

The Action Taken Acts 15:22-24

We have been looking at the council of Jerusalem and the debate that has taken place of what really constitutes a believer in Jesus Christ. Who does God accept and on what grounds? Are we justified by grace alone through Christ alone through simple faith alone, or is there something else that needs to be done? And the decision that the church, and the apostles and leaders come to is that a person is justified by grace alone. There is nothing else that needs to be done. The middle wall of partition that separated Jews and Gentiles has been taken down, removed by the blood of Christ. And salvation is open to all through faith in Christ.

No doubt there seems to be a sense of unity on this matter in the church and agreement as far as the nature of salvation, and you can really see that in the action the council and the church took next. And the action was basically two-fold. One was to send delegates from their church — Jewish believers who could express to the Gentile believers their oneness in Jesus Christ. The other thing was to send a letter. And the words and the composition of this letter that has apostolic authority behind. It is just so masterful in its tacked and beauty and desire to have the church one, unified, and in agreement as far as the nature of salvation.

Let me just say that the church has entered into debates and discord and divisiveness that it ought not to have entered in. We can see debates and discord in our personal lives. In many people's lives it is constant battles and drama, a rollercoaster of emotion. They say they hate the drama but at the same time they seem to be drawn to the next battle. They are armed with their hostilities and anger in their relationships and in churches. And it can be so exhausting. One church ended up splitting because the pastor removed the piano off the platform. People argue and fight about what colour paint should be on the walls. Couples fight and wound one another constantly. They do not know how to communicate with throwing a verbal grenade at one another. And somehow they think it is going to help. We are drawn so many times to conflict, and we end up doing so much harm to the cause of Christ — his reputation, but also end up wounding so many people in the process. We say it is about truth, righteousness and the cross, but really it is more about us and our little kingdom. And what battles are you pursuing in your life? Are they really that big of a deal? Do you see the major problem might not be others but your own heart?

Now here is the problem, we are dealing with sinners in the midst of sanctification, and the weariness of being in the midst of battles and disagreements can cause us to seek peace at any cost. But there are some battles that are worth our effort and we must enter into. The cost is just too great not to enter. And can you think of any greater battle that we need to enter into than the battle for the gospel of Jesus Christ? There will always be wolves in sheep's clothing trying to subvert the very people of God away from Jesus Christ. Again, to be silent is the most unloving and I think in the end the most divisive thing we can do. None other than the eternity of individuals is on the line, and the glory of our Lord and Saviour. We often choose our battles very poorly, and we therefore conclude that we should never battle but such is not the case.

And we can see that here when the delegation came from Antioch to Jerusalem. It was from Jerusalem that certain men were coming and teaching the need to be circumcised if you wanted to be saved, in other words, you had to become a Jew. The stakes were too high to let this go. Too many were getting confused so they defended the glory of Christ. And folks it is in this gospel where we cannot be moved. And we saw the conclusion that they came to through the words of James, but they go further and that is to clarify their decision. And that is what I want to begin to look at this morning.

This really is a great template of how to handle and truly defend the truth in such a way where the gospel and Jesus Christ are preeminent. It is warmhearted and it leaves no doubt where they stand. And it is through texts like these that we learn how to defend the gospel of Christ and even how we should enter conflicts. There is a joy and there is a warmth in this letter but there is also truth. There is loving honesty. Both those attributes. So often someone can be speaking the truth but it is more about them. It is void of love and care for the other or for the glory of Christ. There is not an expense of one or the other. Sometimes there is either anger or there is the goal to pacify at all costs. Where is God calling you not only to enter conflict but to come with loving honesty? You see a wonderful balance and Christlikeness here. So I want us to see a couple of things in this text that I hope will help us defend the gospel in such a way where Christ is honoured.

1. First, in defending the truth action has to be taken. Vv. 22-23.

Often we look at problems and difficulties, and it seems we fight about things we shouldn't fight about. You see this in marriage. Every issue is explosive, and every issue has self at its centre. But on the other side, we do not take up those battles that we should. We might hope that they just go away. If we just leave enough time then they will correct themselves. We do not have the loving honesty to approach others in the humility of Christ, so we would rather stick our heads in the sand, or wait to be explode. And when it comes to false teaching in the church, if it is given room, it just seems to fester and take a greater hold. And therefore a defence has to be made and action has to be taken. And there needs to be boldness and that boldness is always done in love and grace. There needs to be clarity in what the scriptures teach and what we believe. And this is what they sought — loving clarity. They sought to convey that clarity to these Gentile believers. As a church and individuals we always want to give clarity of what the Scriptures teach and also what the Scriptures do not teach.

So look at verse 22, **“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers.”** Now this action that they are taking “seemed good to the apostles and elders.” Remember the apostles are given by Christ to lay the foundation of the church of Jesus Christ, so this action has apostolic authority behind it. But also the elders or pastors at Jerusalem along with the whole congregation decided to participate in this action. And the whole church might have included even the Pharisaical party. They might have saw their error and sought to correct their faulty understanding of the gospel of Christ. Let me say to admit you are wrong about anything takes humility, but something like this is such a great sign of Jesus Christ

working in the heart and life. It is such grace to admit what God says about us that we are sinners. We need to approach one another with loving and gentle honesty, but on the other end have the humility where we can be approached, where we listen to others, that we are willing to see sin and change. This is what seemed to take place in the Pharisaical believers.

Paul and Barnabas now head back to Antioch, which as we mentioned before has become the hub of outreach to the Gentile world. But the church would send two of their own, and these men were Barsabbas and Silas. Silas we will learn more about later. He will accompany Paul on his second missionary journey. We know nothing of Barsabbas, but he is a leader in the church, and both are identified as prophets, who taught revelation given by God and also would have instructed others in the Scriptures. So these men would accurately carry the message of the council and convey the true meaning of the Gospel and also the heartbeat and intentions of the church at Jerusalem. There is such wisdom in sending these men, and having different godly men teach the same message and the same gospel truths. Think of the plethora of teachers we have in the church and even outside the church that give us a greater assurance as they point us back to these glorious truths of Jesus Christ crucified.

So they send these delegates, and the message they bring is strengthened by the letter they send. Look at verse 23, **“with the following letter: ‘The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.’**” Now there are three parts to this opening introduction which are common in ancient correspondence. They are, first of all the authors of the letter. Again, this letter has the authority of the apostles behind it. Second are the recipients - these churches in these cities and areas who are Gentile in origin. This was a cyclical letter that would be shared as these men went from church to church. And the third point is there is a customary greeting, which was basically a well wish for those who were addressed in the letter.

But the one thing I want us to see and stress is that this is from a Jewish church in Jerusalem. Because of its geography it would have no Gentile members, and they are writing to these churches in which the majority would be non-Jews or Gentiles. And notice the warmth here because the direction of the letter is right here in the opening. “The brothers” writing to “to the brothers.” Don’t you love that! There is a recognition of a couple of things. One is that they have equal standing before God. They accepted by God through the merits of Christ just like they are. They really have accepted the mystery that Paul talked about in Ephesians 3:6, **“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”** All the promises are theirs and all the promises are ours through the Lord Jesus Christ. Often we never consider this simpler fact with those we are in conflict with — they are accepted by God. Yes, their lives are not perfect, but if God accepts them we ought also, therefore we work for reconciliation.

But the second thing is they are “brothers.” They not only have the same standing but they are of the same family. They are not two people but they are one people. If you understand what a Christian is then you understand what joins us together and what also separates us from others. Here there is such a warmth in the gospel. And that truth never gets old. There is such a unity among those who are in

Christ. It is incredible the things that separate people, put walls between them. It could be race, culture, age, education, income, politics or whatever — the list could go on. And I never tire of seeing the people of God come together unified around our common salvation and realize this is a work of God. Because of our natural and sinful bias we should not be together, and we not only profess the same salvation but we are united together in such closeness that the only thing that can convey that closeness is family language. This would have been such an exciting and exhilarating opening greeting to the letter to these Gentiles. They are not outside or second-class Christians, but brothers in the faith of Christ.

And doesn't that thrill your heart that you are a full member in the family of God — the household of faith? I mean when you look at our sin and arrogance and even the biases we had outside of Christ, but now we are in Christ, it should cause us to love the Christ of the gospel. So there are a couple of things to see here. Maybe, you are young in the faith and you look at the lives of others, and feel inadequate. Let me say as clear as possible, welcome home. You belong. If you have trusted Jesus then you have the same standing as every other believer. You belong. You are in the same family. Live out that family life. And secondly, based on all of us being of the same family, we should be the most forgiving and welcoming people on planet earth. So many struggle with an unforgiving heart. And everyone else is the problem. Yes, things need to be talked about, yes changes need to be made. But is your heart really oriented toward Christ or self in all the conflicts in your life? It celebrates that he can save out of every tribe and background. Praise God for the glory of his grace. This gospel unifies us as one. The congregation at Jerusalem took action to express the truth of the gospel.

That is the positive side. We welcome those who are in the faith. But there is a negative side of those who would preach some other gospel, which is not a gospel. That needs to be addressed. There is no true unity in a false gospel.

2. We need to see the problem addressed and addressed openly. V. 24

Those who are teachers and pastors and leaders in the church have to realize the spiritual dangers that are evident, and even in the wider area of the Christianity, and seek to protect the flock. And the most difficult kind of error that is out there is the error that seeks to integrate some truth with error. People see the truth but some times find it difficult to see the error. Let me give you an example. Christ suffered so you do not have to. Is that statement true? Well, Christ died and he died for us. And we realize that he expunged the wrath of God or the penalty for my sin forevermore, so ya, Christ suffered so I don't have to. I will be forever with him. But the subtlety is that is most often a phrase that is used by those who preach another gospel. It is in Jesus that you can have heaven now. If you just trust in him then you don't have to suffer whether it is healthy wise or financial or relational. Just trust in him.

Now think of how enticing and convincing that statement is. Also, throw in some Old Testament promises given to the nation of Israel of material prosperity if they obeyed God, and there you have it. It is a theology that integrates mystical philosophy with Scriptures. It combines them both. But it is not Christian and it is not the gospel.

Now here is the question — what happens if that theology and teaching is allowed to continue in the church? The outcome is disastrous and rather than helpful, it actually destroys lives. It confuses our very relationship with Christ. And that is the

problem in these Gentile churches. There is so much chapter and verse but they are confusing or integrating things that Christ came to fulfill with the actual fulfillment found in Christ. So with this in mind, think through the verse one more time, **“Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions.”** The letter indicates that some have gone out from Jerusalem, and maybe it was very easy to have these views in the church of Jerusalem because there were no non-Jews and therefore they might never be challenged. But listen to their teaching does — “trouble you with words.” The word “trouble” here has the meaning of inward turmoil, and notice how this occurred. It occurred through words or through the teaching of those who came from Jerusalem. They unsettle others rather than give them peace. And the second phrase, “unsettling your minds.” The meaning is confusion. This is not the gospel preached in our church, yet these individuals are representatives of the church at Jerusalem, and isn’t that where the church and the gospel originated?

Think of it, because this confusion and disturbing just doesn’t take place on a church level when others try to bring another gospel, but even in our own hearts on a relational level with others we are in conflict. I can say I believe the gospel of Christ but in the midst of conflict preach another gospel. In marriage you can think your greatest obstacle is your spouse. You are righteous. They need to change, so you fight and bicker and seek to change them through the power of your words. You feel troubled and unsettled in your mind. Why? Because you are believing a false gospel. James 4:1-2, **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.”** If you cannot treat someone with love and respect, then the problem is not with them but you. You have forgotten what the gospel says — sinner, proud, foolish, but God is a wonderful forgiving God who gives grace.

And notice how we ends that verse, **“although we gave them no instructions.”** Yes, they were from here, but they were never authorized representatives of the church or the beliefs of the church. Now why is that so important that they stated that? And the reason why is there is a demarcation between what is right and what is wrong, what is truth and what is error, what is gospel and what is false. Although they may say this is what the church believes they had no right. They are not our representatives. There needs to be a distance from those who preach a false message. Again, they may use many of the terms that are biblical but what do they mean? For the welfare and benefit of others and for the clear testimony of Christ there needs to be that clear line of separation between a false gospel and the true gospel.

Paul is talking about those who require circumcision as a requirement for salvation when he pens Galatians, and listen to what he writes in Galatians 1:6-9, **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let**

him be accursed.” Notice there are “some who trouble you.” The same word here of those who came from Jerusalem. They unsettled you. But he makes a clear demarcation between truth and error, and says the people of God are to have nothing to do with a false gospel that is no gospel. And it doesn’t matter if they are from Jerusalem or one of the apostles or even an angel himself — let him be accursed.

And think of it because the purveyors of a false gospel are always accusing those who are true believers often of dividing the body of Christ by those who condemn them or warn others of their false gospel. But here is the thing — they are the ones who are trying to divide the body of Christ, because the thing that unites us is the gospel — it is our trust in Christ and that he has come to deliver us from the eternal judgment of God. All other gospels are false gospels that need to be condemned and warned about and separated from. I can remember I got a call to join in on an evangelistic endeavour in town. I asked who was involved, and the Catholic Church was heavily involved. I asked if these were believers? He said yes. I then said what if they believe you are saved by Christ and also their good works? There was nothing said at that time. I told him we could not participate because we need to distance ourselves and separate from false messages of a false hope of a false way. He wrote me a sarcastic email, but this is exactly what Paul instructed, and even what the church at Jerusalem is seeking to do through this letter.

Now there are some battles that we have to enter into. And can you think of any more necessary battle than defending the gospel of Christ? I know many separate and shoot their brothers and sisters over every little nuance and every little difference, whether end times, or versions that people use, or music or worship styles, or whatever. But the gospel of Christ is something that we are called to protect as individuals and as a church. So what should our response be? One of gratitude when we hear the glorious and breathtaking gospel of Christ. Celebrate that he has really done it all. The more that we learn and meditate on the true gospel that we have been saved from the forever wrath of God and brought close to our great God forever, the more it creates a love for Christ and others. But it should also create a passion in us to hear truth. Ongoing conflict has the potential the more it festers in us to cause a dullness of hearing because we are drawn to another gospel in our own hearts. We want to protect the gospel given and pass it on to future generations until his coming. After all this is God’s gospel. It is what he has done to save wretched sinners like us. How could we ever dare to change any of that blessed message. It is his message for his glory.