

Lesson 7: Paul's Defense of Grace (the Jerusalem Council)

Introduction: "When one considers the situation of the Jerusalem church in A.D. 49, the decision reached by the Jerusalem Christians must be considered one of the boldest and most magnanimous in the annals of church history. While still attempting to minister exclusively to the [Jewish] nation, they refused to impede the progress of that other branch of the Christian mission whose every success meant further oppression for them."¹

I. **Background to the Controversy**

- A. Successful campaign among Gentiles – Acts 14:27
- B. Contention over conversion – Acts 15:1-5²

II. **Components of the Council's Deliberation – Acts 15:6-21**

- A. Decision about Doctrine
 - 1. Based on Peter's testimony about Cornelius' conversion – vv. 7-11
 - 2. Based on the experiences of Barnabas and Paul – v. 12
 - 3. Based on interpretation given by James – vv. 13-19
 - a) Cites Amos 9:11-12 as evidence of the fulfillment of God's purpose – vv. 16-17
 - b) Declares that salvation is by grace through faith plus nothing³
- B. Decision about culture – vv. 20-21
 - 1. Four restrictions imposed – v. 20
 - a) No connections to idolatry
 - b) No connections to *pornea*
 - c) No consumption of strangled animals
 - d) No consumption of blood

¹ Richard Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 56.

² I hold this to be the incident reported by Paul in Galatians 2:11-21

³ By stating that the Gentiles who turn to God should not be troubled, James is essentially confirming the earlier testimony of Peter, Paul and Barnabas regarding the simplicity of salvation by grace through faith apart from the works of the law. This was the great theme of Paul already sounded out in the letter to the Galatians which would be further delineated in his letter to the Romans.

2. One cultural reality enjoined⁴ – v. 21
 - a) The presence of Jews should govern their evangelism
 - b) The presence of Jews should govern their fellowship

Conclusion: The Jerusalem Council set in stone once for all time the correct doctrinal position regarding the acquisition of salvation. Right standing with God comes by grace which is accessed through faith in Jesus Christ plus nothing. All efforts throughout history and in our day which attempt to add to the simple message of the Gospel are condemned in this early Christian show of church unity. The foundation for cross-cultural missions work is laid as well in that those proclaiming the Gospel of Christ's free grace should be sensitive to the cultural circumstances of their audience. Gospel liberty trumps the demands of the law; Gospel liberty must submit to Christian unity.

⁴ "Things which are cultural *requirements* for Jews were not necessary for the salvation of Gentiles, but their observance would have made it much easier for all types of believers to associate, worship and eat with each other. In addition, it would have also served as a witness to non-believers that this person had changed and was now following the living God." Gordon J. Wenham, J. Alec Motyer, Donald A. Carson and R.T. France, eds. *Comment on Acts 15:20-21*. "The New Bible Commentary, 21st Century Edition" (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 1994).