

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 14, 2010**

THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Acts 15:1-21

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Today's Scripture reading is taken from Acts 15. I encourage you to turn to it. What is described there, known as the Council at Jerusalem, is truly one of the most important defining events in the whole history of the church and the Christian faith. The Council at Jerusalem brought together four of the most influential leaders of the New Testament church: Peter, Paul, Barnabas (a man known not only for his spiritual maturity and passion for the gospel, but also for his gift of encouraging others), and James the brother of Jesus, who was the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem.

In the context of our look at the life and times of Simon Peter, this passage has a particular significance as well, because it is the last time Peter appears in the Book of Acts. This is it. From here to the end of Acts, the focus shifts from Peter to Paul, and how God used Paul and his ministry for the spread of the gospel into Europe. Both Peter and Paul played crucial roles as the Jerusalem Council wrestled with and resolved a divisive question with profound theological and practical implications for the integrity of the gospel message and the future of the Christian mission.

Let's look together at Acts 15. We're going to read verses 1-21. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

KEY DATES IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Just for the fun of it, and for your edification, here are a few key dates in church history, beginning with the most recent and going back from there. All of these dates represent gatherings of believers and/or Christian leaders which hold historical significance. Here we go:

1987 – The first worship service of Faith Presbyterian Church took place at Key Middle School (October 4, 1987).

1981 – The first General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church was held at Ward Presbyterian Church in Livonia, Michigan.

1974 – The first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization was held in Switzerland, with Billy Graham as one of the key leaders.

1910 – The International Missionary Conference was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, motivated by the goal of “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” It is a great goal, but it hasn't happened yet.

1886 – The Student Volunteer Movement began at a summer conference held at D. I. Moody’s Mount Hermon School in Northfield, Massachusetts, inspiring a new generation of college students to commit their lives to foreign missions.

1806 – Five students from Williams College in Massachusetts, seeking refuge from a rain storm, huddled under a haystack and began to pray for foreign missions. This Haystack Prayer Meeting is recognized as the beginning of the 19th century Protestant missionary movement in America. Within a few years, Congregationalists in Massachusetts formed the first foreign missions board in America (the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions), and in 1812, the first American missionaries, including Adoniram Judson and his wife Ann, sailed for India. It all began with a prayer meeting in a rain storm.

1789 – The first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church here in America was held in Philadelphia. The moderator of the assembly was the Rev. John Witherspoon, who was president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) from 1768 to 1794, and was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

1646 – The Westminster Assembly in England adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith, which we in the EPC have adopted and affirm, along with the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. They constitute the doctrinal standards of historic Presbyterianism, which, of course, is our spiritual lineage as evangelical Presbyterians.

451 – The Council of Chalcedon (in Turkey) met to resolve a Christological controversy concerning the nature of Christ. The Council affirmed the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus, with both His divine nature (as God) and His human nature (as man) united in one person.

325 – The Council of Nicea (in Turkey as well) was convened by Emperor Constantine. At issue was a question over whether Jesus was truly God. An influential church leader named Arius denied the deity of Christ in his teaching. In response, the Council condemned the teaching of Arius, affirmed the historic Christian belief in the deity of Christ, and formulated the Nicene Creed, which clearly expresses our belief that Jesus is fully God.

In one way or another each of these dates represents an event of historic significance in the life of the Christian church.

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

From there we go back to 49 AD and the very first General Assembly of the Christian church, a.k.a. the Council at Jerusalem. Even if they didn’t call it a general assembly, like we do in the Presbyterian tradition, that is essentially what it was.

Here is some background. In the wave of persecution against the followers of Christ that broke out in connection with Stephen, some of the believers went to Antioch in Syria, where they shared the gospel message not just with Jews but with Gentiles, too. God was pleased,

and lots of them – Jews and Gentiles – came to faith in Christ (Acts 11:21). After personally checking things out in Antioch, Barnabas went to Tarsus, got Paul and brought him back to Antioch, where, for a whole year, the two of them met with the church and taught them the truths of the faith (11:25-56).

A short time later, Barnabas and Paul were set apart by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the church at Antioch for missionary service (13:2-3). Acts 13 and 14 recount the first of Paul's three missionary journeys, this one with Barnabas as his partner. They shared the gospel message with both Jews and Gentiles. While some Jews responded in faith, the response of Gentiles was more pronounced. In the words of John Stott, "the Gentile mission of the church was gathering momentum," and "the trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent." God was clearly on the move. When they got back to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas told the church "all that God had done through them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27).

Not everyone was happy about this new development in the growth of the church, even though the church in Jerusalem had already given its seal of approval to Peter's report of the conversion of Cornelius, the first Gentile to become a believer in Christ (Acts 10-11). But now it was happening on a much larger scale. Because of the church's Jewish origins, lots of the Jewish Christians assumed that if Gentiles were to become followers of Christ, they would embrace and adhere to the Jewish laws and customs and practices, including circumcision. But in Antioch as well as other places, through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, many Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ and receiving Christian baptism without circumcision. They were becoming Christians without also becoming Jews (Stott).

To many Jewish believers, as you can imagine, this was troubling. "Judaizers" was the name given to Jewish Christians who believed that, in addition to faith in Christ, Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow all the rules and regulations of Judaism in order to be saved and to be welcomed in the church. Some of these Judaizers showed up in Antioch and disturbed the peace of the church by insisting that circumcision is necessary for salvation (15:1). Faith in Christ, they claimed, is not enough. In addition to faith you have to have circumcision, and to circumcision you have to add obedience to the law of Moses. Paul and Barnabas jumped to their feet in protest. They got into "sharp dispute and debate with" the Judaizers (15:2).

The Council at Jerusalem was convened to resolve this dispute once and for all. The church at Antioch sent a delegation, which included Paul and Barnabas, to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and the elders (presbyters) of the church.

THE GREAT DEBATE

Here is how the great debate unfolded. The Judaizers, identified in verse 5 as "believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees," stated their position. They said: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (15:5). When they said this is what the Gentiles *must* do, what they meant was: "This is God's will." For them, it was an essential of the faith concerning which there could be no compromise.

The question before the assembly was not *whether* or *if* Gentiles could be saved. There was little or no disagreement about that. The question was *how*. I suppose just about everybody there had an opinion. Verse 7 says that the discussion went on and on, until these four key leaders – Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and James – spoke up.

Peter went first, in verses 7-11. He spoke from his own missionary experience and reminded the apostles and elders of how God had used him ten years earlier to take the gospel to Cornelius and his household, who were the first Gentiles to embrace the faith and receive the gift of salvation. Peter attributed it all to God. It was God's choice to send Peter to preach to Cornelius and his family. It was God who gave them the Holy Spirit when they believed, as a sign of their salvation. It was God who purified their hearts by faith (15:7-9). God did it all. He was behind it. He was in it. He was for it. He orchestrated it. He used Peter as His instrument. But Peter is very clear that God did it all. And Peter observes in verses 9-11 that, in saving these Gentiles the way He did, God erased the dividing line between Gentiles and Jews. He made no distinction between them with respect to salvation (15:9). When it comes to being saved, Jews are on exactly the same footing as non-Jews (Gentiles). And vice-versa. Gentiles don't have to keep the Jewish law in order to be saved. And neither do Jews. As Peter says in verse 11, "It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." It is by grace alone. Not by adding law to grace, or grace to law. And it is exactly the same for both Jews and Gentiles.

When Peter finished his testimony, Paul and Barnabas took their turn. They gave a riveting report of the amazing things God did among the Gentiles on their missionary journey (15:12). Like Peter, they talked about what God did. It wasn't about them. It was about God. About His saving Grace and power. About how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles (14:27), apart from any requirement of circumcision or observance of the Jewish law.

THE DECISION

After Peter, Paul and Barnabas spoke – (Doesn't it almost sound like they could be a musical group? I wonder if any of them could play the guitar.) – James pulled it all together in verses 13-21. As the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem, James was the moderator of the assembly. He was highly respected by the Jewish believers because of his deep personal devotion to the Jewish law. But if the Judaizers who insisted on circumcision and the law expected James to agree with them, they were terribly disappointed. He came down in full agreement with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. Going to the Scriptures, specifically to the writings of the prophet Amos (Amos 9:11-12), James affirmed what was happening among the Gentiles because it agreed with the Word of God (Ray Stedman). Which is the way it should always be, for the Word of God is and remains our final authority in all it teaches concerning faith and life. Amen?

The decision of the Council as expressed by James, in agreement with the Word of God and the Spirit of God (15:28), and affirmed by the apostles and elders, along with the whole church (15:22-28), consisted of two parts. It included both a theological principle and a practical request.

First, in terms of theology or doctrine, the Council agreed that circumcision and other ritual requirements of the Jewish religion were not to be imposed on Gentile believers in Christ. They reaffirmed the truth of the gospel of grace, which is for both Jewish sinners and Gentile sinners alike. This gospel, as John Stott says, is “the gospel of God’s free grace, of His undeserved love for sinners in the death of His Son. Further, it is the gospel of God’s sufficient grace.” Which is to say, grace is not a supplement to something else, nor does it need to be supplemented by something else, such as circumcision. The gospel is all grace. For Jews and Gentiles alike, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It is not “Jesus plus” or “grace plus” anything.

Even today, we’ve got to be careful not to add anything to the gospel, or to add any unbiblical or non-essential standard in judging whether someone is, in our view, an “acceptable” Christian. Our standards may be different than those of the Judaizers, but we may be just as likely today to add on certain requirements to the gospel, or to view others as defective or inferior to us, if they don’t do things the way we do.

Watch out. It’s a trap. Don’t go there. It is not attractive. It is not a good witness. It is not pleasing to God. Guard your heart. Guard your tongue, too. If you need to repent, do it. If you need God to change the way you think, ask Him.

The second part of the decision had to do with how to get along with one another and to preserve the gift of unity in the fellowship of the church. In agreement with James, the Council asked the Gentiles to make certain cultural concessions out of respect for the consciences and convictions of their Jewish brothers and sisters. In its decision and letter announcing its decision, the church leaders in Jerusalem asked the Gentile believers to abstain from four practices that might offend Jewish believers:

1. Eating food which had been sacrificed to idols
2. Eating meat from strangled animals
3. Eating or drinking anything with blood
(all of which were offensive to Jews)
4. Sexual immorality of any and every kind

This last one, the call to abstain from sexual immorality, seems to be in a different category from the others. The first three are about ritual practices, although if you were to actually participate in a sacrifice to an idol instead of just eating food which had been offered in a sacrifice, you would cross a line into the sin of idolatry. Sexual immorality, whatever form it takes, is a moral sin. Sexual immorality was rampant in the pagan Gentile culture of the 1st century. Just like today in the 21st century. In many cases, pagan religious practices involved sex. For a lot of Gentiles (and, no doubt, some Jews, too) following Christ involved a major change in their sexual ethic and practice. Maybe that is the reason James and the Council were prompted by the Holy Spirit to include it in their decision.

I don’t need to tell you that sex is an awfully big deal today, just as it was back then. It is intuitively obvious, isn’t it? And Satan will use every trick in the book to try to get us to

lower our standards, or to compromise our values, or to give in to our desires for the sake of momentary pleasure.

Dear friends, we need to be on our guard about this. Do not make any concession to sexual immorality in your life, lest it compromise your witness or do damage to your soul.

ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

It's time to wrap this up. I love what John Newton said about the apostle Paul more than 200 years ago (1799): "Paul was a reed in non-essentials, an iron pillar in essentials." Isn't that great? Bet you didn't know that both Newton and Paul were part of the EPC, at least in spirit? I think we can say the same of James and Barnabas and Peter, too. In the essentials of the gospel, in the radically good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, they were like iron pillars. They demonstrated unity. There are not different gospels or different requirements for salvation for different groups. There is only one gospel for all people.

But in secondary matters, in non-essentials like circumcision (in their day) or things like worship style or views on alcohol or politics or what to wear to church (in our day), they were more like a reed, able to bend in any direction without breaking, for the sake of loving unity in the fellowship.

That is a good model for us. In essentials, an iron pillar. In non-essentials, a reed. In all things, love. And grace.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.