

Acts 15:1-35 The Importance of the Church Meeting

Introduction

In the New Testament after the first few years as the Church began, a pattern for regular church life began to be established which by the 60s AD and the issuing of Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus led to a three-fold pattern or structure in local church life. There was the office of pastor-teacher /elder /bishop/ overseer – various titles used to refer broadly to the same position covering those men employed on a 'full-time' basis and others in a non-stipendiary capacity (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). A second office was that of deacon in which men and women were set apart for those particular ministries (I Timothy 3:8-13). The third and central body was the Church Meeting. The book of Acts highlights a few examples of the significance of the Church Meeting in the decision-making processes of the Christian Church. The most prominent of these meetings took place in Jerusalem in AD 48 and was of critical importance for the future of world Christianity. At that stage the mother Church in Jerusalem took all the major decisions about church practices, but had invited Paul and Barnabas from the main congregation in Syria to contribute to the meeting. The one issue of that meeting was this: 'On what basis are Gentiles accepted into the Church of Jesus Christ? Are they accepted by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, or on that plus circumcision and the observance of the Jewish religious and cultural practices? What the New Testament does not do is proscribe a set structural relationship beyond the local church. The importance of inter-dependence between congregations within a given country and beyond national boundaries is assumed, but its outworking is not specified. This is probably the main reason why there is such a variety of practices amongst churches around the world. Some churches following a hierarchical Episcopal model, adopted a pattern used in secular political life, but in all honesty as the Church grew in numbers and spread across more countries there was a real struggle as to how to relate effectively to one another across language and cultural boundaries in an era lacking adequate forms of international communications. In our Baptist family quarterly or monthly Church Meetings have been the majority pattern; then regional associations, followed much later by a Baptist Union (crucially once transport and communication links meant it was possible to bring people together in a reasonable timescale across a whole country). Then in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, various Christian denominations set up international bodies that met on a five-yearly basis to prayerfully discuss and plan ways of more effectively working together for Christ. Our Baptist World Alliance was established in 1905. The international office is based in Falls Church, Virginia, USA, with a handful of full-time staff and a reliance on several thousand people from around the world carrying out its work on a voluntary basis. Baptist World Aid, for example, has two full-time staff, but under its auspices teams of full-time staff and volunteers work around the world, on a wide variety of projects. In terms of our Baptist principles each local church is autonomous, that is responsible for conducting its own affairs under the Lordship of Christ, but also inter-dependent that is accountable to sister Churches to support and encourage one another in the work each is engaged. Let us look at

this Church Meeting in Jerusalem and catch a glimpse of the decision-making process in that congregation.

1. The Problem Stated (Acts 15:1-4)

¹*Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* ²*This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.* ³*The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.* ⁴*When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Once again the Church at Antioch was the place where a crucial issue for the future of world Christianity surfaced. Paul in the second chapter of his letter to the Churches in South Galatia (Turkey) reveals the background to this controversy and its implications for the faith and witness of the Christian Church. When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.* ¹²***Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*** ¹³*The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.* ¹⁴*When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"* ¹⁵*"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners'* ¹⁶*know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.* ¹⁷*"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!* ¹⁸*If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker.* ¹⁹*For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.* ²⁰*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* ²¹*I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"* (Galatians 2:11-21). What had happened was that without authorisation from the congregation in Jerusalem a group of Jewish followers of Jesus had gone to Antioch and told the Gentile majority congregation that unless they became Jews and went through all the Jewish rituals and lifestyle practices they could not be full members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Until that time, these men claimed, Gentile believers were ritually impure so, for example, sharing meals together was out of the question. Eventually all the Jews in that congregation were falling into line with their demands including Barnabas and Peter. Paul was in a minority of one when he challenged Peter at a Church Meeting in Antioch to practice what he had been preaching (see Acts 10-11). The basis of Paul's challenge was this: *We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners'* ¹⁶*know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified* (Galatians 2:16-17). I suspect from Acts 15:2 that the meeting was long and heated, but what mattered was that the right verdict was reached at the end.

Paul was vindicated, but a point of principle needed to be settled at the mother church so that this problem could be settled once and for all. On the way to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas briefed other congregations about this issue and explained what was at stake. A date was set for the meeting and in due course the congregation at Jerusalem, together with their leaders and a few invited guests met to discern what God's will was on this subject.

2. The Problem Debated (Acts 15:5-21)

It is helpful to remember that Peter was not the senior pastor of the church where he was in membership in Jerusalem. He certainly never held that position; or any leadership position in the congregation in Rome either. James the step-brother of Jesus had been appointed to that office and held it until he was murdered by Jewish religious leaders in 62AD. It is helpful to grasp that point as we look at this meeting. Luke's account is a summary of proceedings of a meeting in which all the people (or at least all the men) present were entitled to contribute, even if in practice the discussion was dominated by the contributions of some key leaders. However, he highlights the key contributors: (a) **The Strict Observant Jews** *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses."*⁶ *The apostles and elders met to consider this question* (Acts 15:6). First of all the men who had raised this issue or others of the same views succinctly stated their point. It was the most critical decision ever taken by a Christian Church Meeting as it affected not only the way we worship in services on a Sunday, but the way we live out our lives day by day and most crucially the nature of the gospel was at stake. Are we accepted by God on the basis of keeping a list of religious rules or by grace through faith in Christ who died in our place on the cross, whose sacrifice was sufficient to reconcile us to God and He to us? In other words are we saved by our good works topping up the merits secured by Jesus on the cross? Or was that a sufficient sacrifice for sin, once for all time for the salvation of His Church and our works a response in love to the God who has already saved us (Ephesians 2:8-10). The second key contribution came from Peter. After all it was Peter at a previous Jerusalem Church Meeting (Acts 11:1-18) who had been led by God to convince them unanimously that God welcomed Gentiles just as much as Jews into His family. Acts 11:18 at the close of that meeting recorded its verdict: *When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."* (b) **Peter** *After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why 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? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."* (Acts 15:7-11) Praise God for this powerful testimony from Peter. He reminded those present what had happened at Caesarea and the implications for Christian witness and congregational life. He affirmed that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ, not through the observance of Jewish laws of whatever kind. Peter wanted to make up for his failure in Antioch and did a magnificent job. These first generation believers were not perfect people –no more so than

you or me! We praise God for what they accomplished but also wish to learn from their mistakes and hopefully avoid too many of their own. Saying what he did showed Peter's humility. It takes courage to admit our mistakes and say sorry to one another on an individual basis; it takes even more integrity to do so in a Church Meeting or other larger gathering, but we respect one another when that happens all the more, but it is evidence of the grace of God at work in our lives. It reveals the importance of being accountable to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a loving thing to do to stand alongside each other in our good times and when we need help to put right our shortcomings. Paul told the Galatian Churches: *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.* ²*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).* (c) **Barnabas and Paul** ¹²*The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:12).* The implications of verse twelve appears to be that there was some heckling or indications of dissent from Peter's remarks. However, the whole body were touched by the Spirit of God as these two pioneer missionaries illustrated the work of the Holy Spirit in town after town and city by city over the years of their missionary labours. At the end of their contribution, and I suspect no-one else from the floor wished to speak after it, James the chairman of that meeting and the senior pastor of the Church sought to summarise what he understood God was saying to them as a church on that occasion. (d) **James** *When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' ¹⁸that have been known for ages. ¹⁹"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."* (Acts 15:13-21). James reminded them of the groundbreaking meeting some years earlier at which they had acknowledged that God accepted Gentiles, as well as Jews in His family. He quotes a passage from the Old Testament prophet Amos (9:11-12) to confirm the biblical basis for the judgement about to follow. He is aware, as I suspect all those present were, that another groundbreaking step had to be taken: assuming that Gentiles and Jews would worship together and partake of meals together and engage in witnessing for Christ in any particular place, on what basis would that fellowship and partnership be possible? He produced a set of practical guidelines that set a minimum standard to ensure that this problem could be overcome. What wisdom was in evidence in his words! Please pray for all the leaders of this church for the wisdom I need and we need to serve the Lord as we should. When we gather for a Church Meeting it is to seek His will not primarily to express ours; to discern what is best for the whole congregation, even if that is contrary sometimes to our personal preferences. Servant leadership so contrary to the spirit of our age is the pattern to follow – in essence Paul put it: *our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).*

3. The Problem Resolved (Acts 15:22-35)

²²Then 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. ²³With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You 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. ³⁰The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³²Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. ³³After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. A wonderful phrase at the heart of this letter to the Christian community overseas: ²⁸*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* (Acts 15:28). God directed the meeting to come to a unanimous conclusion. This is a successful Church Meeting. For legal purposes certain issues like minutes and accounts have to be voted on to comply with charity law, but notions in constitutions of obtaining ‘two-thirds majorities’ etc may be a necessity sometimes, but they fall woefully short of the successful operation of a biblically based Spirit directed Church Meeting. I praise God that Baptist Churches are making a real effort to return to the older model of Church Meetings of the gathered congregation and seeking to step back from the influences of the voluntary society business meetings that sprouted in great numbers and flourished in the Victorian era. They accomplished a great deal, but left a legacy of bureaucracy in the experience of many local churches, that left them lacking that sense of the leadership and direction of the Holy Spirit in their midst. *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...* is the standard for all our Church Meetings. Who made the choices and sensed the guidance of the Holy Spirit that day? *the apostles and elders, with the whole church* (Acts 15:22); we can assume congregational church government as this was the previous pattern when the deacons were appointed (Acts 6:2: *So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."* ⁵*This proposal pleased the whole group.*) They decided to send two key leaders of the Jerusalem Church, Judas Barsabbas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas and convey officially the verdict of that gathering. What did the letter say? It affirmed the rightness of the earlier policy of affirming the gospel of God’s grace to sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles on the same basis. Although Jews within their own homes and as it happened in the Jerusalem congregation also, could continue to observe the distinctive practices of their heritage while acknowledging Jesus as their Messiah, no such requirements were expected of Gentile believers. Had this not been the case church life today would be closer to the services and activities of a Jewish synagogue than the familiar patterns of worship and witness in a Christian church. James outlined four things from which Gentile Christians should abstain, in order for Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus could worship and share meals /hospitality together. This is not the sum total of guidelines for the Christian life, rather specific restrictions on Gentiles to enable them to

honour their Jewish brothers and sisters who in turn would not insist on their own ritual or religious laws operating within the wider Christian family. These regulations concerned personal and corporate holiness, endeavouring to honour God in our acts of worship and our relationship with other people. It is almost certainly based on the guidelines given in Leviticus chapters 17-18. (a) **Meat /food offered to idols** If a food product, usually meat had been taken to a pagan temple for a prayer of blessing on it, prior to eating it, a Christian was encouraged to decline eating such a product. Paul in I Corinthians 8 addresses this topic at length. ⁴*So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.* ⁵*For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"),* ⁶*yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.* ⁷*But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.* ⁸*But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat and no better if we do.* ⁹*Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.* ¹⁰*For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?* ¹¹*So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.* ¹²*When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (I Corinthians 8:4-12).* The food product hasn't changed by this action. However, for the sake of people around you who believe in the pagan gods or the for the sake of weak Christians who might be led astray again into worshipping these false gods don't touch this food that has been blessed in this way. The principle for us (see Romans 14 for more details) is this: I am free to make many choices about my lifestyle, but I will exercise great care to ensure that my choices do not hinder or harm a fellow believer in their Christian life. (b) **from blood** this is a reference to Leviticus 17:14: *because the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off."* This is linked to (c) **meat from strangled animals** based on Leviticus 17:13: *Any Israelite or any alien living among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth,* in other words food prepared for meals had to be produced in line with kosher procedures. Practical application today: if you were inviting a Jewish friend or a Muslim to your home for a meal you wouldn't serve pork chops or black pudding for religious reasons. We have become more sensitive to the needs of others in all kinds of contexts which is normally commendable. Was this the first guidance for cross cultural food preparation amongst the people of God? It is a sensitivity to the needs of others that is readily applicable in all kinds of contexts today. (d) **from sexual immorality** in context the primary reference is to the list in Leviticus 18 which prohibits a range of heterosexual, homosexual and bestial activities, together with a prohibition of child abuse in a religious context- a form of child abuse culturally acceptable at the time in many pagan communities. The purpose of the guidelines was to build trust and to strengthen fellowship between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. These brothers and sisters in Christ have set an example to us about how to conduct a Church Meeting and how using examples from their own cultural and religious setting we in our day ought to be sensitive about the lifestyle choices we make in the light of how they might help or harm other believers. As a result of these wise choices: *the people [in Antioch] read it and were glad for its encouraging message (Acts 15:31).* May your witness and mine produce a similar blessing on our fellow believers today, Amen.