by their great success in bringing Gentiles to faith. It's ironic isn't it?

They've just had a congregational meeting where people have been rejoicing over the great things that have happened on their first missionary journey

and suddenly it's all spoiled by these guys who come in from Jerusalem with their ideas about what to do with all these Gentile converts.

At first Gentile conversions had been in their ones and twos.

They were in numbers that could be handled by the predominantly Jewish church.

And there was no problem with them being brought in.

The Old Testament told of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God.

Gentile converts had always been part of the Jewish synagogue.

But now that small trickle was becoming a torrent.

And these Gentiles weren't the ones who'd been onlookers in the Jewish synagogues, who understood the traditions of Judaism.

These were people being converted from paganism,

who had no concept of Jewish religious practices;

no idea about God's laws;

about how God had instructed his people to conduct themselves.

So this loomed as a major issue for the church.

Here were people coming into the church through baptism without circumcision.

That is, they were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews.

Here was a major problem.

The original Jewish Christians were worried that the foundations of Christianity were being undermined by this influx of Gentiles with no real understanding of what had come before.

And at one level they're right to be worried.
This moment is the turning point in the history of the Church.

From this moment on the church will never be the same again.
Here Peter makes his last appearance.

From now on, Paul takes centre stage as the "Apostle to the Gentiles."
From this moment on the Jewish and Gentile Churches march shoulder to shoulder as equal members of God's Church.

The Gentiles are freed from the bonds of Jewish law-keeping.
The gospel is freed from its Jewish heritage to be a message for all of humanity.

So what happens?
First certain individuals come down from Judea to check up on what's happening in Antioch.

Perhaps they're unhappy with the decision of Barnabas, the previous envoy, to encourage these Gentiles who were being converted.

In any case they arrive and begin teaching that new Christians should be circumcised.

Their point is that salvation comes through the people of Israel,
so obeying the law of Moses is vital.

We need to stop at this point so we can understand what was at stake here.

Luke makes it clear in v.1.
These Jews were saying that without circumcision you couldn't be saved.

They were going beyond the facts of Jewish history.
At this point they were relying on Jewish tradition and religious practice to establish a theology that was in fact false.

But they'd turned the sign of God's covenant with Abraham into a condition,
a prerequisite, of salvation;
and that struck at the heart of the gospel.

Paul preached that faith in Christ alone was what was needed for salvation and here were these people saying, "No, that's not enough. You also need to be circumcised."

What we need to understand is that this is no small difference of opinion.

When we read 'sharp dispute and debate'
The Greek words used here have the idea of 'arguing forcefully' ...
The notion is one of great strife, discord and disunity.

They are translated elsewhere in the NT as ‘riot’ and ‘insurrection’!

This was a major dispute, a serious theological crisis.

If not handled wisely it had the potential to split the church and seriously hinder the gospel.

So everyone heads off to Jerusalem to discuss the matter.

Now the council in Jerusalem is convened to resolve the question of whether the Gentile believers should obey the law of Moses to be saved.

What happens when they get to Jerusalem is that first Peter reminds the council of his own experience with the household of Cornelius.

You may remember that when that incident occurred Peter got into trouble from the Jerusalem Christians for entering a Gentile house and preaching the gospel.

But his answer was that if God had made them clean, and that was shown by the fact that the Holy Spirit fell on them, then how could anyone consider them unclean.

So he reminds them of that and especially that it’s through the grace of the Lord Jesus that we’re saved.

Grace means “undeserved favour.”

If in any way you deserve it, it is not grace (Rom. 4:4-5; 11:6).

Peter makes it clear that the salvation of the Gentiles originated with God’s choice, that through Peter they would hear the word of the gospel and believe (15:7).

He further underscores that God made no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles (15:9).

In other words, He saved the Gentiles apart from their becoming Jews or any other merit on their part.

And, Peter sums up, “We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (15:11).

That’s quite a statement for a Jew to make!

In other words, their Jewish religion didn’t chalk up “Brownie points” with God.

Their keeping all of the ceremonial and moral laws didn’t move them an inch closer to salvation, because salvation is not based on any goodness in us or any religious activities on our part.

You may have been raised in the church, as I was.

You may have devoted your whole life to service in the church.

You can even serve as a missionary and suffer greatly for your religious work.

None of it weights the scale of heaven even a little bit in your favour.

The murderer on death row is just as close to salvation as you are.

In fact, he may be closer, because he is more likely to see his need for God's grace than the religious person who takes pride in his good deeds.

The Bible says that we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. So we all need to be justified as a gift by God's grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:23-24).

Salvation by keeping the law is impossible.

Peter calls the Law of Moses "a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (15:10).

The purpose of God's law was never to save sinners,
but to show them their need for God's grace.

Paul says, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

So the law was put in place to lead us to Christ

The law, in effect, is like a school teacher who will lead us to knowledge.

We fail to keep Gods commandments all of us have failed.

The purpose of the law is to reveal our sinful nature and lead us to Christ.

Its like a drill sergeant or school teacher.

What is the answer ?

The answer is Salvation through faith and grace alone.

Peter confirms Salvation is through the grace of Jesus alone!

So Peter opens the way for Paul and Barnabas to tell of the way God has blessed their mission into Asia Minor.

Finally James, as leader of the Church speaks.

His conclusion is a wise and Godly compromise based on his clear reading of Scripture and his understanding of the theology of salvation.

He quotes the words of Amos 9 where God says he'll restore Israel, at the same time including in it those Gentiles who bear his name.

So the inclusion of the Gentiles isn't some divine afterthought, or a mistake by Paul, but part of God's salvation plan foretold by the prophets.

Then he concludes "we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from sexual immorality and from whatever has been strangled and from blood."

This lifting of the burden to convert to Judaism would have been a huge relief to the Gentile Christians.

But, James lays three issues that even the Gentiles need to be sensitive about, so as not to be offensive, especially to those whose views differed from theirs.

In other words he asks them to keep away from things that would make them unacceptable to their Jewish brothers and sisters.

These things aren't meant as a condition of salvation.

Rather they're to do with the fellowship to be enjoyed between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Well, James' wisdom is accepted by the council and so Paul and Barnabas are sent back to Antioch with a letter containing the judgement of the council,

accompanied though, by Judas and Silas, who are sent as representatives of the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem.

What are we on about as a Church?

How do we decide what's central to our life together?

What is there that we must have if we're to be a truly Christian Church?

What are the guiding principles that govern our life together?

What will we do when differences occur, as they inevitably will?

First we'll rely on God's word to establish the foundations of our belief.

We need to ask "What does the Bible say that might help us resolve this?"

Second we'll return to the basis of our salvation.

What is it that brings salvation?

Is it faith in God alone or is it a combination of faith and law keeping?

It's faith alone, isn't it?

But, you know, there is a little bit of Pharisee in each one of us.

We may unwittingly mistake upholding tradition, structure, and legal requirements for obeying God.

One commentator, Lawrence Richards, calls it ethnocentrism.

The idea that your own customs and practices are right, and others are wrong.

We need to watch out that we don't assume that because someone lives or acts in a way different from us that they are wrong or inferior...

Faith in Christ and love for Jesus can be expressed in a variety of ways...
Besides our own.

But something deeper was at stake...

A question on the very nature of the gospel itself.

Was the goodnews really that God forgives the sins of anyone who believes in Jesus or not?

We need to be just a clear today...

Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ...with no ANDs at all.

Jesus paid for it all.

The new life of love and obedience we take on after salvation is a consequence,
not a condition of salvation.

How freeing it is to realise that our salvation rests on what Jesus has done...

Not what we must do.

I sin, I sin every day. Every day I struggle with sin and there's a battle within me.
Yet those things do not at all make me unsure of my salvation.

The reason for that is that my salvation does not depend upon what I do,
my conformity to the law or lack of conformity to the law.

My salvation rests on what Jesus did for me.

He has saved me. I am His. He is mine.

For my salvation, I look only to Him.

For my salvation, I rejoice only and totally in Him.

Christians, rejoice in Jesus your Savior.

When Peter stands and addresses the assembly his main point is worth hearing again
and again:

V11 'We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved.'

Let's keep the focus on that today...

Salvation is by grace through faith...with no other condition.

To insist that others conform to our cultural standards before we welcome them into
full fellowship is wrong.

The issue isn't as abstract as you might think.

Sometimes we resist fellowship with those who raise their hands in praise.

Sometimes we resist fellowship with those who meet in a café,
not a church building.

Sometimes we resist fellowship with those who
are too 'boring' in worship style.
Sometimes we resist fellowship with those who only sing psalms,
or those who never sing them.

How relevant are these issues?

You and I need to affirm each other's freedom to differ, without a hint of criticism,
knowing that God, who has accepted us in Christ, also accepts them in the same way.

Our job is to believe in Jesus, to trust Him- to trust in Him only and totally.
And to show others that we are saved through faith.

As the apostle Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:8-9**.

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