



Sunday, May 6, 2012

The Council of Jerusalem: Preserving the Gospel

Speaker: Scott Masson

Scripture: Acts 15:1-35

Sermon Notes:

1. Acts 15 marks a transition point, as the Holy Spirit moves and brings many Gentiles to faith, in large part through the ministry of Paul.
2. In this context, certain Jewish Christians want to impose circumcision and obedience to the law upon Gentile converts as a condition for salvation.
3. In Acts 15, we see a conflict of authority and a conflict of doctrine.
4. These teachers of circumcision were Christian Pharisees acting on their own authority. They had not been sent (cf. Acts 15:24).
5. We live in a lawless age in which Christians reject authority.
6. Acting in Jesus' name without the blessing of the church is dangerous.
7. The doctrine of the priesthood of believers doesn't mean we can dispense with the authority of Christ invested in the elders of the local church.
8. This is for the sake of the integrity of the gospel, and for the protection of the flock (see Hebrews 13:17).
9. In Acts 15, Christians who do not have teaching office and who are not sent are imposing their sincerely held erroneous beliefs upon new believers.
10. We must be on guard not to slip into following Internet preachers, to the point of discarding the authority of the local church.
11. Paul and Barnabas were sent out, blessed by the church.
12. The gospel in essence is God has borne our sin on the cross, and we can know that there is a sure and favourable verdict for us in advance of the last day.
13. The debate in Acts 15 was whether salvation was based on faith alone, without regard to works, or whether salvation depended on the keeping ceremonial laws of Moses.
14. According to James 2, saving faith necessarily produces good works.
15. After much debate, Peter argues forcefully that God cleansed the Gentiles' hearts by faith, bestowing the Holy Spirit.
16. God had made no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Acts 15:8-11).
17. Paul emphasizes that in terms of salvation there is absolute equality among people (Galatians 3:27-28).
18. Our right to be called a Christian is based entirely on God's gift of salvation bestowed through repentance and faith.
19. When God called us by His name, He made us the best of people.
20. Our worldly differences are irrelevant. We're counted by God to be the best of people because of God's remaking of us in Christ.
21. In the early church, God is calling out from the Gentiles a people for His name, giving them the same status as Israel.
22. Peter goes on to cite the prophetic evidence from Amos 9:11,12 about Christ's resurrection and the resulting kingdom.
23. James confirms with Peter, Paul and Barnabas that salvation is by grace alone; but James makes four requests, possibly out of concern for the peace of the Gentile-Jewish Christian community.
24. We're to avoid those things that are in conflict with our profession of faith; we're not to do things that give even the appearance of idolatry or impurity (cf. Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8).
25. The Jerusalem council commands abstaining from *porneia*, i.e., from even the appearance of any kind of sexual misconduct.
26. These provisions are given to safeguard the gospel until the church can be unified in maturity.
27. The essence of the gospel is defended, and the Gentiles rejoice at the unifying and conciliatory judgment.

Application Questions:

1. Are Paul and James contradicting each other in the following verses: Romans 1:17 and James 2:24? What is the biblical position on justification/salvation which is consistent with both Paul's and James' books?
2. How does Peter's comparison in Acts 15 of how the Jews and Gentiles came to faith show that salvation belongs to our God? How does it illustrate His grace?
3. How does the doctrine of grace secure true brotherhood? In what ways does it overturn the judgments of the world?
4. Why do Christians need to be members of a body of believers (i.e. a local church)? What are the risks to a Christian who is independent and unaccountable?
5. Why do we as contemporary Christians need to take sexual purity more seriously and abstain from even the appearance of immorality?