

Notes on the Jerusalem Council

Acts 15ish

Acts 15 as the “centerpiece” of Acts

- Cornelius episode: Jerusalem leaders “praised God” (11:18)
- Syrian Antioch missionaries “began to speak to Greeks also” (11:20): Barnabas sent from Jerusalem and “saw the evidence of the grace of God and rejoiced” (11:23)
- First missionary journey in which Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Cyprus believed, and Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles: The Church in Antioch celebrates that the door of faith opened to the Gentiles (14:27)

The trickle of Gentile converts starting to become a torrent / the Gospel of Christ is not merely a reform movement in Judaism, but Good News for the whole world / the Church of Christ is not a Jewish sect, but an international family of God

From here on, Peter is out of the picture, Paul is the focus as the one who brings the Gospel beyond Asia

Acts 15:1-6 – The “Gentile” problem

The question of the relationship between Acts 15 and Galatians 2

- Does Acts 15 = Gal. 2:1-10 or Acts 11:27-30 = Gal 2:10?
- Acts 15:1-4 = Gal. 2:11-16? (but the council hasn’t yet happened)

Circumcision connected to salvation, not just a sign of the covenant!

At issue:

- Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses
- Is circumcision a condition to salvation?
- Is justification by faith alone or faith plus works?

Peter in Antioch (following Gal. 2:11-14), won over by the “circumcision” crowd, despite his experience with Cornelius?!

Acts 15:7-11 – Peter speaks before the Council: God initiated Gentile Salvation

Peter comes to realization (again) that *God initiated Gentile salvation*: God chose him to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles (i.e. Cornelius and his household), gave them the Holy Spirit, and purified their hearts.

God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles – inward reality of faith overrules outward reality of circumcision and obedience to Mosaic Law

Compare Acts 15:11 and Gal. 2:16 – both stress justification by grace through faith – in other words, by this time, Peter and Paul are on the same page despite Gal. 2:11

Acts 15:12 – Barnabas and Paul speak before the Council: Signs and Wonders from God Confirm Gentile ministry

Luke doesn’t record their words, but narratively, we just lived their testimony from Acts 13-14

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Barnabas given greater prominence (named first) in the Council? Probably because of his previous Jerusalem connections

Their stress is on the *signs and wonders* God gave as validation that the Gentile ministry was blessed by God

Acts 15:13-21 – James speaks and makes a conclusion on the issue: The Prophets Agree

James concludes that Peter (Simeon, his Hebrew name) and Barnabas and Paul's explanations are supported by the prophetic word in the Old Testament

How God *visited* the Gentiles (cf. Gen. 21:1, Exo. 4:31, Luke 1:68)

Amos 9:11-12 quoted according to the Septuagint

The restoration of David's tent (the Temple → The Church) and Gentile inclusion among God's people

What are the abstentions about?

- Ceremonial laws – external purity (cf. Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8): things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, animals that have been strangled and blood
- The Laws of Moses (Lev. 17-18) are known in every city, read in their synagogues
- Freedom of action for the sake of others vs. compulsion and necessity

Acts 15:22-29 – The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers

A letter from "brothers" to "brothers" – another signal of unity and fellowship

"Some people from us" – that is, from Jerusalem, but also claiming to speak for the apostles and elders

"although we gave them no instructions" – distances the opinions of the "circumcision" part from those of James and the rest

"having come to one accord" – stresses that in the end the decisions made by the Jerusalem Council were not simply decisions of power forced on others, but agreed on by all

Acts 15:30-35 – Paul, Barnabas, Judas and Silas bring the letter to Syrian Antioch

Gathering the people together, they read the letter

The Antiochene Christians rejoice because of the encouragement the letter brought

Judas and Silas (prophets) remained for some time and encouraged them

Verse 34 – is it missing in your Bible?

Acts 15:36-41 – Beginnings of Paul's Second Missionary Journey with Silas

Proposal: to return to the places Paul and Barnabas traveled before

The problem of John Mark (Acts 13:13) solved by splitting up Paul (with Silas) and Barnabas (with John)