

Acts 15:1-18 (The Jerusalem Council)

Churches often have their spats. We debate all kinds of things: property, parsonages, pastors, sexuality, euthanasia, and constitutions. Church disagreements, are not always bad. It really depends on what you're fighting for. In one particular church they got into a bit of a conflict over pew cushions. New cushions were to be put in the sanctuary. One of the women became so irate over the colour the committee picked that on the Sunday that the cushions were consecrated, she brought her lawn chair.

A church in Cambridge where I had one of my placements, had a few members who did not like the small blue hymnal “With One Voice” that we used before our current Worship Book replaced it in 2005. One woman would arrive on Sunday morning and check the worship bulletin. If “With One Voice” were being used, she would turn around and go home. Another member would change their offering to Benevolence rather than Current whenever “With One Voice” was being used. Conflicts can, at times, become very silly.

Sometimes a good dispute – properly addressed – can lead to new insight and understanding. A disagreement, honestly processed, can lead to greater clarity, a stronger bond, and a more faithful witness.

Today in Acts we see how Christians convened a church council to handle major theological disputes that arose. The tradition of church councils such as this one continued for many centuries. It can be beneficial to call a council when there is some important problem to resolve. The Holy Spirit often

reveals its will through the wise consensus of spirited leaders. We often see this at work at our Synodical and National Assemblies. The discussions can be long, heated, even dragging out over several assemblies before a resolution or consensus is reached. Same sex marriage was on of those.

The Gospel started in Jerusalem. That was where the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost. The Gospel was alive with spiritual activity for a number of years. But, slowly, Jewish legalism spread and the Jerusalem church lost her fervour. As we have seen, they never developed a true mission program. Many Christian “true Jews” could never come to terms with the new kingdom concept of a worldwide church that included all nations and all peoples.

Some of the legalists in Jerusalem, even though they were Christians, wanted to exert their influence over Gentiles in the Antioch church and make them subject to the Jewish ceremonial laws of the Jerusalem church. Some Jewish-background teachers went from Jerusalem to Antioch to teach believers that “unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved.”

Paul and Barnabas challenged them, saying the Gentile converts did not have to submit to the Jewish ceremonial laws in order to become part of the body of Christ. This was a break from the accepted Jewish “proselyte system.” The debate at Antioch grew intense. The church delegated Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem to seek the advice of the apostles and elders.

The Jews, Hellenists, proselytes, God-fearers, Gentiles, and barbarians had

come to faith. Many of these believers knew nothing of the laws of Moses and Jewish history. They did not know God's covenant with Abraham was sealed by the sign of circumcision. Not only was every Jewish male child to be circumcised, but so were aliens who lived with them and servants who worked in their houses.

There were three types of Old Testament laws:

- 1) Moral laws that apply to every people in every culture. "You shall not murder, you shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery." These laws are written equally on the consciences of people all over the world.
- 2) Civil laws were unique to Israel and formed the basis for the legal regulations: what to do if someone's animal destroyed your garden, or who is exempt from going to war. These civil laws are not binding on other people and other nations. Civil laws varied from country to country.
- 3) Ceremonial law defined Jewish worship and observances of faith: dietary laws defined clean and unclean meat; sacrifices and holy days, codified under this part of the ceremonial law, described when and how Passover and the Day of Atonement are observed and the kinds of sacrifices needed and when to make them; the law of circumcision required every Jewish male to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. Circumcision identified Jewish males as "Jewish."

John Wesley had a good rule of thumb. He said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." The church fight that happened in today's Acts narrative was over something essential! It had to do with the

nature of salvation. There was a certain group of individuals – Luke doesn't call them by name, he simply says a certain group. In other words, this group doesn't represent the whole. They're not really speaking for the church; they're speaking for themselves. One of the worst forms of ecclesial abuse is when a group of individual assumes to speak for the church.

This particular group was of the Pharisee party. They'd heard about the Gentiles in Antioch. Rumour had it they were being baptized and welcomed into the fellowship without circumcision. And speaking for the church, this group said: "You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised." You cannot be a Christian unless you first become a Jew. If you don't accept the law, Christ will not accept you!

The question before the council was whether ceremonial laws applied to new Christians from Gentile backgrounds. (The moral and civil laws were never an issue.) The party of true Jewish Pharisees from Jerusalem insisted that the ceremonial laws apply. They wanted all Christians, including Gentiles, to eat kosher food, keep Jewish holy days, especially the Sabbath, and most importantly, to be circumcised. In contrast, Paul and the mixed congregation up in Antioch had come to the conclusion that these ceremonial laws were not binding on Gentiles. Paul went to great lengths to show that ceremonial laws had been satisfied in Christ. Jesus himself said, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Paul taught, "Christ is the end of the law to everyone who believes."

By saying Jesus was the “end of the Law,” Paul meant Christ had fulfilled ceremonial Jewish law. The Jewish ceremonial law demanded an animal sacrifice for sin. But Jesus became the Lamb of God and shed his blood for our sin. His sacrifice on the cross fulfilled the requirement of the law. Instead of slaughtering lambs when we sin, we confess our sins to God and ask to be forgiven.

For Paul, this same principle applied to other ceremonial laws like circumcision. Paul said that if circumcision or any other ceremonial law were required for new believers, then it would be adding another requirement for people to be forgiven their sin and given the righteousness of God. Paul insisted, “A man is not justified by observing the ceremonial law, but by faith in Jesus.”

Now there's a big difference between a moral or civil law and a ceremonial law or custom. A custom is a norm, a tradition, a practice that is helpful, meaningful, but not necessarily essential. But a moral or civil law is a rule; it's an edict, a non-negotiable. Sometimes the church disagrees over what is custom and what is law. Often the lines between them are not clearly defined.

If what this Pharisee group is saying is true, circumcision or becoming a “Jew” first is necessary for salvation, then the grace of God in Christ is not enough for salvation. You have to add to it, the Law of Moses. Peter, on the

other hand, wisely frames the theology of the early church: "We believe," says Peter, "that we are saved the same way, by the special favour of the Lord Jesus." Period.

The Pharisee party believed in grace. They had accepted God's grace in Christ. But they were so bound to their own customs that they were confusing non-essentials with essentials. And they were making life more difficult not only for the Gentile Christians, but for the Holy Spirit!

So the outcome can be considered a model of conflict resolution. The Antioch church doesn't go rogue; they don't wash their hands of the Jerusalem church. They respect the apostolic community - just as our congregations respect our Synods and our National Church. They understand that they would have never even heard the Gospel had it not been for the Jerusalem church.

So they don't say, "Forget Jerusalem, we'll do our own thing!" The Antioch church sends a delegation to Jerusalem - to the mother church. They send key leaders, Paul and Barnabas, among others. And when they arrive, they are welcomed by the apostles and the elders. There's a mutual respect. The mother church doesn't say, "Oh brother! Here comes trouble!" They welcomed them, and they called the meeting to order.

Apparently, in this community everyone matters. Everyone has a voice. And the church - the mother church - takes time to listen. The Spirit, of course,

turned the tide of the meeting when Simon Peter spoke:

"Friends," he said, "you know that, from early on, God made it plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the message of the Gospel and embrace it – and not in any secondhand, roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth. And God, who cannot be fooled by pretense on our part, but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he did to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very centre of who they were, and working from that centre outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed Him. 'So why are you now trying to out-god God, loading these new believers down with rules that crushed our ancestors and crushed us, too? Don't we believe that we are saved because the Master Jesus amazingly and out of sheer generosity moved to save us just as he did those from beyond our nation? What are we fussing about?'"

It's a difficult thing, to let God be God. It can be so hard to trust grace! We may appreciate grace, but we need to put some parameters around it, some controls, some restrictions, and limits. Paul and Barnabas got up and gave their witness too, about the signs and wonders that God was doing among the Gentiles. And then everyone became quiet. And God spoke in the silence.

After a moment James took the floor. This is not James the apostle, the brother of John. This is not James, son of Alphaeus, another of the original

twelve, sometimes called James the Less or James the Just. No, this is James, the brother of Jesus. He wasn't even a believer until after the resurrection.

But James is now head of the Church. And after listening, he speaks. He places all that they have heard in the context of Scripture. It is clear that the experience of the Gentiles is actually a fulfillment of Amos: "In that day I will restore the fallen kingdom of David. It is now like a house in ruins, but I will rebuild its walls and restore its former glory. And Israel will possess what is left of Edom and all the nations I have called to be mine. I, the Lord, have spoken, and I will do these things."

And then, notice, they don't take a vote. Spiritual leadership doesn't decide God's will through opinion polls and secret ballots. Spiritual leadership discerns God's direction through Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and then moves to consensus.

And so, after holy conferencing, James speaks for the church. "We will not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God," he says. For grace is enough! In a later verse, James will write up the final decision: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to impose this burden on you." Notice the order of priority. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. There was a high trust level in James. Tradition says that they had a nickname for him. They called him "Old Camel Knees." Apparently, his knees were so hard from constant intercession that they looked like those of a camel. It's easy to

trust a leader like that.

Speaking for the church, James wrote to Antioch, saying, "God's Grace is enough!" With one caveat. Please abstain from eating meat offered to idols, unkosher food, and from fornication and immorality. In other words, please respect the scruples of our tradition. Don't abuse your freedom by intentionally offending others, lest you look more like a pagan than a disciple. And they sent the letter, with representatives from Jerusalem to encourage them. And there was unity and there was joy! In Antioch and in Jerusalem.

Looking from a distance of two thousand years, we should not underestimate how wrenching this conflict would have been for the people involved and how difficult it would have been for them to predict who history would eventually label as the "good guys" and the "bad guys."

God's actions through the Spirit engender new practices among God's people, requiring new understanding, new doctrine, and the ascension of newly significant passages in place of what had long served as established guides.

How often, with good intentions, do we place barriers in the path of those who seek God? Not everyone would agree that God most desires that every person find fullness of life in God. But, perhaps, people might agree with this: regardless of faith tradition, it is easy for us to assume that our ways of bringing people to God are consistent with how God wants us to bring people

to God. Like the circumcisions advocates in Acts, we believe this to be true. Yet, God seems unconstrained by our certainties and sends the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth, sometimes working hard to convince us that our actions hinder rather than help people find their way. Acts makes that point more than once.

Do our churches today put additional requirements on people in order for them to be saved? We are not talking about the transformation and change that comes by the power of the gospel. We expect that the adulterer will stop his adultery and the thief will stop his stealing. Those are moral laws of God. But Paul saw a distinction between that and circumcision. It had more to do with culture and Jewish identity than with Christ.

The big question here is: “What does the gospel look like in a Gentile context? What rules are transferable or negotiable? The process followed by the Jerusalem Council is very useful in finding a way forward in our own situations. There will be adaptation in whatever ethnic or religious culture the gospel goes.

One of the great mistakes made by the Western missionary movement is that they thought that their way of doing things was the right and biblical and only way without realizing that many hundreds of years of their own culture influenced the way they thought and taught. Now, as new nations embrace the gospel, our missionary movement could make the same mistakes again.

The Jerusalem Council helps us understand the difference between the supra-cultural laws of God and cultural norms of our various religious backgrounds. Thank God for what God is willing to do for us in order to demonstrate God's grace in Jesus Christ. As a witness, we need to be willing to share our lives in such a way that we become a connection to others, to draw others to God's love and God's grace - without burdening them with customs or rituals that bring them no closer to salvation. God's grace is for everyone - all nations and all people - with no hoops to jump through. Isn't our God awesome?

Amen.

Prayers of the People for Easter 5 - May 18, 2025

In this Easter season, we celebrate the many gifts which You bestow upon Your people. We also reflect upon the challenging call to live as a new creation given us in Christ's resurrection. Recognizing both the blessing and Your invitation to service with, and for others, in this world You love so dearly, we pray:

God of the universal and living Church, Your apostles were persecuted for their steadfast witness to the power of the gospel. Such suffering continues today in the lives of the faithful around the world who face acts of human cruelty and intolerance. We pray for all who are persecuted for the sake of their faith and political beliefs. Strengthen the work of organizations such as Lutheran World Relief.

God of righteousness, empower us and work through our imperfect and weak-willed lives to be faithful to the promises made in affirming our baptisms. Help us to discern Your will from our own short sighted and selfish desires.

Build up our homes: Where the happy may find peace; The sad may find comfort; The hungry may find food; The weary may find rest. Build up the places where we work: Where the honest may find reward; The dedicated may find delight; The imaginative may find new horizons. Build up our community: Where the isolated may find friendship; The marginalised may find welcome; The unloved may find acceptance.

Build up Your Church, redeeming Lord, so that all Your children may find their place, experience a deep sense of belonging, community, connection and acceptance for who they are, just as they are - unique and special, chosen and essential in contributing to the rich and diverse expressions of Your grace. By Your unlimited grace, may each one know their value, and their significance in Your eyes. We pray Your love and healing presence surround especially individuals who are impacted by harmful and exclusionary attitudes towards them, including homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia.

As we draw closer to You our prayers and thoughts are drawn closer to others. Our

minds turn to images of violence we have seen on the news in places of fear and terror. Violence plagues our world today over race, religion, land, power access to water, to essential natural resources, to economic markets at the expense of the poor: Ukraine and Russia, Israel and Gaza, India and Pakistan and the many conflicts throughout our world: Sudan, Haiti, the West Bank, Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and every country that finds it hard to believe that peace is achievable.

We pray for those who serve in harms way, the medics and first responders, those who live in dangerous places, those who no longer have homes to return to, those who need to be alerted to danger by warning sirens, those who have to find family members and neighbours in the rubble that has replaced their homes and neighbourhoods. May Your grace bring peace and safety to all people. Help them find safe and welcoming places to start their lives anew.

Our thoughts turn to those individuals appointed/ elected or serving in positions of leadership and power – who have difficult and important decisions to make regarding the future, having to consider the increasingly complex geopolitical and economic reality we are living in, and its people whose jobs and livelihood will be affected. We pray for our nation, and its leaders. May changes and choices be shaped by the values of Your eternal kingdom. Help leaders lead with strong hearts, gentle hands and generous spirits, with compassion and mercy, with wisdom and grace. May they reflect Your will guiding all their actions and decisions.

For those who suffer from any illness or dis-ease — of mind, body, or spirit, restore them, to fullness of health — health as only You, O God, can bring. We especially lift up all those who are close to our hearts May Your mercy shower them with ongoing healing, mercy and love.

Hear our prayers for those who are suffering this day — the hungry, those experiencing homelessness or precarious living situations, those gripped by the effects of substance use disorder including alcohol and unsafe street drugs; those who are in prison, those experiencing the effects of mental illness, the lonely and lost. We pray that You would not let our concern pass from our hearts as these words pass from our lips, but rather that You would empower us to do Your work of healing and reconciliation in the lives of those around us.

For those who are dying, and for those who have died. Send forth Your comforting love. Give solace to those who mourn. Console those who grieve. May Your grace surround us like a mantle upon our heads, a shawl upon our shoulders, a loving hand to hold our hand.

We pray for the church that bears Christ's name that the world may know we are his disciples. We pray for Pope Leo XIV as he is inaugurated; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, acting Anglican Primate Anne Germond, the congregations and Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, Bishop Azar and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, Grace Lutheran and South Peace United in Dawson Creek - Rev. Marilyn Carroll (United), Deo Lutheran in Salmon Arm - Rev. Erik Bjorgan, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, and Holy Trinity Lutheran in Port Angeles. Bless the ministry of all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and volunteers.

Mother God, Beloved Christ and Sister Spirit, May the moose hide remind us of our commitment to create and live in a society where Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-LGBTQIA+ individuals experience the freedom to flourish within a healthy society that respects, values and cherishes the human rights and dignity of all people. May we join with others to be a part of Your healing and restoration.

Almighty God, as You made a fearful and disjointed band of disciples into Your holy church, we pray that You would transform us to become more Christ-like, that we, Your body in our world, would serve You in joy and hope and thankfulness all the days of our life together. This and all else that is on our hearts we pray in the name of Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Our Father ...