

# **The First Church Council**

Acts 15:1-38

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If you have studied much about church history, you have probably heard about some of the great church councils that met. The Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople, the Council of Chalcedon, and more recently the Second Vatican Council. Many of these councils were important markers in the church, as they helped define and clarify essential Christian doctrine.

Unfortunately, some people have misrepresented (or misunderstood) what these councils did. For example, many people seem to believe that at the Council of Nicaea the church invented the notion of the deity of Christ. That's not what happened. The Council of Nicaea defined the deity of Christ but did so as a response to false teaching that was prevalent at the time. These councils did not invent doctrine—they helped to protect it.

That's what we will see in our passage today, as we look at the first Church Council. They met to make sure the nature of the gospel was clear. They were not inventing the doctrine of salvation by grace, but they were seeking to protect it from those seeking to undermine it. As we have seen already in Acts, this doctrine had been established for quite some time. They were merely making a formal declaration of what was already a clear teaching.

As we look at this important point in history, we will see the importance of getting the gospel right, and an example of how to approach problems and disagreements in the church. Even more, we will hopefully learn to avoid making some of the same mistakes the early church did.

## **The Issue**

Paul and Barnabas were still in Syrian Antioch after returning from their first missionary journey. While they were there, however, an issue arose.

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. (Acts 15:1-2, NLT)

Some men came from Judea and began telling the Christians in Antioch that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised according to the law of Moses.

Think about how disruptive this would have been! These Gentile believers had been following Christ. When someone came and told them that God had previously given them instructions about how to live, and that they could not really be Christians unless

they began to follow all of those commandments (including being circumcised...which is a big ask!), it surely created unrest among the believers. It had to feel like a bait-and-switch!

When Paul and Barnabas caught wind of this, they began to argue vehemently with these men. Why would they argue so strongly? Why waste their breath on people like this? Because the very nature of the gospel was at stake! What these men were preaching was a salvation based on works, not on what Christ has done. So, they argued vigorously, seeking to defend the truth of the gospel.

Finally, the church in Antioch decided they should send some people back to Jerusalem to see if these men were representing the truth, or if they were just interlopers causing problems. They surely represented themselves as men with the authority of the Jerusalem church, but the believers thought it best to send a delegation to go seek clarification for themselves. So that's what they did.

## **Phoenicia and Samaria**

So, the church gathered a small delegation, along with Paul and Barnabas and sent them on their way to Jerusalem. As they went, they stopped in Phoenicia and Samaria to give a report on all that had happened.

The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone's joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted. (Acts 15:3, NLT)

The trip from Antioch to Jerusalem was about 300 miles. It would be a long journey. Paul and Barnabas were used to this, but didn't want the trip to be wasted. So as they passed through Phoenicia and then through Samaria, they spoke to the believers in those cities, telling them about all that had gone on during their missionary journeys. Rather than being upset about what was happening, the people rejoiced at the news that the Gentiles were being saved!

But we must remember that Phoenicia and Samaria were both places where orthodox Judaism did not have a strong foothold. These people had likely been rejected by the Jewish elite (and maybe even the rank-and-file) for a long time. So, the notion of the Gentiles being saved was less of a shock to these people than it might have been in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were about to discover that firsthand.

## **In Jerusalem**

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed warmly, but the issues quickly came to the surface.

<sup>4</sup> When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. <sup>5</sup> But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses." <sup>6</sup> So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. (Acts 15:4-6, NLT)

Paul and Barnabas shared the stories of their journey. I suspect many of those gathered shared the excitement of the believers in Antioch. But not everyone did. There were some people who were believers in Jesus but also had been members of the Pharisees. They began to stir up trouble, saying that these Gentile converts must be circumcised and follow the law of Moses if they were to be accepted as part of the church.

This was the issue Paul and Barnabas had come to resolve. So the church called a meeting of the apostles and elders. It was not only the apostles who gathered, but all the church leaders who got together. These were the people tasked with investigating and coming to a consensus on this issue.

These leaders were wise. They did not simply get together and take a vote. No one issued a command and expected everyone to just go along with it. They talked at length about these issues. They gave people a chance to speak and heard all sides of the issue before trying to come to a consensus. There is great wisdom in this approach. Solomon said,

<sup>17</sup> The first to speak in court sounds right—until the cross-examination begins.  
(Proverbs 18:17, NLT)

In other words, it's always important to hear all sides of a problem before attempting to render judgment. Until you have looked at the matter carefully, you aren't equipped to make a wise decision.

While we may be tempted to simply dismiss the Pharisees' arguments, their logic was reasonable. They likely argued that God's law is eternal, and that God had made it very clear that His people were supposed to follow a certain code of conduct, including circumcision and dietary restrictions. They would surely stand upon God's Word, saying that these things must not be ignored!

I can understand their argument. And for these men, who had likely spent their entire lives focused on the minutiae of following every jot and tittle of the law, it would be incredibly difficult to accept a completely different point of view. It would mean everything they had believed was wrong.

I find it noteworthy that Peter didn't speak for a long time. This seems to show some growth and wisdom on his part. But when he spoke, he made it clear where he stood and why.

His argument was that God had already shown that He had accepted the Gentiles, just as He had accepted them. The evidence was that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit in the same way they had. But his even bigger argument was to say that these Pharisees were telling the Jews they needed to follow the law to be saved—a task that they, as Jews, had failed at! Peter said, why would we look to the law to save us, when it never could!? Salvation is found not in our goodness, but in God's grace.

After Peter spoke, Paul and Barnabas shared their experiences as well. They surely told of the Holy Spirit coming upon believers all over the world, and of Gentiles coming to Christ in droves. Their emphasis was that God was the One doing the work, not human beings.

## **The Decision**

After they had finished, James stood up to speak. James was the half-brother of Jesus. We generally assume he was among the siblings who disbelieved in Jesus during his earthly ministry (John 7:5), but now he had become a leader (seemingly one of the chief leaders) in the Jerusalem church. What changed his mind? Why did he suddenly believe in Jesus? Paul gives us the answer.

<sup>5</sup> He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. <sup>7</sup> Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles.

<sup>8</sup> Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him. (1 Corinthians 15:5-8, NLT)

James had seen the risen Christ! At that point, he was convinced that Jesus was not out of his mind, but was indeed the Son of God, come to earth to save mankind!

Now, as one of the most respected leaders, James spoke up and addressed the group. James recognized that he was speaking to a group of predominately Jewish believers, and I suspect he wanted to win the Pharisees to his side, instead of merely making a declaration. It's always better to lead by building consensus rather than by fiat.

So James began by quoting from scripture. He told them that God had always planned for the Gentiles to be part of His people. James argued that if this was God's plan from the beginning, they should not try to put obstacles in their path!

James suggested that they only make 3 demands of the new Gentile believers. First, not to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Second, not to eat meat with the blood still in it. And third, to avoid sexual immorality.

Now, if you are familiar with Paul's writings, then you know that Paul taught that it was ok to eat meat sacrificed to an idol, because an idol is nothing, sacrificing food to something imaginary is irrelevant. Paul did not reiterate the command to abstain from food with the blood still in it either. He did, however, continue to teach that Christians should abstain from sexual immorality. So, what are we to make of these commands?

Some have suggested that the Bible contradicts itself on this point and is therefore untrustworthy. But the Bible does not contradict itself. Luke is recording what this church council decided—he is not saying this is what God said. When Paul was writing his letters, he was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. James, and this council may not have been led by the Spirit.

So, what should we make of this? Here's my take. I think the council was trying to take a step in the right direction, but they weren't ready to go all the way yet. Notice what happened when they sent the letter to Antioch. The people rejoiced! They weren't upset by these restrictions but were grateful that the council had recognized that most of the restrictions these Jewish people were trying to impose upon them were unnecessary.

As we examine the history of the church councils, we discover that often it took multiple meetings before they arrived at the fullness of their conclusions. Often, these groups would take a few steps in the right direction, without going all the way.

Nonetheless, the Jerusalem council recognized the essence of the gospel as being salvation by grace, not by works. They emphasized that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by faith in Jesus *and* something else. This has always been the bedrock of the Christian faith, and it was why Paul and Barnabas fought so vigorously for their position.

The council sent not only a letter outlining their decisions to the church in Antioch, they also sent two messengers, Judas and Titus, both of whom were prophets, to relay the church's decisions. Not only did they share the letter, but they stayed for a while and continued to encourage and strengthen the church in Antioch. Division in the church was averted, doctrine was defended, and, I believe, God was glorified.

## Conclusion

So, what do we learn from this page in church history? I have some suggestions. **First, resolving conflict takes time and conversation.** This was a major conflict in the church. It could have caused the church to split in its infancy, or worse. But a church split was averted. Why? Because the parties worked together to bring resolution.

It is unfortunate that churches split with some regularity. And people often will commit to a church, then get offended and leave—sometimes leaving the faith entirely. I once had someone joke to me that I was probably tired of people wanting to fight over theological issues. I laughed and said, I wish! If only people fought over things that matter! Instead, we tend to fight over things that have no eternal significance. We fight over carpet and paint colors, over who feels slighted, over how much we sing or what kinds of songs we sing, or any other number of personal issues.

My point is this: the vast majority of conflict in the church can be solved by talking to each other and trying to find common ground. We'd avoid even more if we learned to get over ourselves! If we would recognize our preferences have no eternal significance, we could learn to let some of the petty things go and work toward resolution.

Why don't we invest this time and energy? Because we don't value unity! The early church did. They knew sitting down and trying to work through these issues would be messy, but that it was the only way for the church to remain a unified body. This is what we should strive to do as well. Rather than running to others and talking about how terrible people are, we should go to the source, and seek to resolve our issues. You can

help this process as well by refusing to participate in the divisive behavior of others too. When someone complains to you about another believer, simply ask them, have you talked to them about this? If not, end the issue there. We should work to resolve conflict, not run from it, and certainly not fuel it.

**Second, the scriptures should be our authority, not our opinions or the consensus of the world.** Many today take issue with some of what the Bible teaches. As such, they conclude that we don't need to listen to it, and instead should rely on reason, logic, and the conventional wisdom of our day to determine right from wrong.

This is a fool's errand! God has given us His word to guide us and show us the right way to live. When we choose to ignore it in favor of our preferences or opinions, we are inviting trouble! We are assuming we know better than God and that our reasoning is infallible! Our ultimate authority in every situation should be what God's word says, not what we think. When seeking to resolve questions or disputes, we should first see what God has to say about it. Where God has spoken clearly, we would be wise to obey.

**Finally, salvation by grace is at the core of Christianity.** The Jerusalem Council didn't create the doctrine of salvation by grace, but they did defend it against those who would teach a different gospel. They made it clear that we are not saved by being good enough, by keeping God's law perfectly, or by anything else we can do. We are saved simply by trusting in Jesus Christ's finished work on the cross. Jesus paid our sin and offered us a righteousness we could never achieve on our own.

This is great news, but also a solemn warning. We are great at creating rules for others to follow. Sometimes we tell people (either directly or inadvertently) the same thing as these former Pharisees: You are saved by grace, but you also need to follow these rules. That's not the gospel. We must resist the temptation to go beyond what Christ has said and done.

We must be careful not to allow our preferences or convictions to become a test of the genuineness of a person's faith. You may have a strong conviction about an issue. That's fine. The issue is when we begin to insist that every other person share our convictions. Paul spoke strongly about that issue when he spoke of eating meat sacrificed to idols (cf. 1 Corinthians 8). He said there was no problem with it, unless it caused other believers to stumble or be led astray. His principle was this: we should practice our convictions and live out our own freedom in Christ with that they do not negatively impact other believers. He said we would be better to restrict our freedoms than to lead another brother or sister to violate their conscience. In short, Paul reminds us that we need to get over ourselves and focus on the gospel instead.

The reason this whole incident happened was because the nature of the gospel message is important. We must learn from the lessons of the early church and stand on the same convictions—that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and that through Jesus, salvation is made available to everyone. Anything we try to add on top of that distorts the gospel in a way the early church tried very hard to prevent.

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