

# The Letter Granting Freedom

June 2, 2019

Acts 15:22-35

In our study of the book of Acts, we are at the end of the middle, the culmination of the central event, the Jerusalem Council. And as I've tried to make clear, there is no event after Pentecost that is more central to our faith than the Jerusalem Council. At that council, it was decided, affirmed and put into print that Gentile Christians did not have to become Jews, nor live like Jews. The Christian faith stands on its own. I cannot overstate how important this is to us. I feel like I cannot give this the proper emphasis without jumping up and down in celebration. This is the event, before us is the letter, the written determination that we are free from the yoke of living up to the Jewish Law.

Now, I want to be clear. This council did not make such a thing happen. Jesus made such a thing happen. His Heavenly Father accepted what Jesus did on our behalf. The Holy Spirit guided the young church to this conclusion. They only affirmed what God had done. Are we clear on that? And yet, this WAS the defining moment, setting a direction, a course for the Church throughout its existence. And I also know that it has come at a cost. The relationship between the Church and the Jews has been shaped by this event. The Church from this point forward became heavily weighted toward Gentiles. The Church and the Jews have had a strained relationship from this point forward. Had the council decided differently, there would likely be many more Jewish Christians...and far fewer Gentile Christians. So, know that their decision that day had very important consequences. It set a course.

And today, we come to the crafting and sending of THE letter. In one sense, the content of the letter is virtually identical to what we studied last week from the mouth of James, Jesus' brother. They adopted his position and language. So, content wise, there is not much new here. And yet, from my perspective, this part carries special weight. This is where opinion turns into decision, where people sign their names to the agreement, where you have

something in your hands that you can look back on and reference. There is something permanent in a written, signed document.

And I see this point also being made in the text, because the text of the letter makes it into the text of the book of Acts, the Scriptures, the Word of God. In other words, this letter carries the weight with us as if God had written it Himself. The letter is not just referenced in Luke's account of the book of Acts, it is included in his account, included in the Bible, part of God's eternal Word. Are you catching the point?

Follow along as I read this section of the text, the concrete results of the Jerusalem Council. READ Acts 15:22-35.

Main point: God has determined that Christians are NOT required to fulfill the Jewish Law.

That is the truth. That is the Word of God. That was affirmed by the early Church after much debate, dispute, probably weeping and gnashing of teeth. It was affirmed by all the leadership, by the congregation of believers, by the Holy Spirit. And then the message was taken out, good news spread among the affected established churches and setting the tone for all future churches planted. The message of freedom in Christ has been included as an essential aspect of the gospel. Nothing could be more important to our faith than that!  
(2 parts)

I. The official stance of the Church concerning Gentile Christians and the Jewish Law is that they are not required to fulfill the law, but only to avoid offense to those still living under it. vv. 22-29

If someone comes to you claiming to speak for God and His church, telling you that you must obey Jewish Law in order to be acceptable before God and thus

saved from condemnation, reject their message. Tell them to get lost. Send them packing. They do not speak for Christ and His Church. Can you see how important is this document???

v.22- Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.

After the presentation of James covered last week, the text tells us that the Church came to a decision. Did you notice the wording? It wasn't just the apostles who decided, nor the apostles (the 12 plus a few) and the elders (the local leaders). It says here that the apostles, the elders and the church decided. I see here a bit of congregationalism! Leaders led, the Spirit directed, and the people affirmed. That sounds like a system that might work! Huh!!!

They chose the letter to be sent out not just by Paul and Barnabas, but by Judas and Silas as well, trusted known leaders of their congregation. Paul and Barnabas would perhaps be seen as biased and maybe even fraudulent by critics. They were on one side of the issue. They had incentive to authenticate their position. After all, as we will see in the letter, some have already gone out suggesting that they spoke for the Jerusalem church. In other words, the communication chain was already a problem. The issue of speaking with authority has already messed things up. A problem this central to the faith needed to be dealt with definitively, communicated clearly, disseminated widely by credible authorities whose testimony would be accepted. It was sent by trusted people who did not represent one side of the issue.

Just so you see how this works, this is precisely what is going on in Washington right now. Who can speak with accepted authority and credibility about whether the president of the United States has committed a crime? A special counsel? The Attorney General? The Democrats in Congress? The

President? His lawyer? TV anchors or talking heads? Law professors? Whose words should be believed? I'm not trying to start a war here, I'm just trying to illustrate how important it is that spokesmen for important decisions be received with credibility. I've almost lost hope in Washington!

23 With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

I love this letter. It is short, to the point, official and yet warm. It comes from the hands of the officially recognized leaders of the Jerusalem church. It comes from those closest to Jesus Himself, the apostles. It comes from the recognized leaders of the church. And yet, they call themselves "your brothers." After stating their credentials, they quickly place themselves on the same level, fellow Christians, brothers in the faith. They come with a determination as leaders, and yet as equals, brothers, on the basis of relationship rather than the hammer of authority. This is a good pattern for us all.

They address the letter to the Gentile believers in Jesus from the areas where the enquiry initiated, or perhaps to all the places where this has been an issue. You might want to include, "and to the Gentile believers in rural Nebraska." I think that would drive home my point.

24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

They are responding to a disturbing situation. Some have gone out, claiming the authority of a larger group. They presented themselves as if they had authority when in reality they simply spoke for themselves. Such situations usually end badly! Again, I love the perspective here. The letter recognizes that

their message left them troubled, confused, anxious. In other words, the message preached by such people was not good for them. I love that this is their perspective coming out of the council, especially since it took so much to get them all to this place.

25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

Notice how much of the letter concerns protocol. Clearly, communicating the official position of the church is a primary concern. Clearly, having their message received in a proper perspective is a primary concern. Clearly the reputation of Paul and Barnabas was at stake and needed to be protected. These men had bravely gone out for the cause of the gospel and had been impugned in their message and motives. The clear message of the letter is that they all were on the same side, fighting for the same cause, with the spiritual lives of many people in the balance. I find it amazing and instructive that after this difficult process and struggle, they want the people to know that they are all on the same page. This is how it is supposed to work. This is a pattern for good leadership. The process was hard, the issue went to the core of the participants, there didn't seem to be much room for common ground or compromise, and yet in the end, they were all together and they wanted the people to know it.

28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

The substance of the letter is even shorter, more to the point. In fact, it doesn't actually say what you would expect it to say. The issue is whether Gentile believers must submit to the Jewish Law. Do you see that issue directly referenced here? No. Instead, it says you are free beyond this point... So, the central issue is unstated and assumed. I find this interesting.

As we went through in some detail last week, the exceptions listed here do not reflect compromise, or a boiling down of the law, or the most important issues from the Law. Instead, they represent issues that were common in the culture and particularly offensive to the Jews sharing the same setting. If you do these things, you will cut off fellowship with Jews but more importantly Jewish believers. It would be hard to co-exist in a church where some people could not eat (by conviction and religious practice) certain food you brought to the church dinner because you could and it was common practice. That is the issue. The issue here was not theological or essential, but sociological, the issue was fellowship. You would do well to avoid these things. You practicing your freedom would so offend your fellow believers that they would have to stay away from you and the church. Don't do that! Otherwise you are free.

Once more, this is not saying there are no longer sin issues with Gentile believers. No, no, a thousand times, no. Sin is still sin. The 10 commandments are still commandment. The issue at hand is submission to a code, a code that was designed by the Code Maker (God) to prove to you that you cannot accomplish the requirements of the code. The purpose of the code was to lead you to Jesus. The Gentile believers by definition already had Jesus. Therefore, they had no need of the code. They had found their Messiah, their Christ, their Savior. The purpose of the Law had been fulfilled. Don't put them under the Law.

Can you see how this relates to legalism, the issue at the core for us? The purpose of the law was to lead you to Christ. If you have Christ, why should you put on the yoke of legalism? Legalism is the opposite of freedom in Christ. Legalism takes you in the opposite direction from holiness. I think I've been clear in making that point. I could preach on this topic all day.

II. The news of freedom in Christ brings great joy to followers of Jesus. vv. 30-35

As we already sang this morning and as so many of you know, singing about our freedom in Christ brings me to tears. This issue is at my core. So, when I read this text, you can imagine how I read it. These followers of Jesus, who received the news of the gospel with heartfelt joy, were then told that was not enough, that they needed to do more, that the road to acceptance by God had to go through a strict style of living that was completely foreign to them. I imagine their joy went to confusion, heartache, perhaps disillusionment. But now, after experiencing the arguing back and forth between Paul and his critics, after knowing the big powwow about the issue had taken place in Jerusalem with them at the center of it, they finally receive the news. And the news was that they were free! As Paul writes to these same people in Galatians 5:1 “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free!” How would you respond to such news?

30 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

Can you envision that scene? I imagine cheering, and prayers of thanksgiving, and singing, and hugging, and maybe even a potluck dinner with bacon and shrimp! Again, they got to read the letter. They got to see it with their own eyes. It was written down so that they could be confident that it was being communicated clearly by those in authority. This was now the official position of the church. Christianity stands on its own! They could move on, they were encouraged. They were free!

32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

These two men, sent to authenticate the letter, were a great help. They were not sent as authorities with a hammer, but as spokesmen for the brothers, who sought to build up, not tear down these new believers. And they did their job well.

This issue is so near and dear to my heart. I so often see things from the perspective of a new believer. I have been a follower of Jesus for well over 50 years, but I try to always see things as do new believers. I want to be among those who “encourage and strengthen” rather than put down or shackle. I want to protect them, encourage them, come alongside them. Adjusting to a whole new perspective on life is difficult enough, they ought not be saddled with more. I say, all of us who have been believers for a while, need to have new believers in our lives. Yes, they bring questions, issues, problems, baggage. But they bring LIFE! The longer you’ve been a Christian, the more you need some new believers in your life! It is crucial to your growth and theirs.

33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

I’m sure some of you have already noticed that there is no v.34. That is because after the verse divisions were inserted into the text, more and sometimes better manuscripts were found where the content of v.34 was not in the text. In the judgment of those making modern translations, they probably weren’t original to the text, but added for clarification that Silas stayed since he is mentioned later in v.40.

But here, we see that the message was received, the brothers were encouraged, the messengers went back home, and the work of Paul and Barnabas went forward. The gospel was preached and people came to Christ, the end of

an episode. The Church was now headed in THAT direction. So, was this the end of the issue? What do you think? Not at all. Paul was chased from town to town his whole life over this exact issue. But the issue was settled and we are living in the fruit of that decision. Their freedom is our freedom. And I don't know about you, but I want to be on the right side of freedom. Amen?

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1. We will live in the freedom bought for us by Jesus.
2. We will use this as a model on how to handle difficult questions in our day.
3. We will seek to communicate clearly with those under our authority.
4. We will seek to encourage and strengthen new believers.
5. We will resist the constant urge to put a yoke of slavery on those who are different from us.