

# The Jerusalem Council

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     Amen. Amen. Hey, welcome Table Church. It is good to see you pretending that you are a video camera.

It's good to see the worship team who is here in person tonight. It is great to be in this space and to be looking forward to the days where we can gather in person again for worship.

I am stoked. So thanks for tuning in tonight or watching this later, whenever you happen to watch it. We're really excited. My name is Anthony Parrott.

I get to serve as the lead pastor here at the Table Church. And I've done this now for about 14 months, and I am still waiting to teach the bulk of you in person.

So that will be an exciting day whenever that happens. I guess we'll do it 25 people at a time over the next couple weeks. But until then, if you've got a Bible or a phone that has a Bible app, I encourage you to turn it on, flip it open.

[ 1 : 0 6 ]     We are in the book of Acts. We're going to be in the book of Acts chapter 15 tonight. And if you're jumping in with us, we're in the middle of a series called Everybody Gets to Play.

And it's this idea that we believe in the church as followers of Jesus that there is no one excluded from following Jesus, no one excluded from the call to belong to part of God's kingdom, God's family, God's rule and reign here on earth as it is in heaven.

And we believe this is a really important thing to get right because we tend to get this wrong many, many, many times where we get to say everybody like me gets to play.

Everybody who agrees with me gets to play. Everybody who looks like me gets to play. And rather we are looking at the stories of Scripture that say that everybody, everybody, everybody gets to play.

And so we're continuing on in this series in the book of Acts chapter 15. And we've been exploring the book of Luke, the gospel of Luke. And then Luke, the same person who wrote that gospel, also wrote a sequel called the book of Acts.

[ 2 : 1 5 ]     And it's about these first followers of Jesus, the first church, the early church, and their stories of trying to figure out what Jesus had done and what he said and putting it into practice.

Now, if you know anything about the early church, it came out of Israel, Palestine, Judea. It was a Jewish sect. There's a Jewish man named Jesus, and he called Jewish disciples.

And they started this idea that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, come down on earth to redeem Israel.

And Jesus, right before the ascension, says, here's what you're going to do. You're going to tell the good news about the kingdom in Jerusalem. Jerusalem, great. And Judea, okay. And in Samaria, oh no.

And the ends of the earth, oh my dear goodness. Really. And what the book of Acts is, is it's showing that story of those first disciples, those first followers of Jesus, trying to figure out this command of Jesus.

[ 3 : 19 ] We're supposed to tell about God's kingdom, not just to Jerusalem, not just to Judea, our region, but across the border to the people that we don't like, the Sumerians, and across the next border to those Gentiles that previously we weren't supposed to eat with and associate with and do business with, and you want us to tell them that they're part of God's kingdom?

So we see this unfolding story in the book of Acts, this history book of the church, about how they wrestled with these really hard things. So I'm going to read a passage. It's going to be kind of long, so stay with me, and then we'll kind of explain what this is getting at today.

It says in Acts 15, verse 1, it says, Now, if you're looking at a map, and you look at Judea, and you look at Antioch, you would notice that Antioch is north.

But in Jewish thought, if you come from Jerusalem, Jerusalem is on a mountain, and the rest of the world is down. Down the mountain from Jerusalem or Zion to the rest of the world.

So certain people came from Judea down to Antioch, and they were teaching the believers, these first followers of Jesus, look, unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

[ 4 : 35 ] So this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. If you know anything about Paul, you know Paul is a ruckus fellow.

He likes to get in a fight. So they start debating this. Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some other believers to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and the elders about this question.

Now, what is the question? You've got Jews, and the primary bodily marker of being a male Jew is circumcision. If you don't know what circumcision is, use your Google machine, okay?

It's the primary physical marker. Now, more and more non-Jews, a.k.a. Gentiles, people from other nations, are beginning to believe and call on the name of Jesus.

And the question is coming up of, well, they haven't been circumcised. Shouldn't they, if they're going to be part of this Jewish idea about the Messiah coming down to earth?

[ 5 : 35 ] That's the question. So the church sent them on their way, and they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, and they told how the Gentiles had been converted. And this made all the believers very glad.

And so they came to Jerusalem. They were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders to whom they reported everything that God had done through them. And if you read the chapters before, you see these stories.

First of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, which we looked at last week, about a non-Jew, somebody, a Gentile, who is, receives, Jesus is baptized, and gets the Holy Spirit, and you see story after story like this.

So some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees, by the way, Greek word for party, heresy, fun fact, stood up and said, the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.

So the apostles and the elders met to consider this question. This is the first church council. After much discussion, Peter gets up and addresses them, Brothers, you know that some time ago, God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

[ 6 : 41 ] And again, if you go back to the previous chapter of Acts, you see the story of Peter going to a different land and talking to Cornelius, a non-Jew. Cornelius believes in the name of Jesus, receives the Holy Spirit, becomes a Christian.

God did not discriminate between us and them. God knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving them the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. For he purified our hearts by faith.

Now then, I love this verse, verse 10, Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

No, verse 11, we believe, Peter says, it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are. The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling them the signs, wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

When they had finished, James spoke up, Brothers, he said, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. And the words of the prophets are in agreement with this.

[ 7 : 47 ] As it is written, so James quotes the book of Amos, After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it. And then the rest of humankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my names as the Lord, who does these things, things known from long ago.

So James concludes, It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them, telling them to do four things.

Abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

This is the word of the Lord. With thanks be to God. Now, if you're listening to this, you might be wondering, if you're not a Jew, if you are not male, if you are a Gentile, what on earth does this have to do with me?

So think about the story of Scripture and the story of humanity for a while. There is this mission that God has to reconcile all people and all creation to God's self.

[ 9 : 01 ] And God embarks on this mission through the family of Abraham. God goes to Abraham, says, Through you I will bless you, and I will bless all nations through you.

And so the nation of Israel is born, and that's what our Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, is all about, about the stories of how Israel is meant to be a light to the world, a kingdom of priests, to tell the world about the one true God, Yahweh God.

But if you read the story from Genesis through Malachi, or Genesis through Chronicles, if you've got a Hebrew Bible, you might notice that they fail at this quite a bit.

In fact, Ezekiel says that the Israelites have failed in so many ways that they're not telling people about how good and great God is. Rather, they are bringing embarrassment and shame onto Yahweh God.

And so God does not give up on his mission to bring reconciliation to the world, and allows the person of Jesus, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the King, to in him bear the entire nation of Israel's sins and faults, and as well as the sins of the whole world, and through the person of Jesus is able to accomplish the mission to let the world know what God is like, because Christians believe that we know what God is like by looking at Jesus.

[ 10 : 30 ] So Jesus comes, he's died, he is vindicated by his resurrection, and he says, now go and tell everyone that God's kingdom, God's rule and reign has come, has arrived, it's here, and anyone can be a part of it.

Now, I don't know if you know anything about church history, but churches have this interesting habit of always assuming that they're the ones who have discovered the line, the line between, we'll let these people in, but not those people.

And that line a thousand years ago looks different than it did a hundred years ago, looks different than it did 50 years ago, looks different than it did today or yesterday.

But every generation tends to think, seems to think, they're the ones, they got it, they figured it out, we know what the line is between who can be part of God's rule and reign and who cannot be.

And so when Luke puts a story like this in the book of Acts, we're getting a theology by way of story. Theology by way of saying, this is how the first disciples, the early church, dealt with questions like, who can be in and who can be out?

[ 11 : 54 ] Because it's a question that we keep wrestling with and we're going to keep on wrestling with and we need to know, how are we going to handle this question? So that's why we have stories like Acts 15.

Now, our questions are different. We're not asking questions about circumcision. We're not asking questions about Jews and Gentiles. We ask different questions today about who can be in and who can be out, about who's allowed to participate and who's not allowed.

But listen to some of these words that God speaks through the mouths of Peter and James. Like I pointed out earlier, Peter says, he did not discriminate between us and them.

So why are you trying to test God by putting on the necks of these disciples a yoke that no one was able to bear before? There's an interesting idea here that Peter is saying, if all of these lines drawn in the sand from before times didn't work, why do we think they're going to work today?

If God did not discriminate then, why do we think God's going to start discriminating now? If we are going to think that we've got to figure it out, the line of who is in and who is out, Peter says, you are putting God to the test.

[ 13 : 16 ] Which is, you know, pretty high claim. Something to take pretty seriously. No, Peter makes it clear. We believe it's through grace that we're saved. Not by physical markers, not by what's going on with, you know, our, in this case, genitalia.

Not by what's going on with, like, our bodies or what we look like or don't look like. No, we're saved by grace. James makes it even more clear in verse 19.

It's my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult. For Gentiles, and you can put in that word anything you want, anybody. We should not make it difficult for people to turn to God.

Now, again, I don't have to spell out the history of the church to know about how difficult we've made it sometimes for folks to turn to God.

And the church has a lot to repent of, a lot to be sorry for. But repentance isn't merely just feeling bad for the history. It's about changing our future.

[ 14 : 22 ] It's not merely feeling guilty about things that happened in the past. It's about changing the way that we're going to behave and act today as a church, about the lines that we draw or that we don't draw.

Instead, we should write to them, James says, telling them about these certain things. Now, this is what I notice here in this passage. I notice that inclusion, hospitality, the action of letting people be a part of the community, takes work.

It doesn't happen automatically. It takes effort. Inclusion can sound really nice as like a statement to put on a website or a statement to put on a belief page or something that you just want to say as like a slogan of like, oh, we're a very inclusive community.

But if you don't actually take the actions to make sure that those that you are including feel welcome, feel like they are a part, then it's just words.

Now, if you are the ones who are doing the including, the includers, James says, should not make it difficult. This is why we have conversations today about accessibility, about what are we going to do to not just make room for people, but actually remake the room for people.

[ 15 : 39 ] Not just make space, but remake the space so that everyone can get to play. And we can have this conversation at any level you want.

We can talk about it in terms of disability or sexuality or gender or belief and so on. But it's not just about making room because that kind of implies that like, well, I'll shuffle a little bit over here, but don't inconvenience me too much.

No, it's not about making room. It's about remaking the room. So if you're the one doing the including, think through your actions. Think through your space.

Think through your words. Think through your actions and your ideas of am I making this a place online, virtual, physical place where everybody can feel welcome.

But there's this other idea of work, and this is a finer needle for me to thread as a preacher because I have an idea of who I'm preaching to. And a lot of you have been the ones who have been excluded for one reason or another.

[ 16 : 47 ] And so I want you to know that as I talk about this next point, you who have felt exclusion or being marginalized, I want you to know that I'm aware of that, okay? So just know that I know, okay?

Here's my second point. The included, those who have been left out and who are brought in should respect the includers. Listen to what James says.

James says, we should write to them, telling them to abstain from these things. Why? Isn't this just legalism 2.0? Isn't this just a new way of drawing lines of who's in and who's out?

Well, no, think about it for a second. You've got the Jewish people, people like James, people like Peter, people like Paul who have suffered and been marginalized themselves because of their belief in one God.

They were this weird backwater religion in the perspective of the Romans and the Greeks. And so the Jews suffered much humiliation.

[ 17 : 50 ] Let's go to the topic of circumcision for a moment. Circumcision, I'm sorry, if you haven't had a chance to Google it yet, is the removal of the foreskin from the penis. Okay, we're all adults, at least in this room.

Sorry, kids. And the Greeks and the Romans thought this was a slightly barbaric way of acting, and it was not legalism to the Jews. This was the primary identity marker of knowing who God's people were.

So the Greeks and the Romans, at times, would persecute the Jewish people by, I can't believe I'm saying these words out loud, a circumcision reversal process. Yeah, think about that.

So for the Jews, for them to say, we're going to let anybody in. Well, remember, Jews have died because of this belief.

They were willing to be crucified or beheaded or die in a brutal, bloody war because of what they believed God had called them to do.

[ 18 : 48 ] So getting rid of this restriction wasn't just about like a bunch of legalistic people not being so legalistic anymore. No, it was about rethinking what it means to be part of God's people. So James says to these Gentiles, look, we believe, we know, God has invited you to be a part of God's community, but you don't need to flaunt it to a bunch of people who have suffered and died that we're letting you in, that you're a part of what God is doing.

So these four things, food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and from blood, those four things specifically are what you would do if you were to go to a pagan temple.

That's what's being said no to. Anybody can be a part of the community, but if you're going to be part of the community, that means there are some things that we're going to say, no, not here, you won't.

The freedom of being part of the community is not the freedom to go around and defend everybody you possibly can. The freedom of being part of God's people, the freedom of being part of God's growing community of reconciliation and reconcilers here on earth as it is in heaven doesn't mean that we therefore use our freedom to flaunt it in front of everybody else.

Being part of a community is about some promise keeping to one another, about saying, I see you and I respect you and there are some things I'm not going to do because I know it will hurt you.

[ 20 : 20 ] When community fails to do that, well, that's not community anymore. That's just a bunch of individuals elbowing each other in a room. Who wants that? So, the includers, don't make it difficult.

Think about the space. Think about the room. Think about the words. Think about the actions. Don't make it difficult for people to be part of the community and those who are being included, and that's all of us, friends.

We have to have this idea of what our freedom is for. Our freedom is, Paul says in Philippians chapter 2, is to be able to honor those as if they were better than us.

To respect others as if they deserved that respect. To think of others more highly than ourselves. And this is an ongoing, continual work.

We as a church, the table church here in D.C., Virginia, Maryland, online, we continue to figure this out.

[ 21 : 27 ] Of what is it to continue to welcome in those who have been excluded? To continue to be a place that is safe and homey and warm and friendly and kind and encouraging and growth-oriented.

How do we continue to do that? And how do we continue to sharpen each other and to respect each other and to encourage each other and to say, hey, can you please stop that because that hurts my friend or that hurts me or that hurts the person across the street?

That's a continual work that we have to lean into and say, even when it gets weird and tense and awkward, we're not going to give up. That's what I see when I see a church like Acts 15 that says, we're not going to test God by making a whole bunch of barriers that no one was able to live by before.

That's putting ourselves in place of God. And we're going to respect each other by listening to each other, paying attention to each other and remaking the room so that everybody gets to play.

Thank you.