

Bi134 Acts

Lesson Bi134-27 Missionary Council in Jerusalem

Have you ever attended a church business meeting? You know, one of those meetings where the members get together to discuss the ‘business matters’ of the church. How would you describe the meeting? Was it boring? Quarrelsome? Petty? Have you ever thought seriously about such meetings? What should be discussed, and what principles should guide the discussion? In today’s story from the Book of Acts, the church gathered for a business meeting. And it was one of the most momentous happenings in the history of the Early Church.

Following their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to their home city of Antioch. While they were there, some Jewish brothers arrived from Judea. They started teaching that, before a Gentile man could become a Christian, he must first be circumcised according to the law of Moses. This notion so disturbed Paul and Barnabas that a heated argument broke out. So the church leaders appointed Paul and Barnabas to lead a delegation to go to Jerusalem. They were to discuss the issue with the apostles and elders there. When the delegation arrived in Jerusalem, a special meeting was arranged to discuss the issue.

During the meeting Peter stood up and addressed the delegates. He reminded them of how the Spirit of God had led him to Caesarea to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in Cornelius’ home. He then recounted how God had poured out the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles. It was just like he had done on Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost. Peter concluded his speech by saying, “[God] purified [the Gentiles’] hearts by faith. Why, then, do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Everyone listened in hushed silence. Paul and Barnabas told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:9-12).

After all had heard these accounts, James, leader of the Jerusalem church, spoke. He added proof from scripture. “Brothers, listen to me,” he said. “The stories that Peter and Paul have shared with us go right along with what the prophets said would happen. You remember how, through the prophet Amos, God said, ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent ... I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name’ (Amos 9:11-12/Acts 15:16-17).

James continued, “So, here is my judgement on the matter. We would do wrong to make it hard for the Gentiles to turn to God. Instead, we should write them a letter and tell them what we have decided.” Everyone agreed with James’ proposal. So they chose some delegates to accompany Paul and Barnabas and carry a letter back to the church in Antioch.

In the letter, the leaders of the church assured the saints in Antioch that the troublesome men from Judea had not been sent by them. They concluded the letter by saying, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. Farewell” (Acts 15:19-29).

When the letter was read to the church in Antioch, everyone rejoiced. All were encouraged by what it said. They knew that a way had been opened for them to offer to the Gentiles God's free gift of salvation through faith.

As we think about this story, we should keep in mind that the James spoken of here is not James the apostle and brother of John, the one whom Herod had killed. The James spoken of here is James, the half-brother of Jesus and pastor of the Jerusalem church. He is sometimes referred to as James the Just.

This story of the council in Jerusalem teaches three important lessons concerning how we may best conduct the business of the church today.

The first lesson we learn is that our church business meetings should deal with important matters. In the Jerusalem council, the delegates did not discuss trivial issues, such as how to decorate the church building or the color of the curtains. They discussed weighty matters affecting the eternal destiny of millions of Gentiles. They were seeking to discover the best way to reach the Gentile nations for Christ.

While less weighty matters must certainly be discussed, we must not allow them to dominate our meetings. Rather, we must remain focused on real business of the church, that is, reaching the lost for Christ. Jesus said that we were to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Every discussion, no matter how large or small, must be guided by the question, "How will our decision affect the church's ability to advance the kingdom of God at home and to the ends of the earth?"

A second lesson we learn from today's story is that, in conducting the business of the church, all of our decisions must be based squarely upon the teachings of Scripture. When James announced the decision of the council, he cited Amos 9:11-12. In that text, the prophet told of a day when God would take out "from the Gentiles a people for himself." In other words, the decision they were making was based upon the word of God. James was saying, through Jesus the Son of David, the way had been made for Gentiles to seek the Lord.

Today, we must do the same. Every decision we make must be based on the teachings of the Bible. Any decision that will lead us away from God's plan as revealed in God's word must be rejected.

We can learn a third lesson from the story of the missionary council in Jerusalem. It is that in conducting the business of the church, we must be diligent to hear and obey the voice of the Spirit. In their letter to the Gentile believers in Antioch, the leaders said that their decision "seemed good to the Holy Spirit." This means that their discussions and final decision were guided by the Holy Spirit. As a result great joy came to congregation. More importantly, a pathway was created that enabled the church to continue to expand among the Gentiles.

Today, we must do the same. In conducting the business of the church we must remain focused on the mission of reaching the lost with the gospel, and every decision we make must be

based on Scripture. Further, in all that we do, we must listen to and obey the voice of the Holy Spirit. If we will do these things, great blessing will come to the church, and the work of missions will be advanced.

This lesson is **important** because in it we learn about the proper way to conduct the business of the church. We also learn that Gentiles do not have to become Jews to be saved.

The **main truths** of this lesson are three guidelines to reach the right decisions in our business meetings. We must remain focused on the true mission of the church. We must always base our discussions on the word of God. And, we must listen to and obey the voice of the Spirit.

Let's **review** some important truths we have learned from this lesson.

1. What did the Antioch church do when men came from Jerusalem and demanded that the Gentile men must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses before they could be saved?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered, "They appointed a delegation led by Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the leaders there," you answered correctly.
2. What decision did the leaders make concerning the Gentiles at the Jerusalem council?
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that they decided that the Gentiles, like the Jews, are saved, not by keeping the Law of Moses, but by grace through faith in Christ, you answered right.
3. Name three important guidelines for conducting the business of the church that we learn from the story of the Jerusalem council.
 - A. [PAUSE] If you answered that (1) we should focus on the important issue of how we can best reach the lost for Christ, and (2) we must be guided by the word of God, and (3) we should listen to and obey the voice of the Spirit, you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it several more times until you can accurately retell the story of the Missionary Council in Jerusalem, along with its lessons. Then, before your next church business meeting, review this lesson. Put its principles into practice during the meeting.