

The Jerusalem Council: The Church Resolves Division and Seeks Unity

DARRELL DELANEY

A group of hikers set out on a trail with no map and no clear leader. Some argued about which way to go, while others insisted they knew best. The further they walked, the more divided they became, until they found themselves completely lost. Then an experienced guide arrived, studied the terrain, and pointed them back to the right path. The vision turned to relief; frustration gave way to unity; and the group moved forward together. In Acts Chapter 15, the early Church faced a similar moment of confusion and disagreement. The path forward wasn't clear until leaders gathered, listened, and relied on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. What they learned about grace, unity and God's plan for his people still matters for us today. In this episode of *Groundwork*, we look at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and see a wonderful response to establish unity in the Church moving forward. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in part two of our five-part series on Paul's missionary journeys, and we have landed at quite a pivotal moment in the Church here in Acts Chapter 15, the Jerusalem Council. This is one of the major decisions that the Church will have to make. Does salvation require anything other than the Holy Spirit; and how do the Gentiles fit into this family plan?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; now, we should point out this series is on the missionary journeys of Paul, but this is not a missionary journey; this is a council in Jerusalem...kind of a synod...a general assembly...call it what you will, but we are including this in the missionary journey series, Darrell, because this is so pivotal for the next two missionary journeys, and then Paul's final journey to Rome that concludes the book of Acts. So, that is why we are not really looking at a journey here, but something that is a pivotal part of the first journey and the second and third journeys yet to come.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, up to this point in the book of Acts, the gospel has been spreading far and wide. In our last episode, we talked about Acts 13 and 14 majorly, where the gospel had been taken by Paul and Barnabas to these different places where the majority of people were Gentiles; and people are hearing this good news; they are believing in Christ; and they are experiencing the Holy Spirit...becoming Christians...and it is a beautiful thing to see the Holy Spirit moving in powerful ways; but there are some issues when they return back to Antioch after they gave that report, aren't there, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Here is Acts 15:1: Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers:

"Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

So, there it is in a nutshell. This is not a minor disagreement, Darrell; this is very serious. People are being disqualified from salvation if they don't do a certain external act. As we will see, they are going to end up

concluding that they are placing a real heavy burden on the Gentiles, but they had to figure it out because they at least had the Bible on their side, right? Circumcision was a sign of the covenant. It goes all the way back to Genesis and to Abraham. It was a sign of the covenant. So, you know, they thought they had the tradition on their side by requiring this of non-Jews, but by doing that, it created quite a stir.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; this is so serious that Paul and Barnabas in verse 2 says: Paul and Barnabas got into quite a sharp dispute and debate about this. Because there was a lot of tension in this moment, they literally came back from a missionary journey where they saw the Holy Spirit falling on people, and they were getting saved, but then now they are back here, and they are hearing: Wait; there are more requirements? Why are they adding these requirements when we saw what we saw on the missionary journey?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, right; I mean, just think of it. Paul and Barnabas would say: Look, we saw these Gentiles getting saved; and these leaders from Judea are saying: Did you have them circumcised? No. Then they weren't saved. So, it is like they are insulting and undoing all the good news that Paul and Barnabas had shared with the church in Antioch that we saw in the last episode from Acts 14. They are sort of undoing it by saying: Nah, they weren't really saved; not unless you got them circumcised. So, this is a very, very significant and dramatic development.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; you mentioned earlier circumcision that...I mean, the covenant was made in Genesis 17, with Abraham; but it is really an identify marker for Jews. We are of the circumcision. This is who we are. This is who God has called us to be in covenant relationship with him. So, how are you going to just let these Gentiles in and not have them have this requirement, which we thought was super essential and non-negotiable. What is happening here? And that is a massive cultural shift for anybody in the Jewish world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, what ends up happening is the church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to meet with the other main leaders of the Apostles. In verse 3, we read: The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.

So, they are on their way to Jerusalem to figure this thing out, but in the meantime, they are still converting more and more Gentiles, and making people excited about the fact that they were saved; and yes, even without their getting circumcised first. They just couldn't stop sharing the good news, and that always brought about joy. But eventually, Darrell, they get to Jerusalem, and then the debate continues.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; in verse 5 it says: Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

So, now here it is. The real tension. The former Pharisees, who were like the experts in the law, they said: Listen; this is the requirement, and we are holding tightly to that law of Moses. They weren't trying to be malicious by any stretch. They actually just wanted people to faithfully honor what God's word said. So, you know, people can, with good intentions, be a roadblock and not even know they are being a roadblock. So, inadvertently, they are just trying to honor God's word.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But they have to talk about it. Acts 15:6: The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Darrell, I think this is really rather amazing. We are in the Bible...we are in the book of Acts...you know, we think that, oh, these people heard from the Holy Spirit all the time, you know; it was like getting an e-mail from your wife or something. They just always heard from the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit always told them what to do; and yet, here they are at a significant junction in the road, and they don't know which way to go; and the Holy Spirit isn't saying anything clearly to them to help settle this question. The Holy Spirit does not

write on the wall, saying: Paul and Barnabas are right; the Pharisees are wrong; move on. They have to deliberate. I just think that is amazing that, even in the early Church, they still do what we in the Church do today. We put our heads together, we pray, we discuss, we debate, and we try to figure out which way the Spirit is leading. Without the Spirit directly just solving it for us with a wave of some spiritual magic wand.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and that, I believe, is what Paul is getting at in 1 Corinthians 14:40 when he says all things to be done decently and in order. This order was established in this council, where they were able to get together and discern what the Holy Spirit might be up to; and they used this to, not just rush to a decision, but gather together and listen and seek out God's guidance; and Peter is one of the ones who steps up. In verse 7-9 he says: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

And he is going back to his experience in Acts Chapter 10, which we referred to.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; five chapters earlier, when Peter is called to go to Cornelius's house following that vision of the sheet being let down from heaven, and the Holy Spirit falls on them, and Peter just cannot believe it. They didn't have to become Jews first. He was sure they did. They did have to get circumcised. He was sure that was true; they did have to keep kosher food laws. They did have to follow the law of Moses, or else they couldn't... Nope; turns out not to be true. So, Peter is referring back to that; and so, in verse 10, Peter goes on: Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

I mean, look, none of us have been perfect, even with all of those requirements of the law, Peter is saying. So, why put them through it, and all the more so, because obviously God is not waiting for anything to pour out his Holy Spirit; so why should we put up these roadblocks to them...these external requirements?

DARRELL DELANEY

And he says in verse 11: We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

That is the heart of the gospel, Scott. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone; and that is a reminder for us today.

As we continue in this episode, we are going to tell you a lot about what happens to Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and James will chime in as well in the council, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we have picked up, and we heard Peter give his testimony. He talked about how the Gentiles were saved, and he is referring back to what happened in Chapter 10 at Cornelius's house, and then he talked about how: Hey, we weren't able to keep these requirements. We need grace as well; and so, that is a message that we all need to hear; through faith alone, salvation by grace alone; through Christ alone. it is for both Jew and Gentile, and everybody is welcome into that gospel. We can pick right back up with Paul and Barnabas jumping into this conversation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And also James. This is an interesting chapter, too, by the way, Darrell, because this is like one of those Marvel movies, where all the superheroes are together in one room, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All the big hitters are here. This is, I think, the only real story in the Bible where Peter and Paul are in the same room, that we know of, but not only them, the brother of Jesus is there. Here is what Luke tells us now, at verse 12 of Acts Chapter 15:

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling them about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up.

“Brothers,” he said, “Listen to me. ¹⁴Simon (Peter) has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things—¹⁸things known from long ago.’ (Then James continuing here) ¹⁹It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. ²¹For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

DARRELL DELANEY

So, Paul and Barnabas are sharing their incredible stories of what God has been doing. The signs and wonders and things of that nature, and Luke says the whole assembly became silent. It is almost like in awe, like wow! It is like seeing the highlights of what God has done and hearing the experiences. How can we argue with what God is doing? You see that that testimony is true. These people we trust; how can we even argue with that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don’t get in the way of God is sort of what they are saying. And again, Paul and Barnabas aren’t debating theology in the abstract. They are pointing to evidence, real, tangible proof of what God is doing; and I think, you know, that is a good reminder. I mean, sometimes when there is disagreement, you know, it is easy to get stuck on the level of argument...on the level of debate...of just concept; but sometimes, sharing testimony of what God is actually doing can shift the entire tone of the conversation; and that prompts the brother of Jesus, James, to speak up.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, James, of course, didn’t believe in Jesus very much at all when he was living here and doing his ministry, but later on became a believer; and also, now he is the leader of this church and the Jerusalem Council. That is why he is the last one to speak and make the decision on what they will do. James also quotes Amos 9:11 to prove the point that Gentiles were not a Plan B; they were Plan A all along to God; and so, he is reminding them this is what scripture teaches.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; it goes all the way back to the call of Abram in Genesis 12. The ultimate goal: You will be a blessing to *all* nations. You are right; not Plan B. We should have expected this all along. God is doing a new thing. It was good for us to have the law and circumcision and the kosher food laws for a time...it was good for a time, but, James says, it is my judgment therefore that we shouldn’t make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God, and that is beautiful; but he doesn’t stop there, though. He does, Darrell...he does still have a few things that the Gentiles need to be warned against.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; he has these restrictions about these four instructions. One is abstain from food polluted by idols; then the other one is sexual immorality; the third one is meat from strangled animals; the fourth is from blood. Now, it seems kind of strange for us in this time and age to think about that, but James knows that those

things will help the Gentiles move away from their old pagan lifestyles, but it also will help Jewish believers embrace them as brothers and sisters in Christ, because those are things that are completely offensive to any Jew.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we should point out, too, Darrell, that James has just said don't make it difficult for them; don't give any prerequisites; don't make any requirements for salvation; and now he says this. So, you might say: Wait a minute, isn't he contradicting himself? He just said not to do this. No; he is making it clear. He believes the Gentiles are already saved...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now he is talking about the fruit of their salvation, and they want to put daylight between themselves and idolatry and paganism. They want to put daylight between themselves and the sexual immorality that was so common in the Greco-Roman world. They want to do this, not as the root of their salvation, but the fruit of their salvation; not the cause of their salvation, but the result of their salvation; and that is a very, very important distinction to make. And you are right, because those things were particularly detestable to the Jewish people, this is also making it easier for them to be in fellowship with these Gentiles.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is really interesting to think about. Maybe this is kind of the fodder for James to write the book of James later in the New Testament about these practical applications of what happens after you are saved. So, it is beautiful when we see this situation because they are in a diverse situation. The unity that they are trying to get is going to bring them to a compromise and a sacrifice, but if they do this out of love for one another, then they can actually choose to lay down some of their freedoms; and Paul alludes to that in 1 Corinthians Chapter 8:9, where he says:

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.

So, it is a beautiful thing when we think: Okay, it is not just about it is my choice; it is not just about what I have a right to do; it is about how can I love others well and build up the body of Christ in the same way?

And Paul makes that clear when he says that in Corinthians; and James is saying that when he is saying:

Don't make it harder than it needs to be for the Gentiles.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The community is more important than the individual; that the fellowship is more important than what I have a right to do as an individual. Think of others first, which is a Christlike concept. It is the core of the key New Testament virtue of humility. You think of others before yourself. Paul will also write later that, you know, even if you do have a right...even if you do know that food sacrificed to idols doesn't mean anything, you are right; but you know what? Don't eat it anyway in front of the people that it bothers, because it is not worth it. You are right, but you don't have to prove the point by offending somebody. Just let it go for the sake of the fellowship of the church. It is like Ephesians 2:14:

For he (Jesus) himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...

And Darrell, that is what we are seeing here in Acts 15, the gospel is at work breaking down barriers and reconciling God to one another. We don't want to put up obstacles or burdens; we want to be one people.

So anyway, the Jerusalem Council is getting closer now to a resolution. So, we want to look at the rest of Acts 15, where they finally come to a decision on how they are going to communicate it. So, you will want to stay tuned for that.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and so far, we have seen the Jerusalem Council tackle that big question on what Gentile believers need in order to be saved. Do they need to follow the law of Moses? We found out, no they don't. Do they have to be circumcised? We found out no, they don't. And Peter stood up and pointed to God's grace; Paul and Barnabas shared the evidence of God's work in the Gentiles; and James finalized the decision of what they need to do. So, now the whole Church needs to hear about what they came up with, and that where we are in this passage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Picking it up at verse 22 of Acts 15: Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They called Judas and Silas, men who are leaders among the believers. ²³With them, they sent the following letter (So, here is the letter): The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends, Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. ³⁰So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³²Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the Word of the Lord.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, the Jerusalem Council reaches a decision and they write a clear letter explaining it, and they send it to the delegation, so that the Gentile believers in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia can hear this word; and it is not just about a decision, Scott; it is about communicating it clearly so that it can bring encouragement and unity; and they send their trusted leaders...the prophets Judas and Silas...so that they can say: Hey, this message is real. This isn't a rumor; this isn't what you heard; these people were at the council and we are having them testify to it so you know you can trust this message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; they really wanted them to know this isn't fake; this isn't a forged letter; this isn't from some enemy; this is really from us as the leaders of Christ's Church; and so, they sent those men along to confirm that; and you know, Darrell, of all the lines in there of what we just read, what strikes me the most is that *it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*. They did not say: God told us directly; you Gentiles are fine. So, that settles it; God said it; I believe it; that settles it. No! They said: It *seemed* good to the Holy Spirit and to us. That gets back to something I said earlier, that even though we are in the early Church, which is full of the Holy Spirit, and these are the original apostles...apostles of great power...most of them former disciples of Jesus himself; and yet, they have to figure it out. They have to have a synod; they have to have a general assembly; they have a study committee, right? I think that is amazing, and it really does set the tone for how the Church has tried to operate ever since. You know, in the Farewell Discourses in John's gospel, Jesus said: When I send the Holy Spirit, he will lead you into all truth; and as I recall, the verb there means: He will *continue* to lead you into all truth; and we have seen it all through Church history, Darrell, that sometimes things the Church was absolutely sure they had been right about for centuries turns out they were wrong about; and the Holy Spirit does a new thing; leads them in a new direction; and the Church has to say: Okay, I guess we gotta change course.

DARRELL DELANEY

And it is humility to say it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. It is not something that they are saying dogmatically: No; this is it; and it didn't come to that lightly or quickly. They wanted the Gentile believers to avoid things that would harm their faith and unity with their new Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. So, because the two are becoming one, James says: This is the way you are going to live among each other; and it is a beautiful thing because it is not like legalism, because legalism says you have to do these things or you are wrong. You are not going to make it. You are not saved. No; this is after the community of being saved. This is how we live now together in unity and understanding with one another.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if legalism says do more, work harder and maybe God will love you; the gospel says: No; Jesus has done it all. God already loves you; while you were yet sinners, God loved you and sent Jesus; but now, respond in a way that honors that God. In the Reformed tradition, you know, in the Reformed confession, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, we have three main sections: There is *Misery*, or our sinfulness—the guilt message; then there is the *Deliverance* section of the Catechism, where we find out that we are saved by Jesus through faith alone...all the Solas from the Reformation: Sola gratia; Sola fide; Sola Christo—faith alone; grace alone; Christ alone. But then the third section of the Catechism is *Gratitude*. Now that we have received this amazing gift of grace, how do we live our lives so that they look like a giant thank-you card to God?

DARRELL DELANEY

I think in verse 31, the peoples' response showed that they had that genuine gratitude. It says: The people read it and they were glad for its encouraging message. So, they felt like the weight had been lifted. They don't have to follow the Law of Moses; they don't have to be circumcised; and they are encouraged in their faith, and they are affirmed that they are part of the family of God. I know that is great news. So, they don't have to jump through all these hoops and prove themselves, like you said with the legalism; but because of grace, they are already part of that family.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Darrell, unfortunately it doesn't always go this way in churches and denominations today, but at least in this case, in Acts 15, we started out with division, we had deliberation, and then a greater unity resulted from that. So, in what looked like a fractured moment when everything could have spun apart, instead, through the Holy Spirit; through prayer; through deliberation they came to something that actually led to greater unity, not disunity, and that leads to a whole lot of joy.

DARRELL DELANEY

And that joy comes from the understanding that I think Acts Chapter 15 is teaching all along, that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; and when we embrace that, it changes how we live. It changes us trying to strive for God's favor; it changes the way we live in gratitude; and how we lay down our pride and our agenda, and we build up others. This is a beautiful way to pursue unity; and even when it requires humility and sacrifice, we still seek unity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; which is exactly what Christ did. Through his humble sacrifice, he brought about the Church, which is now his body on earth. So, through the Jerusalem Council, we saw a major jump toward the unity of the Church, sharing God's love with the world; and for that we give God our great thanks.

Well, thank you for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we study and learn from Paul's second missionary journey in Acts 15-18.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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