



Acts of the Apostles: Acts 15: Lesson 26
by Faber McMullen, Union Grove Baptist
Church ©2019

Limits on our Liberty?
The Jerusalem Council



This is the first sermon of the year and in a way this is all about new beginnings, adjustments in how we love one another, and how we should approach conflict resolutions with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Jesus' Death & Resurrection – From Synagogue to the Church

As a review, let's catch up to where we are in the story of the young church. The first part of Acts has been a transition from the synagogue into the church. Remember the synagogue was what the Jews called an assembly that got together on the Sabbath to read and discuss God's Word. The Book of Acts chronicles how the meeting place moved from being in a synagogue to believers in Jesus' resurrection meeting together in assembly to worship together on the first day of the week. Let's review how the Book of Acts started. Jesus died and he rose from the dead on the third day. (Scholars place the resurrection around 30 AD). The Bible tells us that Jesus appeared to many (over 500 people) and then the 40th day after he rose from the dead, He ascended into heaven. Those first believers didn't quite know what to do. They were shell shocked. But they had seen Him and they believed. These believers were all Jewish and they were all in Jerusalem. We need to remember that Christianity began as a sect of Judaism in which Jesus was accepted as the long awaited Messiah.

Pentecost – Receiving the Holy Spirit – Beginning of “The Church”

Fifty days after that night when Jesus went to the cross, those first believers gathered in the upper room and they received the Holy Spirit. It appeared on their heads as “tongues of fire” and many received the Holy Spirit and they spoke in languages they had never studied or learned. As the miracle moved outside the room, some heard them speaking and understood them because each person was hearing his or her own language being spoken.

Saul Persecutes the Church – Believers Spread to Antioch, Syria

That event was the beginning of the Church. God's people had the Holy Spirit of God now dwelling in them. The Church was still pretty much exclusively Jewish. Scholars believe that Paul was converted on the road to Damascus approximately 3 years after that event of Pentecost. We read about Saul's persecutions of the Church in Acts chapter 9. He was there at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Steven. This persecution caused many of the first believers to escape north to Antioch, Syria where they were first called "Christians." After a brief appearance to the church fathers in Jerusalem, Paul sort of drops out of the picture and ends up in Tarsus where God is "taking Him through seminary."

The First Recorded Gentile Believer – Cornelius the Centurion Receives the Holy Spirit

In Acts chapter 10 we saw Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, saved along with many in his family. Peter had received the vision of the unclean animals coming down in a sheet symbolizing that change was happening. God was opening up His family to include Gentiles. Jews marveled (and many were confused) that God had now included the Gentile nations in His plan of salvation.

Paul & Barnabas First Missionary Journey – Gentiles Saved in Great Numbers

The Book of Acts then chronicles Baranabas going to find Saul in Tarsus, and then Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the church in Antioch. The Church leaders laid hands on them and set them aside to go on a missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas then made their way first to Cyprus where they saw a governor named Sergius Paulus who came to faith in Jesus. The two then traveled up into Asia Minor (modern central Turkey) where they would first preach to the Jews in synagogues, and then to the Gentile population at large. Many of the Gentiles accepted the message of Jesus, and Paul ended up founding Churches along the way that had both Jews and Gentiles.

Conflict Arises – Do Christians have to Become Jewish First?

Paul and Barnabas finally made their way back to the home church in Antioch, and that is where the story resumes today. The text tells us, "*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."* ² *This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.*" (Acts 15:1-2, NIV).

So what has happened is that as more and more Gentiles came to know Jesus, there were some of the Jewish Christians who felt these converts needed to become Jews before they could really be Christians. They were insisting that these Gentiles become circumcised and follow the Laws of Moses to be saved. This was in direct conflict to the gospel message being preached by Paul and Barnabas; faith alone in Jesus was what saved a person. So, a conflict was brewing. The Church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to get some answers. We read the following:

“³ 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. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. ⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”” (Acts 15:3-5, NIV).

James (half-brother of Jesus and Pastor in Jerusalem) Addresses the Conflict

Paul and Barnabas gave an account of how God had saved the Gentiles and how they were coming to Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit like those first Jewish Christians had received at Pentecost. James, the pastor of the Church who was the half-brother of Jesus, presided over the council and after the group had heard Paul and Barnabas, James spoke up.

“¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The 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, ¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things— ¹⁸ things known from long ago.” (Acts 15:13-18, NIV).

James then went on to say that four requirements were to be put on the Gentiles who were believers. They were to abstain from: (1) food polluted by idols, (2) from sexual immorality, (3) from the meat of strangled animals, and (4) from blood.

How Does this Apply to You and Me?

So, what is God trying to communicate to us from this passage? I don’t think that this is telling you and me to not eat rare meat (although I don’t eat it!). What this passage is getting at is that those new Gentile believers were to abstain from engaging in activities that had been part of their pagan worship before they came to Jesus. They had been involved in ceremonies that involved strangling animals, engaging in sex with temple prostitutes, and the eating of sacrificed meats and blood rituals.

James was telling them to give up the things of their old lives. They needed to give up the things associated with their lives before coming to Christ. This was for their own good, and it also was an act of love to maintain harmony and unity with the Jewish believers in their congregations. I think there is plenty of application in all of this for us.

Were these Gentile believers free to keep doing some of these things? Yes. Probably they were all okay except the acts of sexual immorality which are prohibited in many other passages of the Bible. Also, none of these acts or conduct would cause a Gentile believer to lose his or her

salvation, but to continue in these practices was hurtful to their own spiritual growth and it alienated them in their relationship with other believers.

The apostle Paul talks a lot about this balancing act in the Book of Romans. He stresses that when we walk in Christ we are “free” to do a lot of things, but we can choose to limit our liberty. We can do this not to be justified or saved, but to limit our liberty out of love for fellow believers. Listen to Paul.

Do Not Cause Another to Stumble

“¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.” (Romans 14:13-22, ESV).

Our church motto this year is “*16...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.*” (Matt 5:16, NIV).

As your pastor, I am learning to lay aside my own desires and likes for the good of each of you. Some of you are very politically opinionated. If I feed that beast in you it will not help you to become more Christ-like, so I refrain from discussing political matters with you. Although I am free in Christ to drink a glass of wine, it is out of love that I might refrain from doing so in the presence of some brothers and sisters, or I might refrain from doing so at all. Many have a history of difficulty with alcohol in your own lives, or you were hurt by someone that abused alcohol and left you with horrible memories. I don’t want to add to that hurt or those memories. I am commanded to be more concerned with your spiritual welfare than with my own freedom in Christ.

I am free in Christ to do just about anything that is not clearly immoral, but out of love for each of you I seek to try to live my life so that you can see whatever works I do that are good, and you will glorify God who is in heaven. If I show you a particular kindness or generosity, my heart’s desire is for you to understand that it is God who is hearing your prayer, meeting your need, and extending you a mercy. He is SO good to me, and He is so good to you. He wants to love you through me, and He wants to love others through you! I want you this year to let Him set you free to love others and be generous in ways that may even shock you! Then when you do this,

point to Jesus and remind the recipient that *“¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”* (James 1:17, NIV). That means God gives and gives and does so with no ulterior motive. He is not a fickle, fair-weathered friend.

You all have often heard me say, “It costs to love people.” It may cost you money. It may cost you time. It may cost you patience. It may cost you forgoing (laying aside) some of the things you love. That’s perhaps what James was getting at when he told these Gentile believers to abstain from certain things.

We can learn much from this passage. Notice that James, the pastor there in Jerusalem, did not let this become a big deal. James did not pull out his “I am the brother of Jesus” card. He did not have to elevate himself by pointing out that he was the first pastor of the first church in the world. He was gentle. He was kind. He was patient. He was loving. This teaches each of us to not let potential conflict in our church and in our lives become a big deal. Everything is NOT a big deal. James sent a letter back and he clearly explained that those who went up to criticize were not authorized to do so, but that’s the last word he speaks about it.

James’ letter is all about unity. It is about how to be more unified as a church family and how to love each other better. To our group this might mean:

- 1) Not looking down on those with a nose ring or a tattoo.
- 2) Not looking down on those who don’t have a nose ring or a tattoo.
- 3) Not looking down on those who have less materially than you do.
- 4) Not looking down on (or resenting) those who have more material wealth than you do (yes...prejudice goes both ways).
- 5) Not looking down on those who are less educated than you might be.
- 6) Not looking down on (or resenting) those who are more educated than you.

At Union Grove we are a lot like the New Testament church. We come from all tribes and nations of the world. Let us remember that we are one body in Christ and we will be together for eternity. Let’s start eternity this year by being the heart and hands of Jesus to one another and to all with whom we come into contact. “Let your light so shine before men that they might see your good works and glorify your Father who is in Heaven.”

We can each do that this year through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Now, let us leave this place and **BE THE CHURCH!**

Let us pray.

Union Grove is one of the oldest Baptist communities of faith in the State of Texas dating back to 1844. Pastor Faber McMullen may be reached by email at uniongrove362@gmail.com or by snail mail at: 15301 FM 362, Navasota, Texas 77868. Tel: 936-825-1227 (Edited and proofed by Amanda Fryday Neese - Webster, Texas.) All financial gifts to this ministry are tax-deductible as a 501 (c) (3) Corporation.