

The First Church Synod

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- [0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 25th of April 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.
- His sermon is entitled The First Church Synod and is from Acts chapter 15 verses 1 to 21.
- Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to hear what your word has to say to us. May we understand it and may we live it out in our lives.
- For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. Please be seated. You may like to open your Bibles to Acts chapter 15 on page 899. Amen. I had the privilege of speaking at a men's breakfast a few weeks ago.
- Well, just before we went on holidays. And the topic I spoke to them about was men's ministry. And I spoke to a group of enthusiastic guys on that morning. It was a good morning. As I spoke to these people, these men, it became obvious to me though that some of them had a confused idea of salvation.
- [1 : 2 2] They had a belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. There's no doubt about that. But they also believed that their efforts in the community also brought about their heavenly reward of eternal life.
- They believed that they were saved by grace plus something else. Whether it was an additional work or religious right or whatever, it doesn't matter. They believed that was saved by grace plus something else.
- It was hard for them to grasp the fact that they truly had been saved by means of the free gift of the grace of Jesus Christ. And there was nothing they had to do to receive the gift except believe that Jesus had died for their sins and that they would be saved from the wrath of God by placing their faith and trust in him alone.
- Now I often meet people who are still searching for faith. They believe in God and in Jesus Christ as well as his death and resurrection. They believe those things.
- But they think that if they could be just that little bit better, then they will be okay. I don't know what it is they're striving for, but they're striving for something better.
- [2 : 3 7] And the church, sadly, is often guilty of making people think that way too. It can be in subtle ways like telling one that they should read the Bible and read Bible notes as they read their Bible.
- And it can be in more practical ways like telling people that it is mandatory to give 10% of their income or that they need to have baptism in order to have salvation. And I'm sure that there are people here too who think that by doing the things they do around the church advances their place in God's kingdom.
- If you think that salvation is earned in some way or another by your own efforts, then I want to suggest to you that that kind of thinking is flawed. If you think like that, then you can only hope that God will let you into his kingdom when your life on this earth passes away.

Now the debate about what constitutes salvation is nothing new. It's been a debate for centuries. And it was this very question about what constitutes salvation for the early church that led the church to the first church synod in Jerusalem.

And that's what we're going to be looking at in Acts chapter 15 this morning. Just to fill you in a little bit on the story though, just prior to this, the Apostle Paul and Barnabas have just returned to Antioch in Syria, north of Jerusalem, from their first missionary journey in which the gospel has been proclaimed to Jews and also to Gentiles.

[4 : 21] In other words, the good news about Jesus Christ has been deliberately proclaimed en masse to people who don't have Jewish roots. And in their report to the believers in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas relate in chapter 14 verse 27 how God had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles.

Now it seems to me that the Jewish leaders had no difficulty with the concept of believing Gentiles because there are many Old Testament passages which predicted their inclusion into God's kingdom.

But what's going on here is a particular question was forming in their minds amongst these Jewish people, the Jewish leaders. And the question was something along these lines.

What means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for the Gentiles, for those who were other than Jews? For the Jewish leaders, it was probably assumed that male circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses would be the means.

And that seems to be what's going on here in verse 1 of chapter 15. We read, Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

[5 : 47] That's a bit like me standing up here and saying that unless you are confirmed in the Anglican Church, you cannot be saved.

And that would be a very controversial statement, wouldn't it? That's why I said it's a bit like me standing up here. I might even have a tomato thrown at me, but who knows?

Well, controversy is what is sparked here. And we read that Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, with those that were gathered in verse 2.

And the result of this debate is that Paul, Barnabas and some others are appointed to go to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders who are now regarded as the leading figures in the church.

And as they travelled to Jerusalem, they took the opportunity to inform the various Christian groups, along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria, on their progress of the gospel amongst the Gentiles.

[6 : 53] And as they reported, the things that have happened, the things that God has done, there is a new sense of joy brought about to all the believers. Now, on their arrival in Jerusalem, they are welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders.

And they reported, in verse 4, all that God had done. Notice here that the emphasis is on all that God had done. That is, the conversion of the Gentiles is traced to God's hand.

And the implication is that what had been done with his blessing must have been done according to his will. But this point is not accepted to all who are present.

For we read in verse 5, But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, they stood up and said this, It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.

We probably, today, underestimate what a colossal step it would have been for these dyed-in-the-wool Jewish legalists to adopt a new way of thinking.

[8 : 09] But let's put ourselves in the Pharisees' boots for just a few moments. Aren't there some dyed-in-the-wool church traditionalists who think that way about church practice today?

For example, the only prayer book to be used in the Anglican service is the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The only instrument that should be played in church is the organ.

And that preaching should only be done wearing robes and so on. It's hard, I think, for many of us to adopt a new way of thinking about the way church should look in the 90s when we have lived a life knowing only one formula.

Now don't get me wrong. The gospel message shouldn't change. It's not negotiable. But the way in which it is presented should be seen to be relevant to the needs of those around us.

Well, it's on the matter of circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses that the apostles and the elders meet. In verse 7 we see that again, after there had been much debate, the apostle Peter stands to give his opinion.

[9 : 27] Now, the apostle Peter, I think, is a bit of a traditionalist. And if you've been following Acts, and we've been preaching through it over a fair while, if you've been following Acts, you'll know that he preaches the message of salvation mainly to the Jews.

But in verses 7 through to 11, he tells his audience three things about the gospel message he proclaimed to the Gentiles and the manner in which they, the Gentiles, received it.

And he does this by reminding the gathered assembly that is there, it would have been a fairly large crowd, I would have imagined. He reminds this gathered assembly about the incident that he had with a guy called Cornelius.

Cornelius, of course, was a God-fearer. Cornelius wasn't a Jew, he was a God-fearer, a Gentile. And Peter, in that situation, had been the chief human factor in this incident some ten or so years prior.

But we see in this incident that he relates about Cornelius that he attributes this whole incident to God's initiative. He says, My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message for the good news and become believers.

[10 : 52] So firstly, the choice to use Peter in proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles was God's initiative and Peter had the privilege of being used by God in that situation.

Secondly, in verse 8, Peter says, God, who knows the human heart, God is the heart-knower after all, God, who knows the human heart, testified to them, that is the Gentiles, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us.

Now in Acts chapter 10, Peter states, Anyone who fears God is acceptable to him. In context, this means that there is no racial barrier to conversion.

But God accepted them in the sense of welcoming them into his family only when he gave them his Holy Spirit. And thirdly, verse 9 says, Peter is saying that it is the inward purity of the heart which makes fellowship possible with God.

It is not the external purity of diet and ritual which Jewish legalism demands. So three things there. Firstly, it is God's choice of Peter.

[12 : 23] Secondly, it is God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit to the Jews and Gentiles. And thirdly, purifying of the heart to both the Jew and Gentile that leads Peter to this unavoidable conclusion that we see in verse 10.

He says, Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

Of course he is referring to the law, the yoke which they were fastened and animals were put in a yoke so that they would go straight. But this yoke they were unable to bear. Why are we putting this test onto the Gentiles, he is virtually saying.

He is saying, We Jews have not received salvation by obedience to the law. So how can we expect the Gentiles to do so? And then we read in verse 11.

He goes and he says, On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Just as they will.

[13 : 30] Friends, this is Peter's gospel. And it's also the Apostle Paul's gospel. And Peter makes it plain here that salvation is through the grace, through God's undeserved favour shown towards us.

Salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ and by faith in Jesus Christ. In other words, he's saying, Put in all your eggs in the one basket.

Put in all your trust in Jesus. John Stott, who wrote a commentary on Acts and who I've drawn a fair bit of material from for this, he writes this of Peter's testimony.

The central theme of Peter's testimony was not just that Gentiles had heard the gospel, believed in Jesus, received the Spirit and been purified by faith, but that at each stage, God made no distinction between us and them.

Four times in Luke's condensed report, in these verses here, condensed report of Peter's speech, the theme of the us-them, or the we-they, is repeated.

[14 : 47] God gave the Spirit to them as to us, in verse 8, and made no distinction between us and them, in verse 9. So why lay on them a yoke we could not bear?

Verse 10. We conclude that we are saved by grace as they are, in verse 11. If only the Judaizers could grasp that God makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, but saves both by grace through faith, they would make no distinctions either.

Grace and faith level us. They make fraternal fellowship. Possible. If only we could conclude, along the same lines as Peter did, that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, then perhaps there would be a much greater sense of unity within the universal church, and possibly within our own church.

ritual would be put aside for the joy and privilege of welcoming the unchurched person who has turned to God in faith through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter's words obviously made an impact on this whole assembly, and they listened to not only what Peter had to say, but we read on that they listened to what Barnabas and Paul had to say to them about the signs and the wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles on their first missionary journey.

[16 : 32] Now if you look at the sequence of events in this passage, you will notice that up till now, there has been the eyewitness account of people who have seen God's work amongst the Gentiles.

Peter's seen what God has done through Cornelius. Paul and Barnabas have testified to what God has done with them as they've travelled through Asia and so on. And now we move on to James.

And he moves from the witness of this human experience to what these people have testified to through their own eyes and so on. He moves from that to the scriptures to see what the scriptures have to say about the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's plan.

Now James was recognised as a leader of the Jerusalem church and he seems to here have been the moderator of this assembly. And James had a reputation for godly righteousness but also a reputation for a conservative Jewish outlook on things.

And what he had to say then would be of utmost importance to all those present. And there was possibly a great deal of tension as the people waited to hear what he had to say.

[17 : 52] Much like there was a great deal of tension as I watched the swans just beat North Melbourne last Saturday night. I sat there for a quarter, biting my nails. But there was a great deal of tension.

So James says in verse 14 and he uses Peter's Hebrew name, Simeon he says, Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles to take from among them a people for his name.

This agrees with the words of the prophet as it is written and he goes on to quote from Amos. He says, After this I will return and I will rebuild the dwelling of David which has fallen.

From its ruins I will rebuild it and I will set it up so that all other peoples may seek the Lord even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord who has been making these things known from long ago. Now David was Israel's king that David's been talked about here as Israel's king some 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

[19 : 08] And Israel was a great nation under King David. But between David and the birth of Jesus Israel's greatness as a nation declined.

The nation was eventually exiled from Jerusalem. Its temple which was the centre of their worship was destroyed. But this quote from Amos 9 here is a powerful statement of two related truths.

God promises through the prophet Amos some 200 years after King David that he will first restore David's fallen dwelling and rebuild its ruins so that secondly a Gentile remnant will seek the Lord.

In other words looking at this through Christian eyes through Christ Gentiles will be included in God's new community. Now while it's not something new for the gathered believers there it's not something that is a new initiative of God but by God to suddenly include Gentiles into God's plan but rather it has been something that has been foretold long ago by the prophets.

And the means by which they are included into God's community or God's kingdom it's not by any external trapping such as circumcision or obedience to the law of Moses.

[20 : 43] But it is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. So this correspondence between scripture and the witness of Peter and the others all helped James in verse 19 to conclude that they should not trouble those Gentiles who were turning to God by telling them that they need circumcision in order to have salvation.

Now something really important is going on here because this synod this first church synod in Jerusalem has more or less stated that the old rules of the Jewish religion no longer applied.

The legalistic adherence to them is no longer valid for salvation to come about. Observing the principles of them may be helpful but they are no longer the means by which salvation is brought about.

And this is perhaps one of the reasons why James says in verse 20 that the Gentiles that they should write to the Gentiles to abstain from four things and those things listed are the things polluted by idols fornication whatever has been strangled and from blood.

Not only are these four things which he writes to them about repulsive to the Jews but it perhaps would be helpful to those in their Christian faith as they too abstain from them.

[22 : 15] Now he's not saying that you must abstain from them he's just his sort of recommendations I guess. I'm going to speak more about that next week as we look at the next aspect of this chapter.

But let me conclude by saying this we should be wary of any organisation calling itself Christian that says there is something you must do in order to be saved.

It's heresy to say that. It's heresy to say that you must believe in the gospel and do this. That's wrong. It's not scriptural.

You see the Christian faith is a done religion. Everything has been done for us through Jesus' death on the cross.

Our salvation is freely given to us when we receive by faith the generous offer of forgiveness of our sins given to us by God through his son.

[23 : 21] an old parable says a silly servant who is told to open the door sets his shoulder to it and pushes with all his might but the door stirs not he cannot enter use what strength he may another comes with a key and easily unlocks the door and enters right readily.

Those who would be saved by works are pushing at heaven's gate without result. But faith is the key that opens the gate at once.

Friends if you are still trying to earn your way to heaven if you are trying to be a better person by the things that you are doing then can I encourage you to surrender yourselves to Jesus turn your eyes upon Jesus look full in his wonderful face and the things of this earth will go strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.