

The Jerusalem Council: How Are We Saved?
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Oftentimes the church is asked to take a stand on particular issues, to articulate and make clear where we are with respect to certain questions. Sometimes it's something related to maybe biblical interpretation—what does the particular passage or concept mean in scripture. Other times it may be something to do with a current cultural issue—what's the church's stand on abortion; what's the church's stand with respect to same-sex marriage; what's the church's stand with respect to war. Whatever it is, there's those kinds of questions. And other times it may have to simply do to standards of behavior for Christian communities. It's a variety of issues will be pressed upon us and we'll be asked to have a position statement, to be able to articulate where we are with respect to that question.

Sometimes those questions are with good intent. Sometimes there are people trying to figure out, and sort out, and discover and examine the truth, and they're looking at a variety of positions as they sort it out. Oftentimes those questions aren't asked with good intent. Oftentimes they're trying to stir a pot, they're trying to generate a wrangling of words, they're trying to generate controversy. Other times they're simply...the person already has their position stated and they're asking you to state yours so that they can immediately judge you and decide if they approve of you or not.

So there's a variety of reasons, but the church gets called upon to have a position statement with respect to certain questions and issues. And, you know, the church has done that throughout the centuries. But the first time it ever did it was the most important time. The first time was the most important time, the first time the church ever officially took a position with respect to the most important of all questions. The question was this...the question was "How are we saved?" Given what the Bible says about their being a great and final day of reckoning, there being a great and final day of judgment when all, both the living and the dead, will be held to account—every careless word, every stray motive, every deed called to account—and given that we don't even measure up to our own standard in those areas, how can we be saved if we're gonna be called to measure up to God's standard of excellence? How can we face that great and final day of judgment and be saved, be able to walk in to enjoy God's kingdom for ever and ever and ever? How can we be saved?

That was the question. The church's response, the church's answer, came in basically two parts. Number one—we are saved through the grace of Jesus. We are saved through the good favor, the unmerited, undeserved, unearned favor of Jesus Christ directed at us. And we wanna be very specific here...the grace of Jesus...grace simply means undeserved favor, unmerited good will...and Jesus has that towards us. Unmerited favor, unmerited goodwill, but it is *His* grace, because it is a grace that goes beyond just simply goodwill and good favor; it actually produces good in our lives. In fact, it is a grace that went so far as to pay for all the sin we have ever committed or could ever commit. Jesus went to the cross and He settled accounts with God for every careless word, every wayward motive, every sinful deed; He paid the price. That's grace; that's grace. We are saved through His grace, His goodwill paying the penalty for us. We're saved through that by faith, by trusting Him, by believing in Him—His promises, His words, His deeds, His works, His cross. We are saved through His grace by simply believing it; believing in Him, and all that He is, and all that he said, and all that He did. That's the position.

The church took that position very deliberately, very carefully, and very officially, in 50 A.D. I want you to turn to your bibles, to Acts chapter 15. And we're gonna walk through this very important moment in church history, crucial moment in church history...the time when the church went public, went official and said 'Here is our answer to that question—how are we saved.' A very official position, one that was debated, that was argued, and finally articulated in that early church.

Let me set the stage for you as you find your place in Acts 15, the book we've been working throughout the school year, working our way through. Acts 15...we're probably about twenty years after Jesus Christ had been crucified, buried, and raised again. As the church had first begun the first believers, the first ones who responded to Jesus and believed Him...I'm just gonna call them Messianic Jews...these were Jews who had been looking for the Messiah, and when they heard about Jesus and the message was given they responded and they said, 'Yes, we believe in Jesus.' And they became a part of this new thing called the church, people devoted to following Jesus Christ. And at first a hundred percent of the church were Messianic Jews, people of Jewish ethnicity and religious heritage that had been looking for the Messiah for generations; and when they heard "This is Him" they responded.

Now, there were some others that were not of Jewish heritage that began to join that early church. And I'm gonna use the label that the book of Acts uses for them, the title for them. They were called 'God-fearers'. These were Gentiles. They were not of the Jewish ethnic history or religious heritage. They were Gentiles; they had not been raised looking for the Messiah. They had not been raised on those Old Testament prophets. They had not been raised with the Ten Commandments. But as they had...somewhere along the line they had come in contact with Jews and the Jewish synagogue. And as they talked to the Jews and talked about the Old Testament and the truth that was there, they began to respond. And they decided, 'You know what? We believe in this God of the Old Testament. We believe there will be a Messiah. We believe these Jews are on to something.' And so they began to attend and participate in the Jewish synagogues. Now, they weren't able to become official Jews. Some of them did over a long, long process of time, but most of them just stayed around the Jewish synagogue; they worshipped the Jewish God, and they participated and supported the Jews as much as they could. And when they heard about this Messiah they said, 'You know what? We think this is it!' And so some of them joined these Messianic Jews and became part of the church.

And then something else began to happen. And at first these Jews were hesitant when these God-fearers began to accept the Messiah, too, because they weren't sure that the Messiah was really for non-Jews. 'But these God-fearers, they're ok; they're on the right track, so maybe God'll accept them too.' But then began to happen...and this was amazing, it just astounded 'em...pagan Gentiles began to believe in the Messiah! And they began to join the church. And we're not talking just a small trickle of them; we're talking about hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Gentiles from many different places began to join the church. They began to say, 'We've heard about this Messiah. We believe in Him. We wanna become part of His people, following Him and committed to Him.' And they began to overwhelm the numbers. In fact, what began to happen is the church...the church began to have more of a Gentile flavor. And you've gotta understand this: we are talking about people that had grown up, and worship for them were drunken orgies, sacrificing animals and prostitution to build fertility into their plants and their fields. We're talkin' about people that worshipped a whole list of gods. I mean, they believed in many, many different gods. We're talkin' about people that had grown up never hearing about the One God of the Old Testament. They believed in Thor, and they believed in the goddess Astarte, and they believed in all these other gods, and they... Not Thor. He was Scandinavian. They believed... [laughs]...gotta watch that, ok. They believed in all kinds of those pagan gods...the god Baal, and the god Bacchus, and they...these people started to join the church and saying, 'Yeah, we believe in Jesus now.' And so you got these Jews that, when they moved from the synagogue to the church there really wasn't much of a change. The church felt very much like the synagogue they grew up in—read the same scriptures, had the same songs, went through the same prayers. The only difference was that you now acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. They said He's come. And suddenly...suddenly you're flooded with all these Gentiles, and their idea of worship is gettin' drunk with the god Bacchus, and suddenly they're in your church? In fact, they outnumber you? Suddenly the church doesn't look like your parents' old synagogue. What are we gonna do?

What happened...most of this centered up around the city of Antioch, about five hundred miles north of Jerusalem where the church started. When it hit Antioch, one of the three greatest cities of the Roman Empire...when it hit Antioch is where the Gentiles really began to respond and connect to the gospel and the church became so Gentile in its flavor. And as it began to reach out from Antioch it kept going to places and reaching out to other pagan Gentiles. And so this was sort of the center of where the church was becoming so Gentile in ethnic background. And so what happened is there came a point in time, as Acts 15 opens up, that there's a group of men that come from Judea...that is the area of Jerusalem where the church was so Jewish in its heritage. Some men came down from Judea and they began teaching the brethren there in Antioch; they began to talk to this church with all these Gentiles, and they began to teach 'em. And they told 'em, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved.' In fact, they pressed it beyond there. He says, 'Not only must you be circumcised, you must follow the Law of Moses or you're not gonna be saved. You're not gonna make it.'

Now, you're a Gentile, you've been worshipping all kinds of gods and doin' all kinds of things in ritual and sacrifice and everything else, and a Christian had come to you and said, 'Listen, turn away from all that. Turn away from that and just follow Jesus to God, the One God. Just believe in Jesus.' And you responded to that, and things are great! You're sayin', 'This is super!' And then suddenly somebody shows up and says, 'Wait a minute. You gotta be circumcised. And by the way, you gotta start followin' the Law of Moses, which means you gotta change the way you dress. You really do. You can't dress like that. In fact, you can't eat what you've always been eating. We're gonna have to change your diet here to follow the dietary laws of Moses. And beyond that, even that, we're gonna have to change the way you cut your hair. We're gonna have to change your daily schedule and routines. There are certain hours you need to be praying. In fact, we need to change your weekly schedule. There's days you can not work—don't work or you won't make it! By the way, the fabric of your clothes...you need to be careful about that. Can't have blended fabrics.'

They had all kinds of instructions for these Christians. They're saying, 'You gotta do this or you're not gonna be saved. It's impossible. I know you believed in Jesus, and He is the Messiah, and He's the way to God. Now do these things.'

There was great dissention and debate, we're told in verse 2. Paul and Barnabas began to debate with these individuals. Paul and Barnabas were two of the leaders in reaching out to the Gentiles. And they had gone to many different places explaining the gospel to people who had never heard of Jesus before, never heard of the Messiah, never even heard of the Old Testament God, and they had gone and shared this. And they began to take issue with these people who had come up from the Jerusalem area. And they began to argue with them. And it stirred a real...the church in Antioch just became this broil of controversy and debate and argumentation. And everybody's arguing the issue. And we're told that what they decided to do, what they needed to do, is they were gonna send Paul and Barnabas and some others, and they were gonna send 'em down to Jerusalem to talk to the apostles and the elders. In other words, they were gonna go to Jerusalem—kinda the mother church, the center where it all started from—they were gonna go down there because that's where the apostles, the individuals who had actually seen Jesus and heard Him when He taught...they were gonna go down there and they were gonna talk to those apostles and the elders, that is the leaders of that early church in Jerusalem, and they were gonna try to sort this out. So they take Paul and Barnabas and some others and they say, 'Go down and figure this out. Get us an answer. What's supposed to happen? How can we be saved?'

They go down there, and we're told that the debate picks up there. The apostles and the elders come together, and down in Jerusalem the debate starts once again, only it's more formal now. The apostles and the elders are there to hear the various positions. And one person stands out as a spokesman. As the debate has been going for some time, and it had been going back and forth, and there were certain people there who were saying, 'Listen, these Gentiles coming in...they have got to change their ways. They believe in Jesus, that's great. But you know what? They've gotta follow the Law of Moses. They have to, or we're on a slippery slope and the church is gonna turn pagan.' In the middle of all that the Apostle Peter stands up, verse 7. And he gives a short speech, and I wanna read it for you. This is the Apostle Peter, the debate has been going on long, and the other apostles and elders are there. And we're told that the Apostle Peter stood up, and he said

"Brethren, you know that in the early days..."

...when the church first got started...

"...God made a choice among you, that by my mouth..."

...Peter's mouth, his witness...

"...the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and they would believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them, confirmed to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them..."

He didn't handle them any differently than He handled us. He made no distinction between us and them.

"...cleansing their hearts..."

...washing them, purifying them, taking away their sins...

"...by faith. Now therefore," he says, "why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?"

'Why are you askin' them to do stuff we weren't able to do?' He finishes with this statement...

"We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way they also are."

'It has nothin' to do with the Law, with the rules. It's the grace of Jesus, by faith.'

Important thing to pick up on his speech when he says this. There's somethin' going on that becomes really important as, if you're thinking of arguing a position, taking a stand on an issue. And it's important to see how Peter argues this. As he goes through his little short speech the emphasis is upon who is doing this, who is taking the action. And he's saying, 'God chose me to do this.' He doesn't say, 'I decided to do it.' He doesn't say, 'This was my idea.' And if you go back and look at that story, the first time Peter shared the gospel with a Gentile, it was like God had to force him to do it. So he's saying, 'This was God's doing, it wasn't mine.' And he goes on, he says, 'God...' And I love the title here—'God, the heart-knower'—the God who knows exactly what's in the heart of these individuals, be they Jew or Gentile, be they pagan or religious...he says 'God the heart-knower testified to them, He confirmed that they were responding correctly, that He was accepting them by giving them the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit He gave us, and He gave it to them in the same way.'

And then he goes on and he says this. *"And He made no distinction."* Peter says, 'It wasn't me that set the standards here. It wasn't me that decided who was in and who was out. God is the One who made no distinction and cleansed their hearts by faith.'

That sets up the clinching part of his argument. He's saying, 'God did this, God did this, God did this.' And so he comes back and he says in verse 11 [should be verse 10], *"Now therefore, why do you put God to the test?"* 'Why do you question God? Why do you challenge God? We're not having a simple, little, theological debate here about what I think should be or shouldn't be. We are looking at what God has actually done, and you are challenging it and you are questioning God on this. Why are you putting Him to the test? He's the One who's doing this. It isn't me, it isn't Barnabas, it isn't Paul. God is touching these people with the reality of Jesus Christ, He is freely pouring His Spirit out on them, He's accepting them just on faith.'

And then comes that statement he wraps up with. He says, 'We believe we're saved by grace through the Lord Jesus in the same way they are also. What happens is happening to us. There's nothing different here.'

When Peter's done two others speak up, and it's Paul and Barnabas. And they go on, and they add to it. In fact it's only...it's really only just one short statement here. You'd expect more, but we've just come through a section of Acts where we've had their ministry described, and all they do is kind of add an exclamation point to Peter's speech. And they begin to describe...we're told that they begin to describe the things that God did through them, the signs and wonders that God had done through them as they were out there among these pagan Gentiles, these idol-worshippers. And so they're confirming what Peter has said. They're saying, 'You know what? God's doing this. It's not us. God's the one who's drawing them to Him; it's not us.'

And then finally, after hearing those two, we finally have the leader of the Jerusalem church. The elder James speaks, and he answers...having heard Peter's statements, having heard the statements of Paul and Barnabas, he stands and he makes a short speech. And basically he says this. He says

"With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written."

And what he's saying here is, 'You know what? Peter's describing this...God working among the Gentiles and calling them by faith. Paul and Barnabas are seeing this in their experience.' And James sits there; as wise as James is, he sits there and says, 'You know what? This is exactly what the Bible said would happen. This is exactly what God said would happen.' And he quotes from the Old Testament. Important thing goin' on here—he's evaluating the reports of the works of God with the word of God. And he's sayin' it fits. If the Bible had truly said this would never happen then we'd be goin', 'Somebody's confused here.' But the Bible says this would happen. And so he confirms it.

And so he comes to a ruling. He makes a decision, a judgment as it were. He's the leader of the church and the rest of the church will affirm it and go with him. He says

"It is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles..."

'Let's not put a lot of rules on 'em.'

He does add a little qualification at verse 20. He says, *"But..."* and we're all ready to go 'Ok, what's he gonna do?' He gives 'em four simple instructions. We read 'em and they're kinda strange. They have to do with sexual behavior, with diet, and with eating things that have been strangled or not, and it talks about things that have been polluted by idols. And we look at it; commentators even wrestle with what are these four things about?

Basically, what they're about is the conflict of the major points of tension in Gentile worship and pagan idol worship. And James is sitting there sayin' 'Hey, don't do this pagan stuff. Be sensitive to Jewish heritage and history.' Now important thing, and this you gotta note...as he starts into verse 21 he'll make it very clear they're not to do these things in order to be saved. He simply says, 'Don't do this, because everywhere we are there's Jews who are following the teachings of Moses.' And so the idea is 'Let's not be offensive; let's not be offensive.'

Having given that directive that has nothing to do with salvation—it's just being non-offensive to the Jewish community—he goes on and they sent a letter. He proposes that they send a letter, and they do. It goes from Jerusalem to Antioch. And it's a lengthy letter; it's recorded, and it's an official letter from the leaders of the early church. And they will explain that 'the first people that went up to Antioch were not sent, they were not official; they were disturbing you without permission.' They'll indicate that this is a teaching; this is a position of the elders, of the apostles, and of the whole church and the Holy Spirit among us. And what they encourage 'em is 'There's nothin' you have to do. Just be sensitive in these four areas.'

The highlight of the letter is, to me, the greeting. It says "From the elders and the apostles in the church in Jerusalem, to the brethren in Antioch, Syria, Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings." This is one of the greatest miracles in the book of Acts. You need to understand—Jews in first century Palestine never called a Gentile a brother, and never greeted 'em with good will. We got Jews writing to a group of Gentiles, of pagan idol-worshipping heritage, and saying "Brothers."

That's the story. That's how it came about. The question—how are we saved? Answer—through the grace of Jesus by faith in Jesus. That's the official church position. It's been the church position since that day. It's our position. But there's one thing about having a position; there's another thing about living that position, and I'm gonna skip forward and talk about that 'cause I'm very concerned about it. We can say that's our position, that's where we stand, that's our answer to the question. The bigger issue for us, then, is do we live that position? It's one thing to state it. It's one thing to take a stand. It's another thing to live it. And the common pattern that you'll find often in Christian communities is this: As we respond to Jesus, the gospel, with faith, we say "I believe," and we call out to Jesus. We say, "Save my soul." We say, "Come into my heart." Or we say just simply, "I'm a sinner. Help me!" But we turn to Jesus and we acknowledge Him in faith, and what I find as a common pattern is people will do that, and then they do that... [This just seized up on me, Katie. Thank you.] They look forward and they say, "Ok, I'm gonna be saved. Someday, I know, Day of Judgment, I'm gonna be ok 'cause I've believed in Jesus. The question is what do I do in between? What am I supposed to be doing in this time between 'I believed in Jesus' and 'someday I'll be saved by Jesus.' What am I supposed to be doing in between?"

People are always not real sure. Some people say, 'Well ok, there's some religious things I need to be doing.' There were those in Jerusalem among the Christian community that said, 'Ok, you need to be circumcised and start keepin' the Law of Moses.' There was others that come in and say, 'You need to join this particular church and you need to go through the sequence of membership they line out for you.' Others will say, 'No, you need to go to that particular organization over there and become a part of that.' Others will say, 'No, you need to become part of this independent group over here and do exactly what they tell you.' Most in our time...the way we are is we kinda move away from organized religious programs and religious institutions. And so what I find more in our day and our culture is people just say, 'Well you know there's some spiritual practices we ought to do. We probably should pray. We should probably say grace at our meals. We should probably maybe get the kids baptized. Not exactly sure, but we know there's some spiritual things we know we ought to do.'

For some it's not any necessarily spiritual things we need to do. We just need to have some moral standards. We need to...we can take...we don't have to take all 690-some laws that Moses gave us; just take the ten big commands and let that be our standard. Or there's some other code of behavior that we say, 'Let's follow those. Let's just zero in and take care of these moral standards. We will do what we need to do.' And then there's others that say, 'You know, just forget the standards. You know, we got friends and they're kinda rough around the edges. Their language is coarse, and they drink a bit, and they do this kinda stuff, so forget all those real rigid standards. You know what? They just really care about people, and that's what we oughta be doing...just care. Between faith and being saved, let's just really care.'

The reason it's a bit of a muddle, and the question gets answered a variety of ways, is because there is confusion. People aren't exactly sure—'Once I call out for Jesus in faith and I look forward to that day of salvation, what am I supposed to do?' In that confusion there's people more than willing to press in and tell you what to do. They'll tell you how to dress, they'll tell you what to eat, tell you how to speak, they'll tell you how to worship, when to worship.

None of that fits. So track with me very carefully here for the next three or four minutes, 'cause I want to make sure you get the gospel at this point. The gospel is this—you begin with faith, you start with faith, and you continue with faith. The same faith you exercised on the day you first called out to Jesus and said, “Be merciful for me, a sinner,” you exercised that faith every day thereafter. You just keep living faith, exercising trust in the reality and the wonder of all that Jesus is and all that He said.

There's a verse in Colossians [chapter 2 verse 6], and it goes like this, because there's a group there...this was one of the most common problems the early church wrestled with. And Paul has to say to the believers at Colossae, he says, 'Listen...

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.

'Just the way you received Him, go forward with Him in faith.'

Paul says in Romans chapter 1 verse 17, and this is one of my all-time favorites verses because he's describing the righteousness of God, how we're right with God, and he puts it this way. He says we go “*from faith to faith.*” That's the Christian experience. You start with faith and you just take your next step with faith...and the next step, and the next step. And the whole Christian experience is simply moving from one faith, one level of faith, one experience of faith, one reality of faith, to the next...to the next, to the next.

The amazing thing as you do that—you start experiencing some of that salvation here and now. Not all of it. 'Cause as you keep moving from faith, to faith, to faith you grow more in your experience of the wonder, the glory, the mystery of Jesus...here and now, ultimately to be completed and fulfilled in eternity.

That's the Christian position. Everything revolves around you trusting Jesus. That's how you started, that's how you go forward. It's not about your performance; it's not about the rules you keep; it's not about the laws you do, the standards you measure up to. It is you, just moment by moment, going forward in the confidence of the reality, the wonder, and the glory of Jesus. It is you believing that He is real. That's how you're saved.

Let's stand.

[Congregation closed with blessing song.]