

The Apostles and Elders Were Gathered



ACTS OF THE [ONLY] APOSTLES FELLOWSHIP CHURCH OF SIDNEY

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.[a] 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

PRAYER

Well, here we are in Acts 15 and it is among my most favorite of places in the book of Acts and I’ve been looking forward to getting to this passage for about a year and a half. We’ll skip the regular review this morning because this starts a new section in Acts and little review is necessary, except it suffices to say that the Apostles had returned after their first missionary journey back to the town of Antioch in Turkey, where they stayed for four or five years, discipling and investing in that local church. So then, let’s get to the Sacred Text.

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Judea was the region where there was the capitol city of Jerusalem, the city that crucified Christ. The men came down from Judea to Antioch, probably because Antioch had become the early center of the operations for the church, who had gone there out of the reach of the Jewish government that was

persecuting Christians in Judea. These who came from Judea to Antioch began to teach that unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now, what you have to understand is that the central concern of these Judeans was what we call the Ceremonial Law. God's Law is divided into three, as most of you have heard me explain many, many times. First, there was the Judicial Law given to the body-politic of Israel, for the time and place that it was given, so long as the people of Israel had the theocratic government established by God. These were the laws that insured law and order in Israel and included the penology; the punishments of certain crimes. By today's standards of lawlessness, many of those Judicial Laws seem severe to us. They include stoning rebellious, debauched, partying and drunken youth. They include stoning fornicative and adulterous people. They also include capital punishment for false prophecy, for sacrificing to false gods, for breaking the Sabbath, for rape, for kidnapping and for murder. Often these laws seem draconian or severe to us today, and these laws are sometimes lifted up to scorn. In fact, given the time and place in which they were given, they were reasonable.

Before the days of antibiotics, a promiscuous man or woman could spread incurable diseases to the entire people, who might be wiped off the face of the Earth as many, many peoples were by venereal disease. In times of famine, a debauched youth who just ate their family's food and sat around getting drunk was putting their entire family's lives at risk. Because Israel was the incubator in which the Messiah would come, false prophets jeopardized God's plan to redeem his people. In Montana not too long ago, stealing a man's horse or his cattle earned one death by hanging. We might consider that law draconian or harsh, but in the Old West to steal someone's horse or cattle was to steal their livelihood, and all things considered, was a necessary punishment to ensure law and order. The same can be said for those judicial laws in the Old Testament. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

Other laws were significantly more reasonable than our laws today. For example, thieves were to pay restitution from those they stole from and if they had no money to pay, they were to work it off. Today if someone steals an automobile they get put into jail at the expense of forty to fifty thousand additional dollars per year, for many years, and the victim is never paid back, and in fact is further victimized by a penal system that imprisons two-million people a year. Back then, they might have killed a rapist or murderer, but the system was intrinsically fair to the victims and ensured people paid for their crimes. Laws were put into place making sure that people were properly tried, that a certain number of witnesses were necessary to convict a person, and that for minor offenses, the person was actually rehabilitated back into the community and made to pay back those they hurt. In that sense they were more liberal than our system today. These laws have passed away with the nation of Israel and even though we can learn from them and even implement them as a matter of wisdom, they are not required in other governments and other places.

Then, there is the Moral Law. These are the Ten Commandments. These are immutable and unchanging. It was wrong to steal then, and it's wrong to steal now. It was wrong to murder then, it is wrong to murder now. It was wrong to commit adultery then, it is wrong to commit adultery now. It was wrong to violate the Sabbath then, and it's wrong to profane the Sabbath now. Jesus reinforced these commandments in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, and these Commandments are repeatedly

reinforced throughout the New Testament. The purpose of these Commandments is to teach us what God expects of us, to make clear our condemnation before God, and to show us why we need Jesus.

But then, there was a third type of law. This was called the Ceremonial Law. These laws deal with the system of worship that revolved around the Temple in Jerusalem. These included laws about priests, about diet, about circumcision, and about sacrifice. Now, just a sneak peak into what we'll unpack in coming weeks. The Ceremonial Law existed to provide the Old Testament Jews certain "types and shadows" to represent or foreshadow Jesus. Until Jesus came, if the Jews were to be saved, they needed to believe certain things. They needed to believe that God provides sacrifice as a means to forgive sins. They needed to understand that without bloodshed, sins couldn't be forgiven. They needed to believe that a priest could intercede between God and sinful men. They needed to understand that if they were God's people they were to be different from the world.

And so, God gave them laws to follow that would get the points across they needed to understand. He established a priesthood, which Jesus would ultimately fulfill. He established sacrifice that Jesus would ultimately fulfill. He would establish dietary laws and laws about clothing and the like to make his people different from the world, which the Gospel would eventually accomplish in believers through sanctifying his people in the Holy Spirit. What we know now, that they had to figure out in the early days after Jesus' ascension, is that Jesus fulfilled the Ceremonial Laws and so they need not be followed, because Christ has come. When the real thing has come, you no longer need the imitation.

The problem is, the Christians had to figure out what laws they should keep and what they should not. If you claim there is no law to follow, you're an antinomian – that the name of the heresy – and you think you can sin as much as you want and God doesn't expect holiness. So, they knew they couldn't throw out all the law, but what laws in particular should they follow.

Now, here's the thing. Remember the Judicial Law? There was no argument about that, because the people already realized it had been abrogated or abolished. Jesus told them to pay taxes to their ruling authority, to Caesar, and taxes to Rome was not a part of their Judicial Law. Historically, we know that the Jews had already long conformed to Roman Law, rather than the Judicial Law of Moses, because Israel was no longer a theocracy; it was under the subordinate control of Rome, and Jesus legitimized Rome's ruling authority by telling the Pharisees to render to Caesar taxes. No one in the New Testament was under the impression the Judicial Laws should be followed to the letter.

But the question then became, what do we do with the Ceremonial Laws? We believe in Jesus, but should we still be circumcised? Should we still follow the feast days? Should we still follow the dietary restrictions? Which of these laws do we follow?

And in verse 1, we see the opinion of those men from Judea. They said to the Christians that they must follow those ceremonial laws given by Moses, including and particularly circumcision.

Why was this such an issue. It's very, very simple. The Gospel is that Jesus died for the sins of believers, that he was buried, and that he rose again. We receive the benefits of the Gospel, including but not limited to the salvation of our soul, by faith alone in the Gospel. Whereas every other religion is a

religion of works, a religion that says “do these things to be made right with God,” Christianity says, “Jesus did what you could not, died for your failure to do what you should, and rose again to bring you eternal life.” Every other religion mandates certain deeds that must be done in order to obtain reward. Christianity, on the other hand, places its trust in the deeds done by Jesus for us, and the means of our salvation include no works, but only faith in Jesus’ works. We do works not to be saved, but because we are. So then, to mandate someone follow the Ceremonial Laws like circumcision in order to be saved, is a contradiction of the Gospel. This was the controversy.

2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Notice the position of Paul and Barnabas. These two brothers are debating with who we call Judaizers, which is a name that Paul gives them when he writes about them to the Galatian church. It’s one thing to argue one should follow Ceremonial Law, but it’s quite another to say they must. And what the Judaizers were arguing is that following the Ceremonial Law is a prerequisite to salvation. Now interestingly enough, the Judaizers didn’t care if people believed in Jesus. They were fine with Jesus, so long as the people kept the Ceremonial Laws and mingled their faith with Moses’ laws. Paul and Barnabas immediately realized the mingling of works and faith undermined the Gospel. They understood that combining works and faith was in fact, false religion. And so, they debated them. When it says, “no small dissension,” compare that with the phrase from Acts 14 last week, when Luke writes, “the Apostles spent no small time in Antioch.” As we discovered, when Luke writes “no small time,” it comes across as an understatement. When Luke says “no small time” he meant, “years.” Like, four, five or possibly eight years. When he says that the Apostles had “no small dissension and debate” he means, “like a lot of dissension and debate.”

You see, the issue over circumcision may seem like a small one to you. What does it matter? Is it really that big of a deal? But to the Apostles, mingling works of the law with faith as a recipe for salvation, didn’t bring salvation at all, but brought damnation.

Let me stop here and drop a thesis statement in your lap and then move along in the exposition, picking it up later. Here’s the thesis; combining works and faith as a recipe for salvation, does not bring salvation, but damnation. To combine works with faith in Jesus in salvation as a means to salvation is to undermine the Gospel. Furthermore, to combine works as a prerequisite to salvation is the heart of every false religion. To demand works for salvation is to make Christianity into the very same as every false religion; it is not a small matter, but it is a huge, consequential matter. When you hear your pastors say things like, “This is why we don’t consider Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy Christianity,” it is not to be mean. It’s because we believe, like Paul and Barnabas, that to deny salvation is by faith alone is to depart from Christianity altogether, and put oneself outside of Christianity. For this reason today, on the matter of salvation being by faith alone, there should be no small dissension or debate; what is at risk is the very hearts and souls of men.

2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Please note, that Paul and Barnabas were appointed by the church of Antioch. Theology, doctrine, was a matter for the church to decide. So then, they sent the Apostles as emissaries of the local church to Jerusalem to get with other leaders of other churches to decide the matter. Why do I say they came together with other churches (plural)? It's because the Apostles didn't just gather with other Apostles, but they came together with the elders, and elders were appointed in the local churches.

Now, why did the church in Antioch send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. Well, if you remember, Jerusalem was the headquarters of the Twelve Disciples, who became twelve of the Apostles. The church lay people mostly fled to Samaria when the persecution began, and to Antioch in Turkey and to other places outside Judea where there were expatriate communities of Jews. As you know, there were lots of Jews living outside Judea who were born Jewish, and there were some Hellenistic Jews outside Judea who were not born Jewish, but who were converts to Judaism, like Cornelius. So wherever they had relatives or some kind of roots, the Jewish Christians fled. However, the original Twelve Disciples stayed behind in Jerusalem. Occasionally, they would send some of themselves like Peter, for example to Samaria to build up churches, but their headquarters was still in Jerusalem, while Paul's headquarters to evangelize Gentiles was in Antioch. The church in Antioch wanted to make sure their doctrine was correct by seeking the opinions of the Apostles back in Jerusalem.

A few things this teaches us, quickly. Number 1, it is the church's job to make sure its doctrine is correct. On essential Christian matters, there is not room to agree to disagree. On certain issues, we may have different opinions without everybody panicking. But when it comes to matters that mean the difference between Heaven and Hell, the church has to take its doctrine seriously.

Number two, there was a spirit of inter-church cooperation even in the Apostolic era. The church at Antioch cared what the church in Judea thought. The church in Judea welcomed the brethren from Antioch to discuss this theological matter. I believe it is important for churches to have relationships with other churches who share the same Confession who can – while respecting the autonomy and independence of the church – can give input on doctrinal matters. And while I'm just throwing this out here, I believe that we have become very much an Independent Baptist Church, being unable in good conscience to cooperate with the growing doctrinal depravity and compromise of our denomination. I long for the day when we can cooperate fully with a body or denomination that more fully is aligned to the authority and sufficiency of Holy Scripture, and sooner or later, we need to have those discussions. I am thankful that we have fellowship with churches like in Weyburn, Bismarck, Helena and the churches whose elders often provide us counsel, but more cooperation with other solid churches would be an imminent blessing.

3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.[a] 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the

elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

The exposition here is short. Notice that it says they were "sent on their way by the church," and that even the Apostles served the local church. They passed through various regions, telling churches about their missionary journeys. Likewise, we should always be interested to hear from missionaries and what God is doing in the world. Now, and at this time, I am calling upon the church body to reinstate its missions committee to build and strengthen relationships with missionaries abroad and provide for their support in finances and prayer. We have taken nearly a year off of this, and we must return to it.

What's also interesting in this passage is that there were believers who were a party of the Pharisees. The KJV I believe says, "Sect of the Pharisees," meaning they weren't just hanging with them, they were indeed Pharisees. This may seem strange, but we see a softening of certain Pharisees even during the ministry of Jesus. We saw it with Cornelius (that is the first Cornelius, not the centurion in Antioch) in John 3. Gamaliel, a prominent teacher of the Pharisees – Paul's mentor, in fact – positioned them in a place to actually care about Scripture and respect its teaching, which might have drawn a number of the Pharisees to Jesus, and probably laid the groundwork for Paul's conversion. However, they still haven't washed all the Pharisee off, and now they're messing up the Gospel. While they believed in Jesus, the problem is, they weren't trusting in Christ's work alone to save them. They claimed it was necessary to be circumcised.

It's here I point something out. It is possible to believe in Jesus and not be saved.

Be careful to hear what I said and don't hear what I'm not saying. Salvation is by faith alone. But, faith is more than mere belief. Faith is a combination of belief and trust. They believed in Jesus, but didn't trust in his work alone to save. Paul goes on to call them accursed and condemned in Galatians. It is possible to believe Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for your sins and rose again, and still be lost. It is possible if that person who believes those things doesn't fully trust in those things for their salvation, and instead also hopes in their own merit from the following of certain laws or rules or sacraments. This is precisely why we say that many who profess Christ, who call themselves Christians, can still be lost.

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

The churches came together, and having sent the Apostles, expected them to authoritatively decide the matter. There was debate.

Low and behold, I can't find anywhere someone in this Jerusalem Council complained that they were being divisive. Nobody, that I can find in this passage, complained that they were being unchristlike. Nobody, praise God, urged them to go along to get along. They actually...debated.

It's here that I will stop short the exposition for the sake of time, and give you the punch line and come back next week to look more closely, because we still have to get to the so-what part of the message. At the end of this debate, Peter – who seemed to head up the evangelization of the Jews, as opposed to Paul who headed up the evangelization of the Gentiles – Peter stood up to deal with the Judaizers and said in verse 11, “We will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter affirms the doctrine of Sola Gratia; faith gratia salvation. It will not be by works of the law, Peter says, it will be by grace that anyone who is saved, will be saved. Grace is unmerited favor that comes in spite of failing to follow God's law. By grace, which is antithetical to being saved in part by works.

That's how today's passage ends, and we'll look more closely at the debate next week.

Well, that's the exposition. That's the what of Scripture, but what is the so what? What is the point, and how does this change anything in your life? That's the indicative; it's what we should know, but what is the imperative and what should we do?

First, please understand this truth, beloved. Doctrine matters. What you believe and what you profess about God is of no small importance. Listen, if we had a religion in which subscribing to an ethos or adopting certain values or exhibiting certain virtues was entry into Heaven it would be different. If Christianity was nothing but a particular set of values of living well and generally being nice and being neighborly and helping others and trying to give back to others and being charitable and being kind to others, doctrine wouldn't matter. But, Christianity is not the sum total of those things. Those things – kindness, niceness, helping neighbors, loving family, being productive and so on – those things are the sum total of every other religion. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Humanism, Mormonism - these religions all teach the same things. Live good to live well. Five words summarize every other religion on the face of the planet. Live good to Live well. And sure, they might all teach the how-to of those five words differently, but it's all the same substance. They might have different holy books, different prophets or gurus, different destinations (Nirvana for Buddhists, Reincarnation for Hindus, Paradise for Muslims, a good legacy for Humanists, three levels of Heaven for Mormons), but they're all built upon the same premise; live good to live well.

That's not our religion, beloved. We're not a religion of do. We're a religion of been done.

Your tithes and offerings are set aside to cover our church's expenses and to help others, and sometimes we buy someone a tank of gas. One such time was Friday evening, when a young woman called who was stranded on her way home to Minot. I met them here across the street, she and her two companions. Brother James went to get some food and I pumped their gas while they sat in the car. I gave him a Bible that James gave me along with the food and he tells me, instantly, that he's got all that book “right here,” pointing to his heart. My response is, “That's good, friend, but I've been a pastor for going on twenty years, and I haven't the Bible memorized yet.” And so he explains to me that he understands the basic gist of the book. He tells me a story about how he paid for a young mother's

formula for her baby, when he only had enough money for cigarettes. He tells me how he once found five dollars when he needed it, but found and gave it back to the owner. He tells me he understands this book and holds to my religion because he tries to be a good person. So, at this point, I have no choice. I say, "Friend, what you just described is not Christianity."

"What do you mean, I believe in Jesus, he says." I ask him directly, if you died today, do you know where you would go? "Well," he says, "I don't know for sure, but I think Heaven, because I've tried to do right by others."

"Friend," I tell him again, "what you just described is not Christianity." So briefly, I explained to him our shortcomings under the Law, in which he disagreed with Jesus on several points, and I left by imploring him, begging him, to read what is in that book. I left him with Romans 3, "No man is good." But you see, in his religion, which is not Christianity, his hope and trust is in his goodness, and like an ostrich whose head is in the sand, he clings to that ridiculous myth that he and anyone else is inherently good. He's got to. That's his only hope. That's his ONLY hope because he doesn't know Christianity.

Christianity says, "I'm not good." Goodness is not found in your intentions. It's not found in your regrets. It's not found in meaning well or doing your best. It's only found in two ways. First, by flawlessly obeying God's Law, which you've not done, and trusting in Christ's work to have been good enough for you. And, Christianity says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," meaning that that first option is not really an option for you.

You see, Christianity is a religion of doctrine. Doctrine means "teaching." Theology is the study of God. And Christianity is not a religion of doing works, but a religion in which we believe certain things about the One who was good for us, so that we might become right with God.

Here's another thesis for you: You must not only believe in God the Father or even God the Son, you must trust in their plan for your salvation through the Cross. Or put more simply, you must believe certain things to be saved.

You don't have to have a PhD. You don't have to be a seminary graduate or know Hebrews or know how to parse Greek verbs. You don't have to understand every theological term or the ins and outs of every doctrine, but you must understand two different things. Here they are; you must believe in the right God, and you must believe in the right Gospel.

I have often put this truth in these terms; both your ontology and your soteriology must be correct. Ontology means "the nature of something." You must hold to a correct ontology of God. You have to have God correct. Islam holds that Jesus is not divine. You got the wrong ontology, you don't have salvation. Mormonism holds that Jesus is a created being, and not the ultimate Creator, and believes in many gods. You got the wrong ontology, you got the wrong god. Jews hold that Jesus may or may not have been a good teacher, but that he certainly wasn't God. You got the wrong ontology, you got the wrong god. Oneness Pentecostals or Modalists deny the Holy Trinity. That's essential. You got the wrong ontology, you got the wrong God. This doesn't mean that you have to understand each and every part of God's nature. This means you can't be so off on God's nature, that in fact it's the wrong god.

Here's the thing; lots of professing Christians (meaning that they claim to be such) have the right ontology. Good on them. But, they have to have the right soteriology, meaning they have the Gospel right. The question is, what are you trusting in? Are you trusting in your merit? You have the wrong Gospel. Are you trusting in the accomplishments of Mary or the Saints or your own good behavior? You have the wrong Gospel. Are you trusting in your ability to follow God's Laws? You got the wrong Gospel. And as Paul says, "I say that, not because there is another Gospel, for there is no other Gospel." At the end of the day, trusting in your righteousness is not Good News; it's really, really, bad, awful, terrible news.

So then, we ask the question, if beliefs matter, what beliefs matter enough to debate and cause no little dissension? Nobody likes dissension. What beliefs do we raise a stink about? What is worth arguing about? What is worth dividing over?

The answer is very simple; the beliefs that matter enough to divide over them enough to cause – if necessary – dissension, are beliefs that are of eternal consequence. In other words, beliefs relating to the nature of God or the Gospel.

You see, somebody may look at a guy like me and say, "You argue with these Roman Catholics or these Eastern Orthodox or these Modalists or these Mormons over here, and you're dividing the Body of Christ." Far from it, beloved. May that not be said of me! No! You will not find me debating matters vehemently when those matters don't hang eternity in the balance. Giving contrary opinions, discussing, perhaps, but not dividing. No! The matters over which dissension is necessary are matters of eternal consequence. Justification; how we are made right with God, how we can be saved, what we must believe to have eternal life, those are the issues over which the church builds walls and plants fortresses. It's those doctrines of preeminent eternal consequence around which we dig moats and build watchtowers. It's around justification and salvation and the Gospel that we place guards and charge our shepherds to stand with staves and contend for the truth as it was once for all delivered to the Saints.

Christianity, without the Gospel left in tact, is a worthless religion of virtue-signaling self-righteousness. If all you get out of Christianity is "do good," you've only obtained enough information to damn yourselves to a thousand hells.

Here's the truth, beloved. The Son of God humbled Himself to be made into a man, conceived an embryo, born a baby, and live a life of suffering, obeying the Father in flawlessness, and dying a death of substitution in the place of sinners, his blood – the very blood of God the Spirit made into flesh – spilling out of the body cavity created by the spear of a Centurian and pierced by Roman nails and placed by a Jewish crown of thorns into his scalp. What we do with that truth hangs the balance of eternity. If that blood was shed so that you could have an extra shot of being good, or for some kind of moral encouragement so that you could be better, you still perish in your sins. Rather, that precious blood was shed so that you could receive the righteousness of Christ, being made completely right with God and accepted as his own adopted child, giving up his only begotten Son for you. The faith you have in THAT is what redeems you and is your only chance at eternal life, and 'chance' is a poor word; it is the guarantee of your eternal life, its seal smeared in the blood of Jesus.

It's not about what we do with "doctrine," so much as doctrine is what we do with the blood of Jesus. What do you do, friend, with the blood of Jesus? Do you receive it as a complete substitute for your unrighteousness, or do you consider it a notable moment in history in which you go about trying to perfect your own flawed self-righteousness? This is what was at stake in Acts 15, and this is what is at stake today.

The believer on the periphery could look at the goings-on in Acts 15 and all the stress and work and expense and effort of the Apostles traveling across continents to dispute and debate the matter and say, "It's just circumcision. After all, Luke records that they believed in Jesus." Indeed, they did. And according to everything we see here from Peter and according to everything written by Paul in his other epistles when he has to deal with this same group of heretics over and over again, we can clearly ascertain that in spite of their ontology being correct, in spite of revering Jesus and on some level believing the various claims he made about himself, the Apostles felt that the Judaizers and everyone they misled were no better off than the unbelieving Jews who denied the Son of God. Affirming the Son of God but denying His Gospel is tragic because it is damning; it is to miss Heaven by both a fine line and a country mile.

The church took doctrine so seriously, that they wanted to seek the authoritative rule of the Apostles so that they could embrace or dispel the teaching of those from Judea. Beloved, that is still the church's job today. What do you believe? What do you confess?

The church gathering to decide a theological matter in Acts 15 that was a precedent set that the church embraced. The church would continue, for several centuries and long after the Apostles, to embrace the idea of it coming together to settle theological disputes. It's here I have to make an important caveat. This council of the church, because it included the Apostles, was authoritative. It was as though Christ Himself spoke through the Apostolate. Further church councils in coming centuries would also make decrees of doctrinal finality, but without the Apostles, those councils are valuable to us, but they are not inerrant. The Scripture alone is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, and yet we find the decisions of the early church post-apostolic period to still be valuable and helpful guides to our understanding of Christian doctrine.

Every heresy that exists today – each and every one – was invented by Satan in the first three centuries of the church. Nothing is new; it is only repackaged. Modalism, Antinomianism, Montanism – that is, charismaticism – Arianism, Judaizing, all of these things savaged the early church and we see the Apostles address most of them in their writings, and what they don't address, were addressed by the early church councils in the first through fourth centuries.

In the year 325, approximately 270 years after this council in Jerusalem, a heretic by the name of Arius of Alexander taught that Jesus was not divine. The church gathered in Nicaea to address it, and to decide the matter once and for all. Scripture, of course, decided the matter for us, but the church thought it helpful to gather and make a definitive articulation of the doctrine of the Godhood of Christ. This creed, like others, addressed the ontology of Christ, rather than the Gospel itself. A battle over the Gospel and its meaning was clear, and didn't have to be widely debated until the Reformation was

necessary after the Dark Ages of the Church turned Christianity into a religion of self-righteousness. There would again be councils and confessions to once again correctly articulate a salvation that is by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone for God's Glory alone, as understood by the Scripture alone. But this council, this council was regarding the nature of Christ.

And they produced the Nicene Creed, which deals with the nature of God. With it came the Athanasian Creed, the Apostles Creed, and other statements produced by early Christian councils to contend for the truth of God.

Let me read to you our Confession, what we believe to be true, and might we stand and fall, live or die by it.

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth, not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness by faith, which faith they have not of themselves; it is the gift of God.

Faith thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are justified; and did, by the sacrifice of himself in the blood of his cross, undergoing in their stead the penalty due unto them, make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God's justice in their behalf; yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them, and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead, and both freely, not for anything in them, their justification is only of free grace, that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

God did from all eternity decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did in the fullness of time die for their sins, and rise again for their justification



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