

Acts 15 – Jerusalem Council (Part 2)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast --Jan. 29, 2012

INTRODUCTION:

- A. We talked quite a bit about the Judaizer controversy and the necessity of understanding its significance in the first century church. That was the big issue facing them. It is a no-brainer today for us, but it was the make-or-break issue for them. It was so critical to the future of the church to get it clarified.
- B. That is why it was necessary for Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem and have a council about this issue with the apostles and elders there. The Judaizers (evidently associated with the Pharisee party) had to go to the meeting as well, or else they had their Pharisee buddies in Jerusalem represent them at the meeting (see Acts 15:5).

AD 49 – The Jerusalem Council, a crucial turning point for Christianity. If that council had not decided in favor of Gentile freedom from circumcision and law-keeping, there would not have been a big nor long history of the church after AD 70. Paul and Barnabas would not have been able to have any more missionary journeys to convert the Gentiles. Gentiles would have rejected the gospel because of its requirement to be circumcised and keep the Law. Christianity would have remained just another sect of the Jews, and disappeared from history after the second century (like the **Ebionites** and **Nazarenes** in **Pella**). The Ebionites and Nazarene sects denied the Deity of Christ and required circumcision and Law-keeping. They were Judaizers and Unitarians. They were teaching "another gospel" which was "different" from the one true gospel of Christ, and Paul in the book of Galatians says that anyone who taught that deviant gospel was accursed, and cut off from Christ. It is no surprize that those Judaizers who went to Pella did not last very long. And that is what would have happened to the whole church, unless the council in Jerusalem had come down on the side of Gentile freedom. Since the Ebionites and Nazarenes were not true Christians, it also explains why there still were some supposed "Christians" in Pella after AD 70, who had not been raptured out of there before AD 70. They were not true Christians, and therefore were not "changed" into their immortal bodies and caught up with the resurrected dead to be with Christ.

The Decrees – I want to talk more about the decretal document that the Apostles composed for circulation among all the churches outside Jerusalem, and how Apostle Paul modified the application of it to the Gentiles later. Notice what Paul does with this issue in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 --

1Cor. 8:1 Now concerning things **sacrificed** to **idols**, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

1Cor. 8:4 Therefore concerning the eating of things **sacrificed** to **idols**, we know that there is no such thing as an **idol** in the world, and that there is no God but one.

1Cor. 8:7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the **idol** until now, eat *food* as if it were **sacrificed** to an **idol**; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

1Cor. 8:10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an **idol's** temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things **sacrificed** to **idols**?

1Cor. 10:19 What do I mean then? That a thing **sacrificed** to **idols** is anything, or that an **idol** is anything?

1Cor. 10:28 But if anyone says to you, "This is meat **sacrificed** to **idols**," do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake;

Paul talks about the "knowledge" that the Corinthians had which supposedly enabled them to eat meat sacrificed to idols without violating their own conscience. However, it did violate the conscience of their weaker brethren, and therefore Paul says it should not be done when the weaker brethren would either see it or know about it. By their superior "knowledge" they were destroying the faith of their weaker brothers. We are our brothers' keepers, and we have a responsibility to look out for our weaker brothers, and not put stumbling blocks in their way. James and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were evidently "weak" in that regard, since they prohibited the eating of anything that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul moderated that to allow the eating of food that had been offered to idols, as long as the person eating was not damaging his own faith, nor putting a stumbling block in the way of another brother.

James suggested that they write a document which explained the decision of the Jerusalem Council. This written decretal (Gk. "dogmata" in Acts 16:4) may have been the first official written document from the apostles to go into universal circulation among all the churches. It was sent out by the Apostles in Jerusalem, so it was inspired and authoritative. It is quoted in Acts 15:22-29. It was evidently one of the "books and parchments" that Paul carried with him on his missionary journeys (since Luke had it available to him when he wrote Acts), and was therefore probably read to all the churches wherever Paul went, and then copied by them to keep on hand for future reference in case the Judaizer controversy ever arose there in that congregation.

The writing of this document by the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem Church opened the door for the canonical writing process to begin (if it had not already). Other documents may have followed soon afterwards (possibly Matthew and Mark). The written decrees opened the door for the apostles to send their "teachings" (e.g., the **Didache**) to the Diaspora churches (perhaps for the Jewish believers in those Gentile churches), and **Barnabas** seems to have used the material from those decrees in his Epistle and its "Two Ways" section. This should be no surprise, since Barnabas was one of the leading men who went up to the council from Antioch. On the return trip from Jerusalem, two leaders from the church in Jerusalem (Judas Barsabbas, and Silas) accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch to deliver the decrees. Once the decrees were read to the church in Antioch, Judas returned to Jerusalem, while Silas remained there.

The **epistle of Barnabas** may have been written by Barnabas sometime after

he left Antioch and returned to his home island of Cypros. Evidently Barnabas spent most of his time on Cypros after this, with the exception of a trip to Corinth at some point before AD 58. Paul mentions Barnabas in 1 Cor 9:6 as another traveling missionary who evidently was sent out by the churches in Cypros to do mission work (because Paul implies here that Barnabas was doing mission work without having to work on the side. Since the epistle of Barnabas appears to have a lot of familiarity with Paul's teachings, especially in the book of Hebrews, there is a possibility that it was not composed until after Hebrews was written (AD 63). It is not a very "Jew-friendly" book, however, and probably stirred up more persecution against him and the other Christians.

Silas was a representative of the Jerusalem Church, and his travel with Paul on his second missionary journey implies that he was representing the interests of the Jerusalem Church to make sure the decrees were indeed delivered to all the Gentile Christians among the Diaspora churches. This also implies some distribution of canonical writings (the decretal document that was sent forth by the Jerusalem leadership). We can presume that the churches wherever Paul and Silas went made copies of that decretal for their own use.

Back when Christianity was mainly centered in Palestine, within easy travel distance for the apostles, there was **little need for written gospels**. However, when Christianity began to spread throughout Turkey, Greece, and Rome, they did not have easy or frequent access to the apostles in Palestine. This was the situation which probably put pressure on the apostles to begin producing the first written gospels, which could then be circulated among the new Diaspora churches outside Palestine. We do not know when the **first written gospels (Matthew and Mark)** appeared, but the need for Christian writings certainly began at this time when Paul began His missionary journeys and established many new churches in the Gentile world outside Judea. **We see at least one such inspired and authoritative (canonical) document go with Paul on his second missionary journey**, when they delivered this decretal from the Jerusalem Council to all the Churches where they traveled.

Paul and Silas would read the decretal letter, and then the churches would have their **scribes make a copy of it to stay there with them** after Paul and Silas left. This decretal letter would have **been real useful if any Judaizers showed up** and tried to bind circumcision and law-keeping on the Gentiles. That is what happened in Galatia evidently, and Paul wrote an epistle to them to remind them about the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. Think about the implications of all this for the formation of the New Testament Canon.

It is amazing to see how God worked through all these missionary journeys and church councils to **produce and circulate a collection of inspired and authoritative literature** that would serve the church well from that time forward and "throughout all generations of the age of the ages." This is the beginning of the Apostolic Canonization process.

So, there is a lot going on here in the book of Acts. It is showing how they made **the transition** from a strictly **Jewish Church** to a **universal Church** composed of all nations. Christ came as the seed of Abraham who would be a **blessing to all the nations**, not just the blood-descendants of Abraham. The book

of Acts gives us a window into that process of transition, so that we can see how the **New Testament was written and circulated and preserved for future generations**. Luke is showing how they solved the most critical issue that threatened to kill the Gentile mission before the church was established in the Gentile world. The apostles gave the Jews first access to the Gospel, before it went to the Gentiles, so that the Jews would have a chance to be saved from the wrath that was about to be poured out upon their nation and temple/sacrificial system at AD 70. Big changes and transitions were taking place, which would take a whole generation to understand and implement. And that transition could never have happened without the **Holy Spirit guiding the process** the whole way.

This transition would never have taken place if Gentile freedom had not been settled decisively at this council in 49 AD.

Next week we will begin in Acts 16 to look at Paul's second missionary journey with Silas, which covers three or four years (AD 49-53).