

Councils

^{CEB} **Acts 15:1-6, 12-19, 22-29** Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we've received from Moses, you can't be saved."² Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position. The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders.³ The church sent this delegation on their way. They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling stories about the conversion of the Gentiles to everyone. Their reports thrilled the brothers and sisters.⁴ When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity.⁵ Some believers from among the Pharisees stood up and claimed, "The Gentiles must be circumcised. They must be required to keep the Law of Moses."⁶ The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.

¹² The entire assembly fell quiet as they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through their activity.¹³ When Barnabas and Paul also fell silent, James responded, "Fellow believers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simon reported how, in his kindness, God came to the Gentiles in the first place, to raise up from them a people of God.¹⁵ The prophets' words agree with this; as it is written,¹⁶ After this I will return, and I will rebuild David's fallen tent; I will rebuild what has been torn down. I will restore it¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity will seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who belong to me. The Lord says this, the one who does these things¹⁸ known from earliest times.¹⁹ "Therefore, I conclude that we shouldn't create problems for Gentiles who turn to God.

²² The apostles and the elders, along with the entire church, agreed to send some delegates chosen from among themselves to Antioch, together with Paul and Barnabas. They selected Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who were leaders among the brothers and sisters.²³ They were to carry this letter: The apostles and the elders, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings!

²⁴ We've heard that some of our number have disturbed you with unsettling words we didn't authorize.²⁵ We reached a united decision to select some delegates and send them to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul.²⁶ These people have devoted their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁷ Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas. They will confirm what we have written.

²⁸ The Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials:²⁹ refuse food offered to idols, blood, the meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid such things. Farewell.

Councils

How dare they? How can anyone dare to blatantly go against the scriptures and call themselves faithful and true believers? We know what the scriptures say and people are choosing to ignore some of the law of God. You can't just change God's law! It's written in scripture – end of discussion.

It's no wonder that some people were shocked when they traveled to Antioch and found out that people who weren't Jews were being admitted to the fellowship of folks who followed Jesus. They weren't being circumcised, they weren't obeying the laws regarding clean and unclean food, and there was no telling how many others rules in scripture were being ignored!

The Jews had been given the Ten Commandments over a thousand years earlier. The details of the law had been spelled out by Moses in the holy scrolls of the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Not only were these writings from God as explained by Moses, the law was also what had held the Jews together through some disastrous times. Their land had been overrun by the Babylonians and many of the people had been carried off to be captives in Babylon. The temple that Solomon had built was destroyed. The temple had been where God was – and now there was no temple. The Ark of the Covenant had contained the tablets of stone on which God had written the Ten Commandments, but that had

been lost, as well. They no longer had a king, they were no longer a sovereign nation. The dwelling place for God had been destroyed and they had lost the Ten Commandments. Through all of their troubles, all of the disasters that would wipe out other cultures and religions, they had survived by being obedient to the one true God in a world filled with pagan idols. The Law of Moses had held them together. It had worked in good and terrible times for centuries; it had proved its worth and necessity. The mark of the Jews was circumcision. It was the cornerstone of the ethical and ceremonial law. Remove that, and the central support and defining element as a people disappeared. Their ethical laws for marriage, money, and murder were not more important than the ceremonial rules for eating. Observance of all of the Torah was their remaining witness to the one true God in a world filled with idols. The Pharisees were especially concerned about this.

How could the uncircumcised possibly participate in the covenant? How dare Paul, Barnabas, and the church in Antioch take it upon themselves to ignore or change the sacred demand? Baptism was coming to be regarded as a substitute for circumcision. Pharisees saw this as an innovation that would devalue and dilute the Jewish heritage as God's people, turn the Jewish Messiah into a generic "savior" and make salvation an individual matter instead of the privilege of Israel.

There were even some, Jews and gentiles, who were sharing a common meal, eating both clean and "unclean" foods. It was corrupting the Jewish followers of Jesus! But Paul and Barnabas declared that eating in separate groups was dividing the church and destroying the unity of the body.

The Pharisees declared that the gentile Christians were naïve to trust solely in the power of love. People need law as well as love. Let law go and the people are left with no moral backbone, like a building with no framework. There was a big uproar over all of these issues, or as the text says more tactfully, there was "no small dissension and debate."

The way to deal with this situation was to hold a church-wide council. Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem. Peter was there. The Christian Pharisees attended as well as other leaders of the church, including James, the brother of Jesus.

Actually, this wasn't the first council held that dealt with the topic of gentiles becoming Christians. Some years before, Peter had a dream about what was clean and unclean before God. Afterward he went to the house of a Roman army officer who wanted to be a Christian and baptized him. Peter was called on the carpet before a church council in Jerusalem to explain his actions. Peter was able to convince the council that it was indeed God's will that non-Jews, gentiles, were to be accepted into the church. This first council concluded that God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life." (Act 11:18 CEB) That was a huge change for the Jewish Christians. But big changes often don't take place overnight. Big decisions return again and again to be reconsidered, refined, or to deal with the consequences of the decision. The first council decided that it was God's will that gentiles become Christians. Now a second council would deal with whether those gentiles would have to become observant Jews in order to be Christians.

It's instructive to look at this second council in Jerusalem to see how they went about deliberating and deciding. Scripture clearly states that God's people will be circumcised. And the Christian Pharisees pointed to those very clear texts. But then there are texts that say the people of God are to be circumcised in their hearts. (Lev 26:41, Deut 10:16, 30:6, Jer 4:4, 9:26, Ezek 44:7-9) Some would say that offers another form of circumcision.

Peter addressed the council and used an approach based on reasoning. Why place a burden of the law on these gentiles when we ourselves have never been able to bear its burden and live all of the rules? Aren't we all saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus?

Paul and Barnabas spoke of the experiences they had with the gentile Christians. They spoke of the lives they led that revealed how Christ was living in them.

James, the brother of Jesus, returned to scripture and reflected on a passage from the prophet Amos that talked of God's desire for gentiles as well as the Jews to come to God.

Using reasoning, considering experience, reading scripture and then examining scripture in light of other scripture, the council reached its conclusions. The results appear to be something of a compromise. The only ancient Jewish law restrictions placed on gentiles is that they avoid eating blood, meat offered to idols, and meat from animals that had been strangled. Those were things that Jewish Christians would have found to be particularly disgusting. The avoidance of sexual immorality is almost universal in all cultures, but it's possible that this is a reference to the pagan practice of temple prostitution or incestuous marriages.

This past week, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has met in council. We call it the General Assembly and it meets every other year. It, too, is a meeting of church leaders. Ministers, we call them teaching elders, from all over the country are sent. An equal number of ruling elders, folks just like the people you have elected to our session, are also sent from all over the country. It is worth noting that the executive presbyters who are the administrators of each presbytery are not automatically sent to the General Assembly.

Like that council that met in Jerusalem, our General Assembly sometimes deals with issues that seem to be a major change from what has been done for centuries. Scripture is studied. It is studied in light of other scripture. Experience is lifted up and considered. Reason is applied. And sometimes big shifts occur. The council in Jerusalem removed circumcision and the vast bulk of the Law of Moses from being applied to gentiles. That was a radical change.

The General Assembly in the past sixty years has proclaimed that women can be ordained as deacons, elders, and ministers. They have declared the value and equality of all races and ethnic groups. Scripture was quoted against those decisions and the issues were discussed for years. The General Assembly continues to prayerfully consider complex and controversial issues just as the Jerusalem Council did. We are a Reformed church and we are always reforming, seeking greater wisdom and an ever clearer vision of God's will. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
We are sometimes called to make big changes in our faith.
We listen for whispers of revelation from the Holy Spirit.
We study scripture, not in fragments, but as a whole.
We use our experience and powers of reasoning,
So we are reformed and continue to reform.