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### The Jerusalem Conference: Grace versus Legalism

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THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE -GRACE VERSUS LEGALISM

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 61  
ACTS 15:7-8

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ACTS 15:7-8 "And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us"

Legalism had just about ruined the Jerusalem church. Legalism had neutralized the influence of the Jerusalem church and therefore, the missionary center moved from Jerusalem to Antioch. It was Antioch, not Jerusalem from which the missionary movement got its start. The church in Jerusalem was so dominated by Pharisaism and legalism that God had to move on from Jerusalem to Antioch in order to get his mission work done in the world. There is no leadership in Christianity apart from the grace of God and apart from the principle of grace. Grace means that God does the work and God gets all the credit. In legalism man does the work (human good) and man gets the credit, and God is supposed to receive the results of man's work. This Jerusalem Conference had been called because of this problem. The Jerusalem Conference was over

GRACE VERSUS LEGALISM

DIVINE GOOD OVER AGAINST HUMAN GOOD

SALVATION BY GRACE OR SALVATION BY GRACE PLUS SOMETHING

THE CROSS ALONE FOR SALVATION OR THE CROSS PLUS SOMETHING

This was the problem of the Jerusalem Conference. The old sin nature of man is the culprit. The old sin nature wants to get in on the act and exalt human good. At the cross sin was judged, but not human good. Human good is to be judged at the final judgment. In the plan of God the work of God is divine good. Man tries to get into the act by substituting human good for divine good. Man tries to do what only God can do. In salvation God does it all and there is no place for human good. Being sincere, weeping at the altar, walking down an aisle, being baptized, signing a card and living by the Golden Rule is no part of salvation. These things are human good and not divine good.

The filling of the Holy Spirit and a knowledge of doctrine is the basis of spirituality and spiritual growth. Remember, morality is not spirituality. Quite often people attempt to substitute morality for spirituality and it can't be done. The Pharisees had a fantastic legalistic and morality background. They wanted to impose this on the church and force on the church a system of spirituality by works and salvation by works. At this point in our study, they had rudely interrupted the work of Paul and Barnabas by an attempt to saddle on them their ideas of human good and human values. This is why Paul and Barnabas thought it was important enough for them to take time out and go up to Jerusalem to discuss this matter.

ACTS 15:7 "And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe." Here in this verse we hear Simon Peter's opinion. This is the last time we will hear from Simon Peter in the Book of the Acts. Let us remember that Simon Peter was often inconsistent. He learned things the hard way. It was very easy for Peter to be influenced by his friends, and in matters of doctrine he was often led astray. When he went to visit the church in Antioch, he was persuaded to separate himself from Gentiles and abide by certain taboos of the Jews. The result was that Paul stood up before them (Possibly a vast crowd of thousands) and reprimanded Peter to his face. This is the story of the last half of Galatians 2. From this experience, Simon Peter came to a deeper understanding of Christianity, and before he died he wrote two of the Epistles that became a part of the Word of God. Simon Peter was one of the

leaders of the church, and here in this Jerusalem Conference, we will see him come out forcefully on the side of grace versus legalism. There has never been a great believer who at sometime did not lapse into legalism. Even the Apostle Paul was guilty of this on two occasions. At the end of this chapter, we will see one of Paul's failures when he refused to forgive John Mark and take him along on the second missionary journey. He should have realized that John Mark repented and was now ready for missionary work. Some years later Paul will go into the temple and take a vow which was contrary to every principle of grace found in the Word of God. For this Paul was severely disciplined. So both Paul and Peter had lapses from grace. No local church ever prospers under legalism. This is why so many fundamentalist churches are small. They believe the Word of God and teach it, yet the lives of so many of their members are weighted down with legalism. Spirituality is taboo in many of those churches. They fall into forms of legalism like condemning the sins of others, or healings or tongues and all such junk as that. One of the great failures of fundamentalism in America today is their ignorance of what constituted spirituality and the Christian way of life. They are almost totally ignorant of the grace of God, and the only time they get close to the grace of God is when they sing "Amazing Grace", and even then don't understand what they are singing. They are so legalistic and so tied up with taboos and so void of true spirituality that they never realize Christianity is a dynamic and the results come because of the power of the Holy Spirit and not by the works of the flesh.

This verse 7 tells us that there had been much disputing. The dispute was over grace versus legalism, grace versus the keeping of the Mosaic Law, grace versus ritualism. (So much Christian literature is full of the idea that keeping the Mosaic Law is a way of spirituality and it is not.) It is a way of morality and morality is for the whole human race. Morality deals with exteriors but Christianity goes much deeper into the real meaning of sin. "There came to pass much disputing" comes from "ginomai" and this word means that something came out that had not been before. There had been much sweetness and light when they gave the great reception to welcome Barnabas and Paul, but now, as we say, "The fat really hit the fire" and they found bitterness and differences coming out that had not been revealed before. This is what "ginomai" means. Paul so emphasized the grace of God in his report that it just knocked them over and they just couldn't stand it.

In the midst of this bitter confrontation, Simon Peter stood up. His crew was full and he couldn't stand it any longer. The language really means that he jumped up suddenly. This was the way he always responded. You remember when no one would say anything conclusive about Christ, Simon jumped up and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God". And on the Mt. of Transfiguration he quickly responded, "Let us make three tabernacles up here and just stay forever". The day they came to arrest Jesus it was Simon Peter who jumped up and swung his sword and cut the ear off the guard. Jesus told him to put up his sword and to learn how to use the sword of the Spirit. So here when Peter jumped up, he was just acting true to form.

Notice he said, "God made a choice among us that Gentiles by my mouth should hear the Gospel". Here Peter is referring to the time when God led him from Joppa up to Caesarea and to Cornelius in Acts 10. Please notice it was God who made the choice. The aorist, middle, indicative here means God made this choice and it was his purpose to do so. Now all those people in that room knew what happened at Caesarea when Cornelius was converted. At Caesarea it was Gentiles who were converted. They responded to the gospel and became true Christians without becoming Jews or without being involved in Jewish ritual. Please notice that they heard the "gospel". The gospel is the good news about Christ. The gospel is the good news that Christ died for our sins on the cross. The gospel is that not sin but Christ is the issue in salvation. The sin issue was settled at the cross and that is the good news. All sins were settled in that court room called the cross when Christ died for our sins and the sins of the

whole world. Jesus was our substitute. Jesus was judged for us. So let us never make an issue out of sins, but let us make an issue out of Jesus. Neither liquor nor immorality or any other overt sin has anything to do with the gospel. The gospel is the good news about Christ. The great issue in the cross is "Whosoever". There is no member of the human race whose sins were not judged at the cross. They were all judged and cannot be judged again. So Peter said that the Gentiles heard the gospel and believed. Believe is a system of perception which exists in the soul and is totally devoid of human merit. In faith the object is Jesus Christ. The only issue in faith is Jesus Christ. It is all Christ. So let us never make an issue out of sins, but let us center on Christ. Peter made it clear that these Gentiles in Caesarea were ready to hear the gospel. These Gentiles had positive volition and God assumed the responsibility of giving the gospel to them. So right here is a good place to get down the doctrine of heathenism.

THE DOCTRINE OF HEATHENISM

I. THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE ESSENCE IS TO BE APPLIED HERE.

You recall two of those essence qualities of God--Righteousness and justice. God is fair to every member of the human race. God is righteous and he has to be fair because of His nature. There never will be a time when God is not fair and the righteousness and justice of God means that every member of the human race gets a fair shake. There never has been a member of the human race with whom God has not dealt fairly. God has not and will not be unfair to any member of the human race.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF UNLIMITED ATONEMENT

2 COR. 5:14-15 "For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again."

1 TIMOTHY 2:6 "Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."

1 TIMOTHY 4:10 "For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe."

TITUS 2:11 "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men"

HEBREWS 2:9 "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man."

2 PETER 2:1 "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

1 JOHN 2:2 "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

From these and other Scriptures we conclude that Christ died for the whole human race. Since Jesus died for the whole human race, He is doing everything he can do to bring every person on this earth to know Christ.

III. IN THIS DOCTRINE THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IS APPLIED.

2 PETER 3:9 "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." God wants none to perish but he wants all to come to repentance.

IV. LOOK AT THE MECHANICS OF HOW THIS WORKS OUT.

Being saved involves God-consciousness. Every normal member of the human race reached God-consciousness. We call it the age of accountability. Babies and those not mentally normal who do not reach the age of accountability are taken to heaven when they die. They are automatically saved. When normal people reach God-consciousness, they can go on positive or negative signals. If at the point of God-consciousness any member of the human race, regardless of geographic location, culture, race or any other factor, goes on positive signals then God assumes the responsibility of giving the gospel to that person. JOHN 7:17 "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."

ACTS 17:27 "That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us"

JEREMIAH 29:13 "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

Now this is the point Simon Peter was making in his speech. God knows where these pockets of positive volition are, and God gives the gospel to them. When Peter was down in Joppa God knew that up in Caesarea there was a brilliant officer named Cornelius who was on positive signals and wanted relationship with the Lord. They met and worshipped there in the house of Cornelius but Cornelius didn't know the way of salvation and it was like the blind leading the blind. They had to have help and God tapped Simon Peter on the shoulder and told him to hustle up to Caesarea and give Cornelius the gospel. This is the doctrine Simon Peter is stating here in his message at the Jerusalem conference.

V. HEATHENISM EXISTS NOT BECAUSE PEOPLE HAVE NEVER HEARD, BUT BECAUSE THEY HAVE HEARD AND REJECTED.

a. They rejected at the point of God-consciousness.

b. They rejected at the point of gospel hearing.

One way to express positive volition is by believing--not by ritual or baptism, or joining the church, or accepting a system of morality. It is grace through faith. Positive volition expresses itself at the place of gospel hearing by faith in Christ. So here in his Jerusalem message Peter is saying, "Ye know these things".

This was by the election of God. They were Roman and Greek soldiers and they knew nothing of Judaism and they accepted Christ right there on the spot without knowing anything about Jewish ritualism. Peter didn't go up there to Caesarea and tell them to obey the Ten Commandments and stop eating pork but he told them, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved".

This "Believe" is aorist, active, infinitive and means that this was God's purpose for them. From the dawn of time to the end of time there is one way to be saved and that is by faith in Christ.

ACTS 15:8 "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us" It should read "And THE God, which always knoweth the hearts". "Which always knoweth the hearts" is a noun and not a verb and is a name for God. In other words, God knows how the soul functions. The soul is made up of self-consciousness, mentality, volition, emotion, conscience, and the old sin nature

So these people in Caesarea were self-conscious and they also became God-conscious through their mentality. So God assumes the responsibility to give them the Gospel and they were saved.

Gentiles have souls and minds just like Jews and they are saved in exactly the same way.

So there is no distinction in Jews or Gentiles. They are all saved the same way.

God gave these Gentiles the Holy Spirit just like he did the Jews when they believed. The Holy Spirit comes into the new convert and enters him into union with Christ, and he also takes men who are unequal and makes them equal. In fact, this is the only place where men are equal, and that is when they are brothers in Christ.

This is the point Simon Peter made in his speech in the Jerusalem Conference and this was the beginning of the solution of the problem.