**The Decision of the Jerusalem Council**

(Acts 15:19-29)  
By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A young man stood up in church during announcements one Sunday and said, “My wife and I have made a difficult decision. We’ve decided that we don’t want children. So if any of you do, we’ll drop them off at your house after church.”

Then there’s the story of a man who made the decision to learn to pick locks. He said it had opened a lot of doors for him.

Finally, as you may know, a lot of people are unhappy about the government’s decision to legalize marijuana. But I’m told that that decision was made by a high government official.

Speaking of decisions—and especially of *official* decisions, like the one made by that “high” government official—here in Acts 15, the Jewish kingdom church in Jerusalem convened a council to decide if the Gentiles whom the Apostle Paul had led to the Lord had to keep the law to be saved. And James, the new leader of the church, is now ready to give the officialdecision of the Jerusalem council, as we see in Acts 15:19, where James says,

**“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God.”**

Now before we talk about the decision that James is rendering here, we need to talk about how we know we can *trust* the decision that he rendered. Because if we can’t, then you can’t be as sure that you’re saved by grace without the law like you think you are!

The reason I’m asking if James can be trusted is that my mentor, Pastor C. R. Stam, called James a *usurper* in his commentary on Acts, and a usurper is someone who *seizes* an office *illegitimately.* Pastor Stam called him that because he didn’t think James had any business replacing Peter as the leader of the 12 apostles, and the head of the Jewish kingdom church.

While I thank God for Pastor Stam’s pioneering work in recovering the grace message, he would be the first to tell us to *build* on what he taught us. And we *now* know that we *can* trust the decision James handed down, because our apostle Paul didn’t call James a usurper. Look what Paul called him in Galatians 1:18,19:

**“…I went…to see Peter…but *other* *of the apostles* saw I none, *save James the Lord’s brother.”***

As you can see, in a roundabout way, Paul called James *an apostle.* He wasn’t one of the *twelve* apostles. He was only an apostle in a secondary sense. But Paul said he was an apostle, *not* a usurper!

And since Paul wrote that epistle by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we know that *the Spirit* thought James was an apostle as well. We also know *God the Father* thought James was an apostle, or He wouldn’t have let James write a book of the Bible!

You say, “But that doesn’t prove James should have replaced Peter as the *leader* of the apostles, and head honcho of the church who had the authority to make official decisions. And that’s true. But look what *Peter himself* said after an angel broke him out of prison in Acts 12:

**“Peter…said…Go shew these things *unto James,* and to the brethren” (Acts 12:16,17).**

If Peter didn’t recognize that James was the new leader of the church, he would have just said, “Go tell *the brethren* about this,” wouldn’t you think?

Finally, we know *Paul* recognized that James was the leader of the church, and had the authority to make official decisions, because he wrote those same Galatians and said,

**“…when *James, Cephas, and John*…perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision” (Galatians 2:9).**

I doubt Paul would have shook hands with James, and made that agreement with him, if he thought James had no authority to *make* agreements like that.

We can also tell from what Paul wrote there that he even thought James was the *leader* of the apostles, for he mentions James *first* out of those three apostles, even before Peter, who is called Cephas there. Compare that to how the Bible mentions *Peter and John* eighteen times in the Bible, and each time *Peter* is mentioned first. Know why? It was because he was the head honcho of the twelve, and *deserved* top billing.

And when Paul mentions *James* before Peter in Galatians 2:9, it shows that he recognized that James was the *new* head honcho. The top dog. The big enchilada. And all of that proves there was a new sheriff in town, as they say.

The final proof that we can trust the decision James made is found in the fact that he made the *right* decision when he determined that the new Gentile believers in the Body of Christ didn’t need to keep the law to be saved. And the way we *know* he made the right decision is because it agreed with what Paul taught in his epistles. The Bible never contradicts itself when it is rightly divided!

But having rendered his decision, there was something James was concerned about—something he talks about in the next verse of our text. After saying, “We won’t trouble the Gentiles to keep the law,” he went on to say what they *would* do:

**“But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20).**

Now the question here is: why would James think the Gentiles would have to be *told* not to worship idols? I mean, in order to get saved, they must have done what the Thessalonians did when *they* got saved. Paul reminded them of how

**“…ye turned *to* God *from* idols *to serve the living and true God”* (I Thessalonians 1:9).**

That’s what *these* Gentiles had to do to get saved as well. So why would James think they would go *back* to worshipping idols if they turned to God *from* idols?

Well, I can’t prove it, but I think it was because James knew that throughout the Old Testament, the Jews *combined* the worship of God with the worship of idols. Look what a Jewish woman said in Judges 17:3:

**“…I...dedicated the silver unto the LORD…*to make a graven image and a molten image.”***

Did you catch that? That dear lady dedicated some silver to the *true* God, but used it to make an *idol* to a *false* god—something the Bible says not to do! And if you know your Bible, you know that that kind of combination of worshipping God and idols went on throughout the Old Testament. It *still* goes on today in Roman Catholicism, in spite of what James decided about us Gentiles here.

Okay, now that we know why James had to tell them not to worship idols, why would he *also* tell them in verse 19 to abstain from *fornication?* Wouldn’t you think that any believer would know fornication is wrong?

Again, we’re not told why James added this prohibition to his official decision. It could have been simply because the Gentiles were well known for fornication in those days, as they are today as well! But I think that James was thinking, “If we tell the Gentiles they’re not under law, *they’re going to keep sinning.”* I think that *he* thought what a lot of Christians today *still* think, and that is that to be under grace is to be given a license to sin.

We know that that’s what the *Corinthians* thought, for Paul had to write them and say,

**“...there is fornication among you…*and ye are puffed up,* and have not rather mourned…” (I Corinthians 5:1,2).**

Instead of being *sorrowful* that one of their members had fallen into fornication, they were *puffed up with pride* about it. Evidently they thought that God had given them a *much* more advanced religion than He’d given the Jews with that stodgy old law that said you *couldn’t* commit fornication. It seems clear that they thought grace was a license to sin.

James saw that coming, and tried to nip it in the bud in verse 20 of our text by telling these new Gentile converts to *abstain* from fornication. And we know *Paul* saw that coming as well, for after he spent the first five chapters of Romans teaching us how we are saved by grace, he dealt with the idea that grace was a license to sin in Romans 6. He makes it clear that as God’s people, we should abstain from *any and all sin* that gives the grace of God that saves us a bad name.

But now, why would James *also* say that the Gentiles should abstain from “things strangled” (Acts 15:20)? Well, if you *strangle* an animal to kill and eat it, instead of slitting its throat and draining its blood, you end up *eating* blood—and the law said *not* to eat blood.

But if James was agreeing that the Gentiles weren’t under the law, why would he tell them not to eat blood? Is he saying, “They’re not under the law, but they still have to keep *some* of the law”—like a lot of Christians *today* say, especially in the area of what you can eat.

The answer to that question is a resounding *no!* The next verse in our text doesn’t say that they shouldn’t eat blood because *the law* said they shouldn’t. Verse 21 says they shouldn’t eat blood,

**“For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day” (Acts 15:21).**

James is telling those Gentiles not to eat blood *because it would offend the Jews who were still under the law,* and whose very worship of God involved hearing the law read every sabbath day.

Now if that kind of reasoning sounds familiar, *it should,* for that’s what our apostle Paul told the Romans when he wrote,

**“…*there is nothing unclean of itself….*But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, *now walkest thou not charitably…* Let not then your good be evil spoken of: *For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink…*he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, *and* approved of men” (Romans 14:14-18).**

There used to be *plenty* of meats that were unclean of themselves. Just read Leviticus 11 and see! But not under grace!

What Paul is basically saying is that if you exercise your right to eat blood, you’re acceptable to God under grace. But if you *lovingly,* charitably *give up* your right to eat blood in front of someone who still believes you shouldn’t eat it, then you’re acceptable to God *and* men. You’re not offending either. And that’s what James is advising the Gentiles here in Acts 15:21 as well.

Okay, now that a decision has been reached by the council, all that’s left to do is to let the Gentiles know about it, something the members of the council determine in verse 22:

**“Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas and Silas, chief men among the brethren” (Acts 15:22).**

The plan was to send some Jewish kingdom saints with Paul to Antioch to relay the council’s decision. You’ll remember that Antioch was where Paul had led a whole lot of Gentiles to the Lord. But word had gotten around to *other* areas as well, so verse 23 says they sent Judas and Silas to alert *those* believers to the council’s decision as well:

**“And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:23).**

Now, there’s an *astounding* word in that verse that you shouldn’t gloss over. Do you see where it talks about “the *brethren* which are of the Gentiles” there? For the previous 2,000 years prior to that statement, you’d *never* catch Jews like these men calling *Gentiles* their *brethren.* It would have been like members of the Ku Klux Klan calling *black men* their brethren. But now a *revolutionary change* had taken place with the ministry of the apostle Paul, and Jews and Gentiles and blacks and whites and all other believers were *brethren* in the Lord. And that includes Jewish kingdom saints like they had in Jerusalem, and believers in the Body of Christ who’d come to Christ by grace without the law. They’re brethren in the Lord as well!

And as we read on in the next *four* verses, we see how those Jewish brethren worded their decision:

**“Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment:**

**“It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,**

**“Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**“We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth” (Acts 15:24-27).**

Now when verse 24 says those Jews had troubled the Gentiles “with words”—do you remember what we used to say as kids? “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Well, words might not be able to hurt you *physically,* but they can *trouble your soul,* as God’s Word says there. And the words: “You have to keep the law” are *very* troubling to Gentiles who are saved by grace like us.

When someone told the Galatians that *they* had to keep the law, Paul wrote to them, saying:

**“…*God*…called you into the *grace* of Christ…but there be some that *trouble* you, and would *pervert* the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:4,6,7).**

The Galatians had been saved by believing the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), but some troublemakers had *perverted* the gospel of grace by telling them that they had to keep the law to be saved.

If you want to know how Paul felt about that, the answer is that he just threw that trouble right back at them, saying:

**“…he that troubleth you *shall bear his judgment,* whosoever he be…I would they were even *cut off* which trouble you” (Galatians 5:10,12).**

Those words remind me of what Maude used to tell her husband in that popular sitcom from long ago: “God will get you for that, Walter!” Saved Jews who tried to put the Galatians under the law will be judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Unsaved Jews who were involved in that will bear their judgment at the Great White Throne.

But did you notice that verse 24 of our text says that those troublemakers had “subverted” the souls of those Gentile brethren with their words? The dictionary defines that word *subvert* as *to turn aside,* and that’s how it’s used in the Bible as well. Lamentations 3:35,36 says,

***“To turn aside* the right of a man before the face of the most High, *To subvert* a man in his cause, *the LORD approveth not.”***

And those troublemaking Jews had subverted the Gentiles *spiritually* by telling them they had to turn aside *from grace* and keep the law. I guarantee the Lord didn’t approve of *that* either!

Now what you are seeing there is a *major* dispensational change from what God told the Jews to do in Joshua 23:6, where He told the Jews to

**“Do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses…*turn not aside therefrom* to the right hand or to the left” (Joshua 23:6).**

God told the Jews to *keep* the law and *not* to turn aside from it. So spiritual subversion in those days meant turning *away* from the law. Today it means turning *to* the law *from grace.* Talk about your dispensational changes!

Do you know what the answer to the subversion of the law is? Timothy must have had the same problem with legalizing Jews, for Paul uses that same word *subvert* when he told him,

**“…strive not about *words* to no profit, but to the *subverting* of the hearers. Study to shew thyself *approved* unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth”* (II Timothy 2:14,15).**

The answer to the subversion of the law is *rightly dividing the Word of truth.* It’s the *only* answer to the law, because the law is *in* the Word of truth. You just have to understand that not everything in the Word of truth is about you! And you’ll *never* understand that if you *don’t* rightly divide the Word. And if you don’t rightly divide the Word, you can’t know what spiritual subversion is! That’s how important it is!

Well, verse 24 of our text ends by telling those Gentiles that the Jewish leaders had not given those Jews we read about in Acts 15:1 any commandment to trouble them with the law. But since they did, the Jewish leaders decided in verse 25 to send some men with Paul and Barnabas to tell the Gentiles their decision by mouth as they delivered it by letter.

But when verse 26 calls Judas and Silas men that had hazarded their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus, let me ask you: Who do you think used to *threaten* their lives before he got saved? *Paul,* back when he was Saul of Tarsus! You know. The guy who was now going to be their *bunkmate* on this trip to deliver the council’s decision! You’d think Judas and Silas would sleep with one eye open with a famous killer like Paul laying next to them. But they knew that salvation had melted Saul’s murderous heart, and they now had nothing to fear from him.

The leaders finished their letter in the final two verses of our text, saying:

**“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;**

**“That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well” (Acts 15:28,29).**

Now here in verse 28, we have to stop and ask: How did *they* know what seemed good to the Holy Ghost? Well, do you remember what the Holy Ghost *did* when Peter preached to a Gentile named Cornelius and his family? If you’ve forgotten, look what Peter told them about the Lord in Acts 10:43,44,46:

**“…through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins. While Peter yet spake these words, *the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word*…they heard them speak with tongues”**

As soon as Peter talked about believing on the Lord, those Gentiles got saved—*without the law!* And then the Holy Ghost fell on them to *prove* they got saved without the law. Speaking in tongues didn’t always prove that Jews were saved, but it always proved Gentiles were saved!

But that’s how the council knew it seemed good to the Holy Ghost not to burden Gentiles with having to keep the law. Remember, Peter had *told* the council about his visit to Cornelius, and James must have found that experience *very* convincing, for he remarked upon it in his opening statement.

The letter to these new Gentile believers ends in verse 29 by telling them to abstain from the things we talked about. But you may have noticed that the council originally planned to write them about “*pollutions* of idols” (Acts 15:20), and here they warned them about “*meats* offered to idols.” That’s because one of the ways men worshipped idols was by eating meats offered to them.

Pagans in those days worshipped their *idols* in the same way the Jews worshipped *God.* The Jews worshipped God by sacrificing an animal on an altar, and then allowing their priests to eat the meat of the animal. Pagans worshipped idols by sacrificing an animal on an altar, and then letting pretty much *anybody* eat the meat of the sacrifice.

And I’m told that’s still done today. I don’t know if that’s true, but I do know what Paul says about it:

**“If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; *whatsoever is set before you, eat,* asking no question for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, this is offered in sacrifice unto idols, *eat not for his sake that shewed it…”* (I Corinthians 10:27,28).**

As you can see, Paul says the same thing James said earlier in Acts 15, that it is okay to eat things that used to be forbidden under the law, just as long as you don’t eat them in front of believers who might be offended by it.

But look what *else* he told the Corinthians about this subject:

**“…eat not for his sake that shewed it, *and for conscience sake*…Conscience, I say, *not thine own,* but of the other: *for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?* For if I by grace be a partaker, *why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?”* (I Corinthians 10:28-30).**

Paul says that grace gives us the liberty to partake of things the law forbids. You can eat them with a conscience that is *crystal clear.* I eat these lobster cakes from my grocer that are just *out of this world yummy,* and my conscience doesn’t bother me a bit.

But Paul *also* calls on us to be mindful of the conscience of *other* believers when it comes to these things. I heard from a new grace believer recently who thinks that we *shouldn’t* eat things like lobster or pork because he thinks they’re unhealthy, and he thinks that’s the reason why God told the Jews not to eat them. Well, they may be unhealthy and they may not be, I don’t know, because the Bible doesn’t say, and I only trust what I read in the Scriptures. But the Bible *does* say why God told the Jews not to eat those meats, and that is *not* the reason!

But the way to *convince* that brother of this isn’t by taking him out to eat and talking to him about grace while chowing down on a plate of baby back ribs! If you do that, you give him a reason to speak evil of grace.

You know, the world around us has a saying that says: “Let your conscience be your guide.” They think that’s the absolute highest plane on which a man can life.

But it isn’t.

Paul tells us to let our *brother’s* conscience be our guide. *Now* you’re talking about living on life’s highest plane. If you like singing, “Lord plant my feet on higher ground” as much as I do, be sure to remember that that song is a *prayer,* and living like this is what part of what you’re praying for. But if the grace of God that saved you means anything to you, that’s the plane you’ll want to live on.

In closing, as I write these words, it’s football season, and I’ve noticed that the back of the helmets of some of my Chicago Bears it reads, “End racism.” That’s a nice sentiment, but how?

Many years ago, a black missionary from South Africa called us at *Berean Bible Society* to say that he was in town and was coming to visit us, but he’d be arriving quite late, and he needed a place to stay. Since I stay in a motel room when I work here three days a week, I told him he could bunk with me, but that I’d be asleep by the time he arrived. I also told him I’d leave a key to my room at the front desk, and that he should just let himself in and try not to wake me as he got ready for bed.

It all went very smoothly, but I can remember telling that story to the midweek Bible study at my church the following Wednesday night. I remember making it sound very dramatic, saying,

“Last week, while I was sleeping, *a black man entered my motel room.* And I did what any white man would do.”

I then paused for effect, and that gave a man in the congregation a chance to call out, “You hid under the bed?” We all got a good laugh out of that. But then I said,

“No, I rolled over and went back to sleep.”

You see, he might have been a complete stranger, but I didn’t sleep with one eye open—as I *also* would have done with a white man who was a stranger, by the way. I knew that the grace of God had made him my brother in Christ, and I didn’t have a thing to fear from him.

Do you want to know what the answer to racism is? The *only* answer to racism *is the Lord Jesus Christ,* and the grace of God that brings salvation to all who will believe that He died for their sins and rose again.

