

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Question on Councils & Creeds

Acts 15:22-29

Keywords: Missions, Doctrine, Jerusalem Council, Conflict

PowerPoint Presentation included:

SermonAudio Blurb: The Jerusalem Council is finished and the with the final decisions and letter written, Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch to give them the results. Preparations are then made to go on another evangelistic journey but this time with a new companion for Paul. And in all of this we see how God continues to press forward with His purposes even when we don't understand all of the reasons why.

I. Introduction.

- A. Today we have the opportunity to see this critical council draw to a close in Jerusalem and the aftermath of it all.
 - 1. It was convened not at the request of the leaders in Jerusalem, but because Paul and Barnabas needed to gain clarity on the role of the Law of God and circumcision in the life of Christian.
 - 2. We saw it clearly stated that obedience to the Law of Moses is never the way of salvation or forgiveness of sin. Anyone who says you must first obey this or that for you to be saved is not speaking truthfully.
 - 3. We also saw that the Christian is not under the Law of Moses; rather, we are called to follow the Law of Christ. He is the One who kept the Law of Moses perfectly for He was without sin.
 - 4. We are already law-keepers because of our union with Jesus Christ. Just as we have died to sin and risen in life because of our faith in Him, so too, we are free from the Law itself. We have died to it and therefore we are free.
 - 5. We saw that there was additional concerns that were running beneath the surface of this whole thing. It had to do with what to do with the many Gentile (non-Jews) who were believing in Jesus and were part of these churches that were being established outside of Israel.
- B. The mission of God.
 - 1. This ingathering of the nations is a key part of the purpose we exist as a local church. We do this by supporting and training pastors who can efficiently reach their own people. which we have done in Cameroon, Greece, Romania, Brazil, Serbia, Tanzania, and Ethiopia.

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. We are really following a pattern we see set forth in the book of Acts. There are many ways to approach missions but we focus on training of pastors in their own nations and people.
3. And this is what we saw with Paul and Barnabas. They worked their way through Asia Minor to establish churches. During their rest and recovery at Antioch the problems of false teaching arose and necessitated the trip to Jerusalem.
4. But this side trip was not wasted. Though it was unpleasant and full of tension, it did what controversy tends to do, it clarified. Tensions were going to still be part of the early church between the Jews and non-Jews, but never again will there be the question of whether the Law is the way you are saved.
5. In this final part of chapter 15 is really in two parts.
 - a. The wrap up of the council.
 - b. The preparations of the next missionary work.
 - c. We are going to focus on the first point today as I want to talk a bit about the nature and purposes of church councils and creeds.

C. Read 15:22-29.

II. A Question of Councils and Creeds.

- A. The council concludes.
 1. The decisions and positions made by this gathering in Jerusalem now needs to be communicated (22).
 2. Interesting to see that now the Jerusalem church is going to send representatives back to Antioch, just like Antioch did when going to Jerusalem.
 3. vs 24 People are always eager to give their thoughts and teachings but this is not always helpful nor proper.
 - a. One should be cautious before latching onto those who do this sort of thing. It is not uncommon for people to work behind the scenes to push some pet doctrine among those willing to give an ear without first considering the source and possible agenda.
 - b. Compare this with the "select" men in vs 25. These were not volunteers, they were chosen out from among the whole of the church in Jerusalem.

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- (1) These are tested men.
- (2) These are trusted men.
- c. And it is here that I think we need to be careful when we give a word of recommendation to people. Make sure you can say they are truly “select.” Would you yourself choose these men. Can you attach your name to their actions and doctrines?
4. Note it was not merely the apostles or the elders or the church. But all of them. Is it possible that literally the whole church was represented? Perhaps, but it could be that the churches were represented by a few chosen men. Or, the elders would go to their respective church bodies and bring the situation to them to hear their thoughts.
5. vs 28 uses **none** of the terms convey commands and that is worth noting. There is a consistent battle between a top down authority via councils and bishops to the more casual approach elsewhere.
6. And so men are selected, one of them being Silas, who will become a key part of the missionary work of Paul and the rest of the Gentile churches.
7. They have a job (27) to faithfully report what was decided to the church in Antioch. And this is exactly what they do.
- B. Some observations to consider regarding councils:
 1. This council is not like the councils you may hear about in various contexts. We might think of the Council of Nicea as an example.
 - a. This took place in AD 325. Just give that some thought for a moment. A little under 300 years have passed since what we call the Jerusalem Council has occurred.
 - b. The issue before the men gathered was if Jesus was God—the deity of Jesus. Pretty important issue.
 - c. In the end it affirmed that Jesus is God, the 2nd person of the Trinity. Not like one key theologian, Arius, was teaching. He saw Jesus as something less than deity. He would be worshiped but more like a demi-god.
 - d. Out of it we received a creed known as the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down, and became incarnate and became man, and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and dead, And in the Holy Spirit. But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.

2. In all of this there is a huge question regarding a theological concept called “ecclesiology.”
 3. Here is my point: We must make decisions in our own minds as to how much authority we give to the councils. And depending on how you land on this will determine many small things that can lead to big things.
 - a. There is a current debate on the nature of the Son of God. It is called EFS and centers on the internal relationship of the Father and the Son.
 - b. Those who argue for it say that within the Godhead the Son is subordinate to the Father.
 - c. Those against this say that EFS makes the Son less in essence than the Father and this is heresy.
 - d. To watch the debate unfold is quite fascinating for those who love theology. But to simplify it, the major arguments against it **are not from the bible**. Rather, they flow from logic, philosophy and the Nicene Creed.
 - e.
 4. In all of this is a need to have a solid ecclesiology. How you view the Church and how it is led will radically affect how you view councils and creeds.
- C. The “*solas*” of the Reformation:
1. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), and *solī Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. Put these into a sentence and it would look like this: “People are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone and to the glory of God alone.”
- D. However, somehow these points, especially Scripture alone, gets messed up in our minds.
 1. One error is to think that the Reformers were arguing for nothing but the bible. This is not correct. They would take into account the traditions and teachings over the centuries. But the final authority rests in Scripture, not traditions and confessions and creeds.
 2. The other error is to begin to subtly switch the center of authority from the bible to the traditions and confessions. This is most common and it is seriously problematic.
 3. This second error results in our learning basically freezing in place. So no longer do we look to the Scripture, but instead we look to our confessions and creeds.
 4. There was a statement used by the Reformers, *semper reformanda*, which meant to be always reforming. Why? Because traditions and teachings become exalted into the level of Scripture and we stop examining all things by Scripture.
 5. So Lutherans hold to the Book of Concord from 1580 because they believe its doctrinal teachings are true and binding. For Presbyterians, it is confessions such as Heidelberg and Westminster confessions. For many Baptists it is the London Baptist Confession.
 6. And when you get into a theological debate, often it is not the bible that is used but the confessions. And this is where we go wrong.
 7. Confessions are helpful, but they are theological statements and this is NOT the same as biblical statements. They are not inspired and therefore they should not be held as the final authority.
 8. And this is where the whole EFS issue and many others become messed up. The arguments against it is not within Scripture as much as it is in confessions and creeds. And when we find ourselves there, we need to be very careful before we denounce as heretical and false people who teach differently.

III. Conclusion.

- A. We will pick up with the second part of this the next time we gather, Lord willing.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

Missio Dei Fellowship exists to glorify God by delighting in Him and making Him known through the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- B. But today let us be convinced in our own hearts before God that our authority cannot be this pulpit, this church, any creed or confession. Let it be the Word of God alone.
 - 1. And then, let us all learn to listen carefully and examine what is said in light of the Scripture.
 - 2. Let us be diligent to study it, to rightly interpret it and then teach it. Let this be done to our children and one another.
- C. But also let us not jettison the many helpful labors of those who went before us. There is great value in using the creeds and confessions as basic guidelines. But never allow them to supplant a careful examination of the bible.

Benediction

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.