

Sunday July 24, 2022

## Lesson 8: The Jerusalem Council's Mandate

Scripture: Acts 15: 1-21

### **Context:**

We continue our unit of unpacking life in the Spirit as found in the work of the early church being moved by the Holy Spirit. This week we examine how the Holy Spirit worked in the lives of the early church's quest for unity as they struggled with various issues of the times. We will then explore how the Spirit works today to remind us of the power of unity in the face of great struggles.

The text today opens with a conflict. Individuals from Judea have come amongst the family of believers, teaching and insisting how new believers must first be circumcised, and then admitted into the faith. Both Paul and Barnabas contend this is wrong and there is intense debate over what should be done. The ending result is a meeting at the church in Jerusalem. Yet on the way, they stop along several places telling about the conversion of the gentiles, giving a thrill to other brothers and sisters in the early church.

When they arrive at Jerusalem and have given their report of all they had ministered to, some of the Pharisees stood up, unconvinced of these conversions and demanding the gentiles be circumcised and keep the Torah. This assertion leads to dialogue about what should happen with various speakers coming forward. Peter speaks up to his experience with Cornelius and the revelation of God's inclusive grace as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit convicting the gentiles as proof enough. Echoing the book of Romans (yet to be written), Peter stresses primacy in the belief of all being saved by the grace of God. Peter then concludes the body should be careful in challenging God by placing a burden upon these new disciples with a requirement of circumcision and emphasis on Mosaic law.

Peter is not alone as we are presented with James (a leaders in the church of Jerusalem and commonly believed to be Jesus' brother), with words from the book of Amos. James speaks after the testimony of Paul and Barnabas, as if to seal their argument with scripture in support of the gentile mission utilizing a text which refers to the restoration of the true people of God.<sup>1</sup> The wisdom in James' words comes from the fact Amos said nothing about the need for gentile converts to follow requirements of the law.<sup>2</sup> This allows for the debate to continue with gentleness.

For various reasons, this meeting highlights a useful guide for how the church ought to argue. For one thing, the church listens to its leaders and for another, there is a focus on new revelation along with confirmation by experience and with testing by scripture to help church move to a better place.<sup>3</sup> And finally, there is respect for a new plan to help all parties understand their identity and move to a better place.

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<sup>1</sup>Willimon, William H. "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 129.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 130.

## **Application**

For some personality types, the worst thing someone can do is bring up the word “conflict.” Sadly, in today’s world of leadership and life, conflict has become synonymous with negativity and disunity. Thus, some leaders either go the route of micromanaging and silencing parties within a conflict or they allow things to go completely amuck so there is little accountability for any party. At times, there may even be leaders who do both with a fear of what conflict can do within a body, creating even more disunity and division.

Often, I think we in the church idolize the early church and its formation. We preach about the resurrection and love to think about the first part of Acts where we derive our celebration of Pentecost and then read of the church sharing resources and enacting the phrase “everyone was singing kumbayah.” The scene is beautiful and one we should read and celebrate.

Yet the book of Acts also makes clear the early church had its fair share of conflict and disputes where multiple parties had a stake in what would happen. In this case, we see questions around circumcision and belonging to a community of faith. And fortunately for us, we see how unity was the primary focus instead of division and subduing conflict.

The first thing to strike me when reading this text was the amount of respect for the various individuals represented. Paul and Barnabas are respected for their work with the gentiles and the church in general. The Pharisees are respected for their knowledge of tradition. Peter is respected for his experience and convictions. And James is respected for his application of the historical understanding of a prophet with a new revelation. There is a level of equality and respect given to one another.

Perhaps the greatest thing we need to regain today is respect for those who lead us, or if we are leaders ourselves, learning to communicate effectively and know our positional authority. This does not mean there will always be agreements on every issue at hand. Often, we are sharpened by the gifts of others to help accentuate our own, and vice versa. Respect means even though we may not agree or understand the motivations of leaders, we seek to learn and give credence unto their office. When we are openly petty, dismissive, or disrespectful, we lose our own perspective and part of our Christian witness.

The second thing to strike me is how unity was their focus even though the struggles were huge. If there is anything we could glean from the early church in this text and throughout scripture, it is the focus on being united in the truth of how the saving grace of Jesus Christ is what should bring us together despite our differences. Unity does not mean uniformity and allows for us all to continue to grow and flourish with one another.

Today, the church could learn from both observations about how to move forward, especially in the conflicts of today. We are called to respect our leaders, even if we disagree with them. This means praying for them, venting about them to safe people when we cannot understand their decision-making processes, and then continuing to serve faithfully whether we are clergy or laity as God would have us to do. Respect, even in the face of difficulty, can help all of us maintain hope and even heal once conflicts have moved on and we continue to labor together in the Kingdom of God.

We are also called to strive towards unity as the body of Christ. This is a gospel truth and to say otherwise is not quoting scripture, but instead focusing on the fear or anxiety within us. American Christians often face the temptation to act as our country does, dividing up based on social worldviews or biases. It is so tempting, and we may even think we have extremely profound theological reasonings based on scripture to divide. Yet if we read Acts closely, we see the focus is always to strive towards unity even when the struggles seem overwhelming and too

large. The good news of Jesus Christ is what unites us, and we would do well to remember the example of our early church in seeking how to embrace our mission.

How does respecting leaders allow for us to move forward together? If we are leaders, how can we communicate effectively and empower others? Why do you think unity is a focus of the Holy Spirit? What is the danger in saying unity in Jesus Christ is a lie? How have you seen conflict actually help move a church or body closer together in mission for the gospel?

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