

Acts 15:22-35: First Pilgrimage to Jerusalem II: Jerusalem Council II

Introduction:

Well, People of God! Last week we looked the first part of what's called "The Jerusalem Council." We talked about the decision-making process of consensus that took place as the early Church, Gentile & Jewish, tried to figure out together just how Jewish believing Gentiles had to become if they were going to become God's People.

And it was a more deliberate message than usual. We walked through each stage of action in the scene. That's okay, because the process of consensus is deliberate.

And we said that the goal of the process of consensus is to experience that same mix of blessing that ends the Jerusalem Council's decision. There's a strong sense of God's confirmation of the decision (Acts 15:28), a sense of delight in those who heard it (Acts 15:31), encouragement is given and received (Acts 15:32), and ultimately, the Good News about Jesus goes out because of it (Acts 15:35).

What was a matter of question was decided, and as a result, people were free to move forward.

Today we're going to talk about the decision that the Jerusalem Council came to. If last week was about process, today is about outcome. It's a, oh, weird passage to talk about, but I think we can do it. First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Results!

Things start this way:

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.

So the troop troops out. We read, "With them they sent the following letter."

We'll pay close attention to the letter, because it's the

decision the Church has peaceably come to. First, the introduction!

This is how the letter starts:

The Decision: Intro

***The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and
Cilicia:
Greetings.***

And I'd point out: The early Church was part of a patriarchal, male-dominated society. Translating this as "brothers" isn't terrible, because it was, it seems, men who sent these "brothers" along. But there were "sisters" in the Jerusalem Church, too, and we can't forget it was wealthy women who paid for Jesus' ministry. Much like "hermanos" in Spanish can mean a mixed group of men and women, often the NIV will translate the Greek "anthropon" as "brothers and sisters." Here, they don't. I guess it's fine.

Because the point is made: This Jerusalem church, which could claim superiority wants Antioch to see that they see themselves as their equals, not their

superiors. They acknowledge that Antioch is the center of the Gentile part of the Church. Antioch was in Syria; Cilicia was the southern part of Turkey, the northern coast of the Mediterranean. Tarsus, where Saul was from, was there. Jerusalem is trying to let all the Gentiles know: We're equal to you, your siblings in God's family.

The Decision: Rehash

And then, in their letter, they rehash what's happened so far. Jerusalem reminds Antioch and the rest that there was no institutional backing of the people who messed with their joy. They write this:

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.

Okay, right? Straightforward. They don't want Antioch to be troubled anymore. They're dispatching agents

who are like Barnabas and Paul as witnesses to the truth, against the anxiety-inducing lies the others came with.

And this is all as important as their actual decision. They want Antioch to see that they mean them no harm. It's important, because the Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem Church are going to present some limits. They are going to say that there are things the Gentiles have to do. They don't have to be circumcised, they certainly don't have to keep Torah perfectly, which not even the Jewish believers were able to accomplish, but to be a part of this new People that God is making, this new way of being human, is to make some behavioral commitments.

The Decision: The List!

They write:

28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

And again, we're drawn back to the consensus process we talked about last week. Their agreement, together, and their mutual submission is the sign, for them all,

that the Holy Spirit was behind this. We realize, too, that whatever we're about to read, they don't see this as a burden.

They list things:

***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.

What's it all mean?

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols,
from blood,
from the meat of strangled animals
and from sexual immorality.

Ultimate Why?

Let me just say at the outside. These all have to do with ensuring that the Jewish Church, which has slid into this new, Jesus-centered way of being God's People with their own broad cultural stuff intact, can

fellowship with the Gentile Church, which has its own baggage, depending on what cultural assumptions they come to Christ with.

And while there were clearly different ways of being Jewish in the ancient world, just like there are different ways of being a Gentile in the ancient world, there were some broadly acceptable no-no's, things that, if the Gentiles did them, it would have so deeply disturbed their Jewish brothers and sisters that fellowship would have been impossible. These things would have been alienating and disruptive.

So what we're reading here is a list that will ensure the Church can stay together, despite the radical different cultural backgrounds. These are protections for fellowship. These admonitions are about ensuring these two very culturally different groups can be one as they are meant to be. They're also, as we'll see, about recognizing God as God, and people as created and dependent upon God.

Two things: Fellowship and recognizing God. Let's look at each in particular.

Particular Why?

Food Sacrificed to Idols:

The Gentiles shouldn't eat food sacrificed to idols.

And this makes sense.

Jewish people, Christian or not, can't eat food sacrificed to idols. To do that is, as far as they are concerned, to take part in idol worship, in worship of false, pagan gods. There's no way around this. Yahweh-centered Monotheism was fundamental to Jewish identity. There was one God, and that God had chosen Abraham, so that the whole world might be blessed, and created through Abraham a whole people for Himself. Fitting Jesus and the Spirit into this monotheistic worldview was the major theological work of the early Church.

But this meant and means that all those other gods that all the people around the Jewish people worshipped weren't gods at all. At best, they were nothing, at worst, antagonistic spiritual beings, demons and the enemies of God's people. And the Gentile world was full, full, full of alternatives to God, idol nothing-gods that were worshipped. It still is. Not metaphorically, the way, oh, consumerism can be an idol, but literally.

As the Church has spread throughout the world, it has always spread into regions where people worship idol-gods other than God the Father, the Son, and Spirit. And in societies and cultures that are inundated with these idol-gods, this advice still matters deeply. Food sacrificed to idols made up, in the Gentile world of the early Church, and makes up in places right now in the world, the main source of meat in the market. To eat that meat in front of non-Christians, who believe the god it was sacrificed to is real, is to legitimize the idol. Paul will treat this topic at length in Corinthians.

And what Paul acknowledges there is that while some Christians realize the meat is just meat, some Christians don't. They feel to eat it is to join in worshipping the false god. It's not totally clear that he's talking about Jewish Christians, but his principle applies: Don't do anything that will cause the other person you're eating with to feel like they're sinning. Be conscientious about their crises of conscience. That principle underlies this situation: The Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians can't eat a meal together if the meat on their plate comes from an idol-sacrificed animal.

The principle is one of cultural sensitivity, and frankly cultural accommodation, but accommodating yourself to the cultural norms of the other, of the person in front of you. This is a big ask of the Gentile Church, because a huge amount of their reasonably priced meat comes from market stalls that idol temples run.

So: Don't eat meat sacrificed to idols. It's not because the idols are anything, it's not, as Paul will point out later as he writes to a Gentile congregation, it's not because you're taking part in worship of idols, but if you do this, you'll never be able to eat with your Jewish brother or sister who simply can't get past this deeply ingrained part of their cultural identity. Respect that this is too much for them. Keeping the Church together is worth your restraint. There can't be a Jewish and Gentile unified Church, at least one that eats together, which is at the heart of fellowship and even worship, if the Gentiles ignore this. To abstain from meat sacrificed to idols has to do with both fellowship and a recognition of who God is.

We in America basically ignore this entirely, because it doesn't really feel relevant. You could make some complex argument that factory-farming has something to do with worshipping the idol of consumerism, but

it'd be convoluted and metaphorical at best. Brothers and sisters in India and Pakistan and Asian countries have to deal with the question of whether or not to eat meat really sacrificed to idols every day. I don't know what choices they make, but those are probably as contextual as Paul implies they're allowed to be.

Particular Why?

Blood & Strangled-animal Meat:

Antioch is told to abstain from "blood" and "strangled-animal meat." And again this has to do with both fellowship, and a recognition of who God is.

God is the giver of life. And blood is fundamental to life. You can't really have life without blood. Just as without the "breath" or "wind" or "spirit" of God that we read about in the Bible nothing can live, neither can anything live without blood.

And Jewish thought considered blood sacred because of this. Sacred in the most literal way: Set apart for God to control, just like life was under God's control.

We tend to think of ancients as toddlers, who didn't know anything about anything, and were just completely unscientific. But they weren't dummies; they know that if you have no blood, you die. Life was

blood. And so: You can't consume it. That's stealing life, taking on some role in the world that you're not allowed to take on.

And in the world around Israel there were cults and religions built around practices that treated blood like a magic potion, something you could drink and then be magically sustained, too. When we think, "Ew. Gross. Drinking blood is for like, vampires." It's exactly right on. This is why vampires, which are fictional, are so bad, you know? They were made-up in a Christian environment, which knew about this admonition. And they stole life from people that way. Bad. Don't drink blood. As far as Jewish thinking goes, it's an attempt to steal life, trick God.

And if you kill an animal to eat it by strangulation, the animal's capillaries and veins will burst, flooding the body with blood. These two admonitions are tied together, and both have to do with ensuring that the Gentiles don't consume blood. Ancient rules in Leviticus and Deuteronomy speak to this concern (Hans Bietenhard, "Πνίγω, Ἀποπνίγω, Συμπνίγω, Πνικτός," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 457.).

Here's what I find so interesting about these two things. Over time, the Church stopped caring about the "blood and meat from strangled animals" part of this letter. At least, let's say, the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant church. You'll meet strong, deeply faithful Christians who love rare meat, and steak tartare, and blood-sausage. In societies where there is magical thinking about blood, still, this admonition is generally followed. But most of the Christians you and I will meet don't even think about this.

They lean on things that Jesus said before this, how what we eat doesn't defile us, which Mark comments on by writing, "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean." They point to Peter's vision just a few chapters before, in which God says all the unclean food Peter eats is clean. They'll lift up Paul's letter to the Corinthians as a way to highlight this. These aren't small bits of data to ignore.

And I think, although if this comes from anywhere other than me, it's from something I've read so long ago I don't remember it, I think that the Church decided to emphasize Peter's experience and Paul and Jesus' words, rather than this letter the Spirit has

helped create, is for a couple of reasons.

First, for much of history the Church antagonized and persecuted those who were ethnically Jewish. When Jerusalem fell in 70 AD, and the Jewish Christians were scattered or killed, the Church by and large lost its Jewish heritage. And later the Church came to reject it, seeing Jewish people as the agents of Jesus' death. We've talked about this before, but it's only relatively recently that movements like Messianic Judaism have brought back into regular conversation a more Jewish--and holistic and healthy because of it--way of thinking about Jesus. Jesus' Jewish roots weren't even really a major topic of scholarly, academic study until, like, the late 70s!

So, just basically: If you're not sitting down to eat dinner with your brother or sister who happens to be culturally Jewish, who would never eat meat from a strangled animal or ever consume blood at all, then maybe you don't care as much about these things. If you've got some easy way to justify not caring about what the Jerusalem congregation writes, which the Church has had in Jesus' words and the words of Paul and Peter, then, sure: Have some black pudding. Have seconds. Again, in the context of table-fellowship, of

eating together and having communion together, this just hasn't really come up for Protestants, Catholics, European Orthodox groups.

Again, this is about table-fellowship. How can the Gentile and Jewish Christians live together as one. If the Gentile church has steak tartare and black pudding as its first course for threefold communion, the Jewish Christians cannot abide by it. They'll have to leave. One part of the Church will be inviting the other part into something they consider sin. Because of history and precedent, we just no longer think these things are that bad.

Particular Why? Sexual Immorality

(Friedrich Hauck and Seigfried Schulz, "Πόρνη, Πόρνος, Πορνεία, Πορνεύω, Ἐκπορνεύω," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–))

What's really interesting to me, though, is that while we basically have come to ignore the food admonitions, we don't ignore this one, the sexual immorality one. I mean, if you've grown up in a contemporary Evangelical culture, what you're quickly

taught is that sexual sin is the worst kind of sin, and personal sexual ethics are the most important ethics. I was taught about the need for me to reject sexual immorality way before I was told about this passage, and I was never taught to avoid rare meat. Because, again: Our society has chosen to ignore the previous admonitions, but not this one.

Again, I think this has to do with table fellowship and a recognition of who God is.

The greek word here, “porneia,” is not an easy word to translate well. Outside Jewish thought, in the Ancient Near East, the word was generally attributed to prostitutes and prostitution. In the Bible, this word equates to a greek word that has to do with prostitution, and by extension, adultery. The old way of translating this word, “fornication” wasn’t a terrible one, because it meant exactly this: having sexual intercourse with someone you weren’t married to.

To translate it “sexual immorality,” as the NIV does, is actually pretty unhelpful. Not because I want to, right now, argue for some expansive freedoms when it comes to sexual activity, but simply because good Bible study depends on exactness.

And most accurately, this word has to do with prostitution and adultery. The ancient world of the Old Testament and the world of the Roman Empire at the time of the early Church was full of temples and temple-employed prostitutes. Usually slaves, but not always, these prostitutes were a common part of society's landscape. Even Israel, which now and then tried to worship Yahweh and other pagan idols at the same time, had to deal with, and was always condemned for, trying out religious prostitution, prostitution-as-a-way-to-worship.

God would use this term to describe what happened whenever Israel tried to worship other gods; that they were engaging in prostitution or adultery with others. With regard to God's covenant relationship with Israel, "Porneia" became shorthand for unfaithfulness to God. Later Judaism would treat idolatry and fornication as two of the three fundamental commandments that even Gentiles should have to keep. The other was murder.

By the time of the New Testament, in Judaism, the word comes to mean any sort of sexual behavior, inside or outside a marriage, that doesn't really

conform to what the Rabbis thought was appropriate or legitimate. But it primarily still means prostitution and infidelity and things like, say, incest. It carries this idea of indulgence without boundaries, but doesn't abandon its basic orientation toward cultic prostitution and infidelity.

And again, to abstain from porneia, from "fornication," has to do with both fellowship and a recognition of who God is. This is especially true for these Gentiles who are surrounded by temple prostitutes, who have grown up in a society that has considered meeting one's sexual wants, married or not, as reasonable an act as eating when you're hungry or drinking when you're thirsty. Religious prostitution was an institutionalized way in which any male--there's all sorts of male privilege wrapped up in this--was allowed to satisfy his wants.

And the Jewish Church wants to make sure that the Gentile Church recognizes that to take part in religious prostitution is to worship an idol other than Yahweh, it's to tear at this fundamental monogamy that they see as basic to the God-Church relationship to God.

And, and, it also destroys the way marital monogamy

reflects God's commitment to His People, and the commitment God invites in return. We've talked about this at length when we've talked about divorce and marriage in particular over the years.

So if the Gentile brothers think they can hit up a temple for a little bit of sexual release before communion with their families and a Jewish brother or sister or two, they're simply wrong, even though their entire world tells them it's okay. They need to realize this. To do so will not only cause them to participate in worshipping a false god, not only will it break what the Jewish Church sees as God-established practices, it will also so deeply offend the sensibilities of the Jewish Church that they simply can't exist together.

Not Long After:

What's remarkable is that it's not too much longer after the Apostles and Elders send this letter that certain groups of Christians begin to think that real faith, real trust in God, allows them to do basically whatever they want. In fact, they think that it's an act of faith to particularly flaunt the things the Apostles and Elders lay out here.

In the very misunderstood letter we call Revelation, we

see as God praises the Pergamum congregation and the Thyatira congregation and then goes on to condemn their embrace of sexual immorality and eating idol-sacrificed food.

So. Maybe the Holy Spirit and the entire Jerusalem Church knew what they were talking about when they suggested what they suggested. Maybe a few millennia of trying to practice monogamy with God made them realize how important it is to practice this at home, too.

End Results:

We read this at the end:

31 The people read [the letter] and were glad for its encouraging message.

They find it encouraging! We think any limitation on our freedom of expression is just that: a limitation on our selves, but they don't. They're encouraged. Comforted. "Relieved" would be a reasonable translation here. And why not? They don't have to be circumcised, they don't have to impossibly keep the whole Torah.

They simply have to do the things that recognize God is the only true god, and the things that enable the entire Church to be together. They have to do the things that both recognize God as the only true god, and enable the Church to be one Church, no matter what culture a person comes from.

This letter, these admonitions, protect the unity of the Church that was revealed in the consensus process we talked about last week. They keep the Gentiles focused on God, and they keep the most basic Jewish sensibilities about what faithfulness looks like protected.

So here's my question:

Question:

What can we ignore? Can we ignore this letter? Can we say, "Oh, that thing's irrelevant. We'll prioritize Paul or Jesus over this line. We'll highlight this one as expansively as possible." Can we ignore this letter?

I mean, we already do. We don't think about this. And we're by-and-large totally okay with it. We eat extra rare steak and carpaccio. We create shades of meaning for "porneia," "sexual immorality" as it's

translated here. I mean, the most expansive understanding of sexual immorality, “porneia,” could include many divorces and remarriages, which I think none of us would accept. We find other passages of Scripture to help us manage why and when we ignore today’s passage, and we talk about temporary and permanent prohibitions, about context and cultural assumptions.

I want us to be people who understand Scripture. Who are honest about the ways we read it, when we read it, and what we read it for.

I also want us to be consistent in the claims we make.

I think we ought to at least treat the letter, the admonitions, as a whole. I don’t think we can line-item today’s passage and decide that this or that moment is overwritten by something somewhere else, while this or that is not; or this is okay to contextually abandon, while this isn’t. I’m not very comfortable with that, even though I understand it.

It feels like consistency in biblical study is a sign of personal integrity, and developing a framework of understanding the Bible that works in all places is an

important one. But: I am old-fashioned in this way, I think. Or just wrong.

What shall we do with this passage? What will you do with it?

As it is...

As it is, let's at least recognize what's happening in this moment in the life of the early Church.

The early Church took on the radical effort of deciding by consensus the results of this letter. This letter is a call for unity and trust. It positions the Gentiles to worship God as the only true God, and honor their Jewish brothers and sisters as God's chosen People, the ones through whom God worked to gather them in.

It ensures the Church can commune together, fellowship together, and worship together, despite the great cultural divide between Jew and Gentile. The letter itself was a result of God's work and human submission, and the proscriptions that the Jerusalem Church laid out were a relief to the Antioch congregation.

Let's at least appreciate the process and the holy

activity that resulted in this letter, even as we consider what to make of it, and when.

***For Website, No Cutting Room Floor, No Preach:
Wondering:***

I've been wondering what it would mean to read this from a power perspective. The Jerusalem congregation held all the power, and all they asked from the Gentiles was that they honor God and ensure they can be family together. The Jerusalem Church could have asked so much more than that, could have demanded so much more, but God led them not to. I wonder, at a moment in history when our American, Western Church has so much power, what we would ask of those who have little, and can't stand against our weight or influence in the world. There's a deep posture of humility in today's passage that the Jerusalem Church takes on, and a plea: They cannot coerce their Gentile brothers and sisters to do as they ask, but if Antioch ignores them, the Church will be divided. What is terrible is how soon after this letter is sent the basically Gentile Church goes on to forget

their Jewish roots, and the humility that Jerusalem models, here.

***For Website, No Cutting Room Floor, No Preach:
On Judas & Silas:***

Judas and Silas, we'll learn a few beats later, are prophets, and they bless Antioch when they arrive. They "said much to encourage and strengthen the believers." At the end of the chapter, Judas Barsabbas, as he's called, and Silas are sent back to Jerusalem by the Antioch congregation "with a blessing of peace...to those who had sent them." Maybe. Maybe. Some ancient manuscripts say Silas stayed put; others leave it out. Judas Barsabbas, at least, made it back with that blessing of peace.

What we know for sure is that Silas will go on to be Paul's partner the way Barnabas has been, after Paul and Barnabas have a big disagreement. So we'll learn more about Silas, soon.

The Jerusalem congregation sends these two, Judas and Silas, because they want to confirm the news Paul and Barnabas have, and they want their own people to bring a word of blessing to Antioch. It's a big deal, and a big deal that Judas and Silas go, you know? It's

admirable that they do.

***For Website, No Cutting Room Floor, No Preach:
Not Gentile Law***

They aren't rules that the Gentiles have to follow in order to somehow coerce God into accepting them, or to be pleasing to God. The testimony of Peter, Paul, Barnabas has made it clear that God has already accepted the Gentiles. These aren't some sort of Gentile-specific laws, things that, then, the Jewish Christians could conceivably go on to ignore if they wanted. The very language the Jerusalem Church uses when they say "You'll do well to avoid these things" that they think aren't a "burden" points out that this is their and the Holy Spirit's wisdom about what the Gentile Christians should take on as standard practices, having already been invited into a relationship with God.

***For Website, No Cutting Room Floor, No Preach:
Do what we do.***

And, by and large, you know, our Western, Eurocentric take on history, and its shaping of history, hasn't been all that culturally sensitive. So if new congregations start in places where food is sacrificed to idols, and

blood is drunk for its magical powers, and meat is consumed raw, well: We have just tended to tell the locals to ignore cultural sensitivity and eat whatever, have “strong” faith, and, really, roll over new believers who would find it all repugnant. That’s a legacy of European missions that isn’t something we can easily disregard.