

**Sermon Notes of
Pastor Craig Kuhlman's Sermon on January 24, 2021:**

**"Transformation of the Early Church Series on
The Book of Acts – The Jerusalem Council
(Acts 15:1 – 16:5 (Part 15))"**

[In today's sermon, Pastor Craig Kuhlman on Zoom shows us how the Holy Spirit was intimately involved in the early church bringing change and greater unity which brought about encouragement and strength.]

Introduction:

- Paul and Barnabas have come back to Jerusalem from their first missionary trip to where there are issues going on.
- And what we'll see is that the Holy Spirit doesn't prevent issues from arising in the church but works through them.
- In working through issues, we first start with what God is doing and then go and interpret scripture.

- In the past, we used only scripture to interpret actions.
- But now when the Jerusalem Council got together, they first looked at what the Holy Spirit was doing in the church and then from there they went and interpreted scripture, because there have been major changes occurring due to God's actions.
- And this gives us a good example that when we now face decisions in our church, that we do it in a similar fashion of coming together and discuss things.

Reviewing Transformative Vision Anchors for 2021 (1/3/21 - Acts 11:19-12:25):

1. Remain true to the Lord with all of our heart.
2. As we are able, live generously. (This is one of the hallmarks of the family of God.)
3. Remain earnest in prayer to God for protection and political tension.
4. Sleep well, and be at peace with our health and even death knowing God is in control what we can't control.
5. Place our trust in God (not self) to address political unrest and tension.

Overview outline of today's message:

1. The point at issue (15:1-4)
2. The debate in Jerusalem (verses 5-21)
 - a. Peter (verses 7-11)
 - b. Paul and Barnabas (verse 12)
 - c. James (verses 13-21)
3. The Council's letter (verses 22-29)
4. The Council's decision is shared (15:30-16:5)
5. Lessons

Poetic Preview of today's message – Pastor Craig's rhyming verses:

*Now in Antioch arose false Teaching,
Law of Moses, circumcision for salvation they're Preaching.
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Traveling to Jerusalem, sharing good news along the Way.*

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Four standards were given they claimed so Bold.
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The leaders then gathered and drafted a Letter,
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John Mark was criticized for disloyalty to All.*

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Paul took him on his travels helping Greeks to Abide.
Decisions from Jerusalem, shared from town to Town,
Churches strengthened in faith and the numbers Abound.*

Acts 15:1 (NIV), 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.”

- Scholars suggest that this event occurred around 47 AD.
- This Jerusalem Council set the format for the other councils that came later in the New Testament church such as the Council of Nicaea, the Counsel of Chalcedon, etc.
- Their format was to bring the leaders together to discuss and share what they've witnessed and experienced as to what the Holy Spirit has been doing, which transformed the church.
- When we go through experiences in life, we're transformed as well.
- We need to realize that the church is a church of community not isolated individuals.

- What's also so interesting is that Peter was the one whom God used to introduce Gentiles into the Christian faith through Cornelius and his family.
- And yet Peter was swayed by this Old Covenant teaching.
- This occurrence is known as a watershed for the early church because the leaders had to deal with things that could have gotten out of hand.
- The people that this chapter talks about were called Judaizers.
- For about 10 years now, since Cornelius and his family became Christian, many Gentiles have come into the church.
- And so, some of the Jewish Christians believed that the Gentile Christians had to adopt standards that the Jewish Christians were still maintaining.
- However, these Jewish customs could not be used as standards to define salvation, as Paul declared here.
- Justification could not come about by observing the Old Testament law.
- These Judaizers were trying to create a faith plus, a grace plus kind of religion.

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. 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.

- These verses show that God is including all people into His family not just the Jewish community.
- James, the brother of Jesus, was the lead elder of the church of Jerusalem.
- The Judaizers, when going to Antioch, told the believers that this is what James was teaching in Jerusalem, which was not true.

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." 6) The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

- With this happening, there is now disunity among the believers going on

7) After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed 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. 8) God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9) He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10) Now then, 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? 11) No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

- Here, Peter has become involved in the church over this issue.
- There is so much history in the Old Testament that shows how the law could not be practiced faithfully or consistently nor did the keeping of the law bear spiritual fruit.
- Yet, the Judaizers wanted the Gentiles to begin keeping the law of Moses.

- Peter's statement makes it pretty clear the distinction between law and grace.

12) The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

- Next Paul and Barnabas showed what the Holy Spirit was doing and His actions were much different than what people thought the scriptures said.
- So, people have been given a new lens and should take God's actions to help them interpret scripture.
- Remember that Luke has shown us throughout the book of Acts that these "signs and wonders" were always done with the outcome that Gentiles became believers.

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:

- James quotes from Amos, one of the Minor Prophets.

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.

- Now, as we go back and reinterpret the Old Covenant with the New Covenant lens, or see the scriptures through the eyes of Jesus, we see that God had a plan of inclusion of all mankind all along.
- It was never intended by God that it would only be Israel alone.
- James is taking the book of Amos and showing that even from the prophets we see that Gentiles were intended to be included by God.

19) "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20) Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21) For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

- James is declaring that what Peter and Paul had said was correct – the Gentiles wouldn't to follow Jewish customs.
- So then, James gives the Gentile Christians four abstinence practices, which were affecting fellowship of Christians especially when they ate together, which was a very common practice among the early Christians.

22) Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. 23) With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

24) We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25) So we all agreed to choose some men

and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – 26) men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27) Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28) It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29) You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

- The Spirit of the Spirit is not to force us or to burden us with demands.
- The Holy Spirit is a spirit of family and unity.
- These four points we given as guidance and direction to bring people together.

30) So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31) The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

- So, when the Holy Spirit is directing things, we always see an encouraging and positive outcome.
- And so the people were lifted up.
- Unity was the key hallmark of the church.

32) Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. 33) After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. 35) But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

- Paul and Barnabas stayed round the area and continued to encourage the members by their preaching.

36) Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” 37) Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38) but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39) They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40) but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. 41) He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- Paul took this disagreement that John Mark had more seriously than Barnabas, who was related to John Mark.
- So, even though Paula and Barnabas didn’t agree on everything, they still proceeded and did God’s work.

Acts 16:1 (NIV), Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. 2) The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3) Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

- Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? He did this to have acceptance by the Jewish Christians here.
- Paul, who dramatically said Gentile believers didn't have to be circumcised, evaluated the situation in this area and did otherwise to help the area unit.
- It was good that Timothy would be accepted by the Jewish Christians.
- And it was also good for Timothy to then accompany Paul on his missionary travels.
- So, it's not the specific practice that is either good or bad, but it's how that practice is applied and who the audience is.
- How we interpret scripture is not always black or white, but many times there is gray involved.
- This takes discernment, which Paul shows us.

4) As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5) So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

- The Holy Spirit is always involved and brings about change that is needed.
- We also discern that the church leaders should work together and have discussions and even debates which will ultimately reveal what the Holy Spirit intends.
- Church unity is based on coming together and talking about things, which will bring encouragement and strength, which then solidifies the church.

Poetic Summary of today's message: (Let's say this together):

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Closing prayer: