

Grace Church  
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #36

ACTS  
The Jerusalem Council - Doctrine  
Acts 15:1-12

Why is it necessary to nitpick over biblical doctrine? Should we really fight over doctrinal issues when the unity of the church is at stake? Do we need to judge men on the basis of doctrine when we should be loving them? These kinds of questions are being raised today all through evangelicalism in America. Doctrine is being set aside for unity and love which, in the end, may be the destruction of the general evangelical movement. We must remember that doctrine is important and especially when it concerns the facts and interpretation of the biblical gospel. The gospel must be defended at all costs without compromise.

“But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8, 9).

Christians may disagree over whether there is going to be a millennium, or when the church will be raptured, or whether it is right to baptize infants, or whether the episcopalian, congregational or presbyterian form of government is correct, but they must agree on the essence of the gospel. In no way can a Christian compromise, water down, or pervert the gospel. If the gospel is abandoned, the Christian Faith is abandoned!

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is the first major defense of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. This council was called to determine whether salvation was by works or grace, whether one becomes a Christian by law keeping or by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Whatever else may be concluded about Acts 15, the issue at the Jerusalem Council was “the grace of the Lord Jesus.” “But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (Acts 15:11). The method or way of salvation was the center of thought, so the controversy was whether a person was saved by free grace or by some human rite, ritual, work or act.

THE CAUSE OF THE COUNCIL (Acts 15:1)

“And some men came down from Judea . . .” – Certain Jews, who were probably converts to Christianity, came down from Judea to the church at Antioch and began to teach these Gentile believers that a Christian had to keep the Mosaic law in order to be saved. The issue was salvation by law, but the controversy focused on the act of circumcision. These anonymous men were professing Christians. While they

appeared to be saved, the text does not specifically tell us that they were saved. They were Christian legalists who did not understand the grace of God in salvation or sanctification. These legalists came to Antioch to pump these Gentile believers, who were saved out of paganism, who had been idolaters, who had been devoted to licentious and sexually immoral pagan temple worship and who knew nothing of the Mosaic law, with the false teaching concerning the necessity of keeping the Mosaic law to be saved.

We are not told who these men were, but they probably were self-appointed and claimed to come from the Apostle James in Jerusalem. While we don't know who they were, we can pretty much tell what they were from observing any modern day Christian legalists. They were gloomy, long-faced, critical, kill-joys who had great commitment to their negative approach to life. The tragedy was that these legalists were sincere. They were not trying to cause trouble, but they were deeply committed to the belief that unless a Gentile complied with the Law of Moses and was circumcised, he had no right to call himself a Christian. These legalists were sincere, but they were in the dark concerning the biblical concept of grace.

“ . . . and began teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” – The crux of the issue was not simply a question of whether one should be circumcised or not, but one had to be circumcised in order to be saved. These legalists were dogmatically declaring that salvation is not by grace through faith, but by grace through faith PLUS circumcision. These legalists wanted Gentiles who believed in Christ to keep every aspect of the Mosaic law. “But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5). The issue, then, was belief in Christ and keeping the law for salvation. This was adding law-works to the grace of Christ for salvation. These legalists were not against Gentiles being saved and becoming part of the church, but they said Gentiles had to believe in Christ and keep the Mosaic law if they were to be saved.

This was a very attractive heresy and seemed to have some Old Testament support. It was clear from the Old Testament that Gentiles were saved on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant had, as its sign and seal, the rite of circumcision which was performed on every Jewish male child on the eighth day. The act of circumcision was originally designed to be a symbol, but the Jews had perfected this so as to make it necessary for salvation. These Christian legalists concluded, therefore, that every Gentile male child should also be circumcised to indicate they were of the covenant people as was Abraham.

These legalists were teaching a false Christianity, but in many ways it sounded so biblical. This was a mixture of grace and law, faith and works, and was destructive to real Christianity which teaches that salvation is caused by God's grace and appropriated through faith in Christ. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9).

The issue of circumcision for salvation is far removed from us today, but we still have many in the twentieth century who would tell us that Christ plus some human act is necessary for salvation. Men who bear the name of Christian tell us that if a person is to be saved he must be water baptized, he must be immersed, he must do certain external acts, or belong to a certain denomination. Yes, and these false teachers can find an isolated Scripture here and there to prove their point, but in every case there is a rank denial on the teacher's part to acknowledge the pure grace of God in the salvation of a soul. If salvation is by faith in Christ plus anything, Christ will profit nothing, and this is the very same error the Jerusalem Council refuted. We must trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. We must not trust in Jesus Christ and our baptism, and our church membership, and our denomination or anything else. If we are trusting in Christ plus anything, we are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone and He will profit us nothing.

#### CHOSEN MEN SENT TO JERUSALEM (Acts 15:2)

“And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, . . .” – Paul and Barnabas immediately saw their theological error and took issue with them. This was a doctrinal point that threatened the very existence of true Christianity. These Christians had a heated debate which caused static and friction. In fact, this was a regular Donnybrook. Paul and Barnabas were ready to defend the true gospel. They loved the unity of the church, but they loved the pure gospel more, so they fought for the truth. Paul and Barnabas were not spineless, sentimental, jellyfish Christians who gushed with love. If Christians would say, “Paul, you must not judge,” Paul would have a few choice words for them. When they would say, “Now, Paul, don't get all tied up over doctrinal issues, or you will split the church,” he would give them a double whammy that would let them know they were wrong. Paul and Barnabas were willing to confront error for the cause of Christ and they would not allow the gospel to be twisted and perverted. Paul and Barnabas probably took these legalists right to the text and showed them that Abraham was saved in Genesis 15 when he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness. Years passed before Abraham and his family were circumcised in Genesis 17. Circumcision was a sign and a seal but brought no life or salvation. It was an important symbol, but it could not save. Only faith in Christ can save. In the twentieth century, we have so many ministers and sweet Christians who never get excited over biblical doctrine, and it is not too long before the wool is pulled over the eyes of these sweet saints and they fall prey to some legalistic, works gospel which strips the true gospel of life and power.

We should never be surprised when the doctrine of grace alone in salvation causes strife, for grace is an offense to the human pride. Grace is unmerited favor. Grace says that even man's faith is a gift from God. Grace is gratuitous; it is free. By free grace, we mean that salvation cannot be bought, worked for or merited by man. Salvation is a pure gift from God provided through the death of Jesus Christ for sinners. Free grace in Christ is an offense to our morality, for it tells us that we cannot get to heaven by our character. Free grace in Christ is an offense to our reason for it tells us that we cannot philosophize our way to heaven. Free grace in Christ is an offense to our culture, for it tells us that not many wise, noble and mighty are called to salvation. Free grace is an

offense to our education, for it tells us that we cannot make ourselves good enough for heaven. Free grace is an offense to our human wills because it calls for unconditional surrender to Christ and tells us that we are not saved by human volition. “In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth . . .” (James 1:18). Free grace clashes with all human reason and efforts to save oneself. Free grace says a man will not be saved unless God grants that man salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and this is repugnant to the totally depraved nature of every human being. Free grace was taught by the Lord Jesus Christ and it is just as true today as it was when He taught it. “No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 4:44).

“ . . . the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.” – It was finally decided by the church leaders in Antioch to send Paul and Barnabas, and a few others of their number, perhaps Titus, to Jerusalem to consult the pillars of the church there concerning this matter. Paul and Barnabas were the most logical men to have been chosen for this purpose. They were informed, theologically astute and fearless men who would take a back seat to no one, not even the apostles. We must be careful not to read this assuming Paul was uncertain as to the truth of salvation by grace through faith in Christ, and therefore had to consult with the other Apostles before it was settled. Paul never had a moment’s doubt over the issue because the gospel had been revealed to him by Christ. Paul and the others only wanted confirmation from the mother church in Jerusalem so as to silence the legalists.

It should be noted that at the Council of Jerusalem not only the apostles, but also the elders, deliberated on this matter of salvation by law or grace. Elders today are still responsible to keep the local church doctrinally sound and pure.

Another very significant point concerning the Jerusalem Council is that the whole first century church was not represented at this Council. The various local churches in the Roman world did not send delegates or representatives to this council. It was a meeting of a delegation from the local church at Antioch with the local church in Jerusalem over a theological question on which the church at Antioch wanted guidance, counsel and clarification from the church at Jerusalem. The purpose of this council was for consultation and not for coercion because of some authoritative decree from the Apostles in Jerusalem. However, the decision at the Jerusalem Council carried great weight because it was of great interest to all the churches. It is very questionable that from Acts 15 any type of higher denominational system can be supported. Delegates were not sent from all the local churches. However, Acts 15 may support the idea that local churches of like mind should get together to discuss matters of theology and practice, but no binding decision should be made that would be forced on the local churches.

CONTINUING TO ENCOURAGE THE BRETHREN (Acts 15:3)

“Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, . . .” – Again, we see the local church at Antioch sending this delegation to Jerusalem. The local church was central in

all New Testament action and activities and it should be that way today.

“ . . . they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.” – On their journey to Jerusalem, the delegation stopped in various cities and encouraged the brethren by sharing what God was doing among the Gentiles. We should always get excited when we hear of God saving people. One of the exciting things about a local church is when people are being saved and these new converts become part of the local church, bringing in new life and vitality.

#### COMING TOGETHER AS BRETHERN (Acts 15:4)

“And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and elders, . . .” – There was a warm welcome given by the church at Jerusalem to this delegation from the church at Antioch. There is no real substitute for Christian love, warmth, friendship and hospitality. Notice that the whole local church at Jerusalem received this delegation.

“ . . . And they reported all that God had done with them.” – The Jerusalem Council probably lasted for weeks or months and what we have recorded is merely a synopsis of what happened. The first meeting to be held was a body life service at which time Paul and Barnabas shared the triumphs of the first missionary journey, telling of what God was doing for and through the Gentile Christians. They told how Jesus Christ was changing the lives of Gentiles as they responded to Him by faith.

#### CIRCUMCISION INSISTED UPON BY THE LEGALISTS (Acts 15:5)

“But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, . . .” – There was a group of converted Pharisees in the church at Jerusalem who truly believe in Christ but who had not broken from the Mosaic law. They were victims of their culture and prejudices. These Pharisees, as unbelievers, failed to destroy Christianity, but now, as misdirected Christians, they were a bigger threat to the church. They were more dangerous on the inside of the church than on the outside of it. Essentially, they had not changed in their practice even though they had changed their attitudes about Christ. They were Christian legalists. They were saved but had wrong teaching because they did not understand grace.

“ . . . stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.’” – These sincere, converted Pharisees wanted to add something to the gospel. Whenever anything is added to “by grace through faith,” there is no longer the gospel but religion, a works system whereby man is doing something to merit salvation. Beware of legalistic pharisaism in or out of the church. Its message is one of slavery, and not of emancipation; it binds and it does not bless. Every religion today which makes demands on people to keep the Law of Moses, observe certain external ordinances, and comply with certain specified manmade rules is the same old pharisaism of the first century, dressed up in modern garb. Legalism in every form kills the spirit of Christ.

#### CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUE BY THE LEADERSHIP (Acts 15:6)

“And the apostles and the elders . . .” – The issue was not taken lightly and the doctrinal matter was considered by the apostles and elders. This is why elders must be men who can handle the Word of God well, so they can defend the true gospel accurately.

“ . . . came together to look into the matter.” – There was a careful study of the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament revelation on this matter.

There should be no doctrinal issue which comes up in a local church which the elders are not willing to deal with from the Bible.

There is a need today for all true Christians to get together around the inspired and Holy Scriptures to discuss the doctrinal issues of our day. We need a World Council of Christians who will discuss the true gospel from a biblical base so that the gospel will stay pure and undiluted.

#### CHRISTIAN GRACE AND FREEDOM UPHOLD BY PETER (Acts 15:7-11)

“And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said, . . .” – Apparently at this point, the council had moved into the public eye and Peter stood before the apostles, elders and congregation. He stood, and this stand for Christ was probably the most important thing Peter ever did. He stood boldly for the truth and he had the respect of the legalists because he was such a legalist himself before he had a vision from God. Peter was God’s man for the hour. Peter was a Jew’s Jew and he could communicate with these legalists.

“ . . . ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did also to us; . . .’” – Peter went back at least ten years when he was given a vision to go to the house of the Gentile Cornelius and preach the gospel. It was God who opened the door to the Gentiles. Gentiles who knew hardly anything of the Mosaic Law were being gloriously saved and were receiving the Holy Spirit. Peter argued that if it was necessary to be circumcised to be saved, then these legalists were saying God made a mistake in what He did at Cornelius’s house. These Gentiles were saved by grace and not by law and the fruits of their salvation were proof of the grace of God.

“ . . . and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.” – These Gentiles were saved by exercising faith in Jesus Christ alone. All external, ritualistic salvation is refuted by what happened at Cornelius’s home.

“Now, therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” – Peter’s argument is that if the Jews could not keep the law for salvation, why do the Jews expect the Gentiles to keep it? To be placed back under the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law for

salvation or Christian living is to place a yoke around a person's neck which will choke out the very life of Christ. Furthermore, no Jew in the Old Testament was saved by keeping the Law of Moses. Every Jew who was saved believed by grace in the Messiah who was to come. Furthermore, God has never saved anyone through the keeping of the law. Do you know why? There has never been a person who has kept the law. God saves on one basis and one basis only "by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord."

The Mosaic Law puts men into bondage, makes them slaves, produces miserable people who know nothing about the freedom which is in Christ Jesus. Christ sets a man free. The law puts him in bondage. Whenever men try to be saved by keeping the law, it is such a crushing burden, an intolerable weight, they are often put into despair because they can never live up to the requirements of the law.

"But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." – How were Jews saved? The very same way as Gentiles – by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter drew the whole issued down to the grace of God. If men are saved by grace, no ritual, work, merit, or act is the final cause of salvation. Men are saved only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. If any man is saved, it is because of free grace which became real to him at the moment he received Christ as personal Lord and Savior.

We must stand, at all costs, for salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, for if we give this truth up, we give up the gospel. In love, I must expose error for the good of the gospel and the cause of Christ. When Roman Catholics teach that original sin is removed by the waters of baptism, daily sin is removed by the non-bloody sacrifice of the mass, venial sins are removed by the oil of extreme unction and others sins by purgatory, what place does this leave for the grace of Christ? When Protestant liberals say that man gets to heaven by character and good works, what place does this give to the grace of Christ? When conservative Protestants say that men must repent, confess, believe and be baptized in order to be saved, what place is there for grace in this system? Absolutely no works done by man or performed for man can save anyone. Yet, there is an even more subtle false teaching in our day among evangelicals who say that a man's act of his will is the final cause of his salvation. They teach that God in grace has done everything He can in Christ to save man, and now the final decision is up to man himself. This makes man's faith or act of his will a work. Same kind of thinking was held by a British monk, Pelagius, in the fifth century who taught that all men have a free will and can respond to Christ if they desire to do so. This position of Pelagius was condemned as heretical by three different church councils and finally at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. A modified form of Pelagianism sprang up called semi-Pelagianism and this was condemned at the council of Orange in A.D. 529. Semi-Pelagianism is running rampant in our modern day evangelical circles mixing grace and works, for free will unaided by God is human work. Augustine opposed Pelagius and said that men were saved by grace through faith in Christ alone and traced the salvation root of a person to the elective purpose of God. If we truly understand free grace, we will never get hung up with adding anything to salvation. Salvation is a total act of God flowing from His

pure, unadulterated, free and sovereign grace.

Let it go on record that I am committed to the grace of God in salvation alone. I believe in free grace which is related to the doctrines of election, predestination and particular redemption and the infallible call to salvation. Grace is free. Grace is unmerited. Grace is sovereign. Grace will be my theme until I die!

One of the greatest evangelists who ever labored for Jesus Christ was George Whitefield. He was the most dynamic evangelist the nation of England ever produced and America has even seen. He was an evangelist who had his doctrine straight and saw the importance of grace. He said,

The doctrines of our election and free justification in Christ Jesus are daily more and more pressed upon my heart. They fill my soul with a holy fire and afford me great confidence in God my Savior. I hope we shall catch fire from each other and that there will be a holy emulation amongst us who shall most debase man and exalt the Lord Jesus. Nothing but the doctrines of the Reformation can do this. All others leave free will in man and make him at least in part a Savior to himself. My soul come though not near the secret of those who teach such things. I know Christ is all and all. Man is nothing. He has a free will to go to hell but none to go to heaven till God worketh in him to will and to do of his good pleasure. Oh the excellency of the doctrine of election and the saints final perseverance. I am persuaded that until a man comes to believe and feel these important truths, he cannot come out of himself. But when convinced of these and assured of their application to his own heart, he then walks by faith indeed. Love, not fear, constrains him to obedience.

#### CITATION OF GOD'S BLESSING UPON GENTILES (Acts 15:12)

“And all the multitude kept silent, . . .” – The Judaizers, the legalists, were silenced by Peter's arguments. That probably meant they stopped talking and started listening as they realized they had missed the whole point of grace in salvation.

“ . . . and were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.” – Paul and Barnabas told of what God was doing with the Gentiles. He was saving them and they knew hardly anything of the Mosaic law. When we understand the biblical meaning of grace, we stop talking about ourselves and start talking about God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

#### CONCLUSION

##### Saved

Christian, are you concerned about doctrine? Are you desirous to know and proclaim the pure and true gospel? If you are, then you must expect opposition because the non-Christian world hates grace and much of the Christian world does not understand it. We are indebted to Paul and Barnabas who stood for the truth. We are indebted to Peter



who stood up for the truth of salvation by grace. We are indebted to men like Augustine, Wycliffe, Huss, Tyndale, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Whitefield, Spurgeon and many others who have stood in their generation for the truth of grace in salvation, and we, too, must stand in our generation. If we do not stand, this generation may lose the whole meaning of the gospel. May God grant us grace to stand for the truth of grace!

### Unsaved

Non-Christian, unsaved man, you are shut up to the grace of Christ to save you. If you are to be saved, Christ will have to work grace in you. However, do not think you do nothing in the salvation process, for salvation is by grace through faith and you will never be saved until you trust Christ as Lord and Savior. You must trust in Christ alone to save you. If you trust in Christ, you don't need anything or anyone else to save you. The Mosaic law, good works, human acts, even your faith, cannot save you. Only Christ can save you by His grace and you must cling to Him for salvation. Trust Christ and you shall know that He has worked grace in your heart and that grace is FREE!