

Unity, Charity, Consensus

Genesis 9:1–7, Acts 15:19–29

Today, we return to the Jerusalem council. This council is important not only for the *decision* that was reached (that believing Gentiles could be received into the church without undergoing circumcision) but also for the *manner* in which the matter was decided (that is, by a council of apostles and elders searching the Scriptures and discerning God’s will). The matter itself is of critical importance, for it concerns the gospel: are hopeless sinners saved by Christ, or by Christ *plus* something else (in this case, Christ plus circumcision)? A lot of people vainly hope that they will be saved by their good works, but according to the Bible, “we are all as an *unclean* thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.”¹ Under Old Testament law a person infected with the dread disease of leprosy was required to live outside of town, cover his face with a rag and warn anybody who approached, crying out, “Unclean, unclean!” Such is the status of a sinner before the throne of a God of infinite holiness. The sinner may be very proud of his good works, but those supposed good works are of no currency at all in the court of heaven. It is a fact that a guilty sinner can in no way earn his own salvation. He needs to have his sins washed away by Christ’s precious blood; he needs to have Christ’s perfect righteousness credited to his account by faith. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”² Abraham is the pattern for all the ages: if we want to be saved, we must believe the gospel, we must believe that by looking to God in faith, we are saved. Our sins are laid on Christ, and his perfect righteousness, which alone can qualify a sinner to enter heaven, is credited to us by faith.

The biblical gospel is that sinners are saved by Christ *alone*. The word *gospel* means *good news*, and the good news is that all who look to Christ by faith are saved. Yes, that is for you: if you know that you are a sinner—that you have broken God’s holy law, and are guilty—and you look to Christ by faith, you are saved—saved, not because you are good enough, but saved by the perfect righteousness of Christ, not by your good works. Good works can never be the *ground* or *basis* of our salvation; we are not saved *by* our good works. Rather, good works are the *fruit* of true faith; redeemed sinners live a life of good works out of *gratitude* to God for his salvation freely given. If you belong to Christ, you will delight in doing good works. You will delight to enter into his holy presence with his church for corporate prayer; the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; and to hear his word proclaimed by his minister. If you belong to Christ, you will love your neighbor and delight to serve him in the Savior’s name. You will do acts of

¹ Isa. 64:6

² Rom. 4:3

kindness out of love for the Savior. If you do not desire to do good works—if you are content to live a selfish, self-centered life, thinking only of your own happiness and pleasure—then that is evidence that you do *not* belong to Christ. You should go to God and tell him, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me” Pray for the fruit of true repentance. Examine yourself, whether you are in the faith.

Our text for exposition and application this morning begins at the close of the apostle James’ speech to the Jerusalem council. James appears to have been the moderator of the Jerusalem council. He was well-respected among the apostles and elders. Peter had spoken first, relating how under his ministry the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Gentiles, and how God had cleansed the hearts of both Gentiles and Jews by faith. Afterward, Barnabas and Paul spoke, telling how God through their hands had worked many miracles and wonders among the Gentiles. These speeches apparently encouraged others to speak as well, for twice Luke observes all the multitude becoming silent. After everyone had had their say, James was the last to speak. He specifically cited the prophet Amos, who recorded God’s promise to rebuild the tabernacle of David “so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name.” God had an elect people among the Gentiles, and this fact was no afterthought on God’s part; rather, it was known to him from eternity.³

Our text today has James concluding his speech by saying, “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.” F. F. Bruce’s comment is helpful: “James’s conclusion amounted to this: that all attempts to impose circumcision and its attendant legal obligations on Gentile converts must be refused. The way of salvation and the terms of church fellowship were to be the same for Jews and Gentiles alike: their basis was God’s free grace in Christ, to be received by faith alone. The fundamental principle of the gospel was thus safeguarded.”⁴

Yet there remained the practical matter of how believers from very different backgrounds would cooperate together in the kingdom of Christ: Jews who all their lives had lived under the ceremonial law as God’s peculiar people, as well as Gentiles who knew nothing of the Jewish ceremonies and were strangers to the covenants of promise. The Gentiles would bring customs into the church that would be highly offensive to the sensibilities of their Jewish brethren. So James continued, proposing “that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.” His purpose was not to add something to the requirement of faith, to argue that a sinner is saved

³ https://all-of-grace.org/sermon_manuscripts/2022-01-31_Acts_15_18_Known_unto_God.pdf

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 311

by Christ *plus* abstaining from certain foods or from sexual immorality. The gospel is *Christ alone*. It is not Christ plus circumcision, it is not Christ plus keeping certain other rituals; it is Christ alone. But to avoid unnecessary offense to their Jewish brethren, to keep the biblical ideal that would later be expressed by the apostle Paul: “Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God,”⁵ the Gentiles should abstain from foods that had been offered to idols, from things strangled, and from blood.

They should also be reminded to abstain from sexual immorality—that is, to live lives of purity, according to the seventh commandment. Then, as now, sex outside of lawful marriage was rampant in society—it was commonplace, and people didn’t even think of it as sinful. But God is holy and pure, and his law clearly states, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” His requirement for every person on earth is sexual chastity and purity in the single life, and monogamy and faithfulness in the state of lawful marriage: one man and one woman in a loving, committed, permanent relationship. If you have failed in the matter of sexual purity, there is forgiveness and hope in the gospel, but far better to “flee fornication,”⁶ as Joseph did when he fled from Potiphar’s wife. As Paul would later write, “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites . . . will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6). May God give his people grace to live joyful lives of sexual purity!

But where did James get the idea to suggest that the Gentiles “abstain . . . from things strangled, and from blood”? This actually predated the law of Moses and God’s choosing of Abraham and his seed. It had been revealed to Noah, just after the flood. Clearly, this is a command for the whole human race, not just the Jewish people. Listen again to our Old Testament text: “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man’s brother I will require the life of man. ‘Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.’” Here was the clear command of God revealed to Noah for him and all his descendants—that is, the whole human race. Man may eat meat—that is, flesh. Man is not *required* to eat meat; he may choose to be a vegetarian; but if he chooses to eat meat, he is required to drain out the blood. This, of course,

⁵ 1 Cor. 10:32

⁶ 1 Cor. 6:18

is routinely done in the preparation of beef, pork and fowl for human consumption, but it is important not to overlook the *reason* for this, and that is to teach the sanctity of life. God alone is the Lord and giver of life. Man can mix chemicals together, but only God can bring them to life. Life is a gift from the hand of a loving God. Human life especially is precious, but God values the life of all his creatures. Since the Flood, man has been given permission to eat meat, but animals are not to be needlessly or wantonly slaughtered. When they are slaughtered and butchered for human consumption, the blood is to be drained out first. This is to be a permanent reminder to all mankind that life is a gift of a loving God.

Premeditated murder is a grievous sin against the image of God. Whoever sheds innocent blood is to be brought to justice, and the perpetrator of such an affront against God's perfect image is to be put to death by lawful execution. As we read in Numbers 35, "Blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it." Let it be emphasized: human life, from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death, is to be valued by all peoples as the gift of a holy God. The sixth commandment is "Thou shalt not kill" (also translated "You shall not murder"). It requires "all careful studies, and lawful endeavors, to *preserve* the life of ourselves and others."⁷ The preservation of human life is one of man's principal duties. Suicide and homicide are grave sins against the image of God in man.

So it was not without good reason that James at the Jerusalem council would recommend that the church should inform its Gentile members "to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood." Salvation is not faith in Christ *plus* abstaining from these things, but the redeemed of Jesus Christ will gladly obey their heavenly Father by living a life of good works as a heartfelt response to his grace. Good works are not in any way the *ground* of our salvation; rather, they are a *response* of a renewed heart. We do not do good works *in order to* be saved; we do them *because* we are saved. We do them out of gratitude for our salvation. My dear hearer, do you sincerely want to do good works? As the Savior said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."⁸

Let us think through our text using the three words that form the title of our sermon: unity, charity, consensus. These are beautiful graces that ought to characterize every church, and to which all Christians ought to aspire. First,

1. Unity

This would later be explicitly spelled out in the letter to the Ephesians, where the apostle would urge us to "[endeavor] to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond

⁷ Westminster Larger Catechism 135 (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 957)

⁸ Matt. 5:16

of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Now surely there is diversity in the Christian church. We know that this is God’s intent, for at the final day the company of the redeemed will include men and women “out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). Already in the book of Acts the church was learning to adjust to the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ. The church is composed of men and women, boys and girls, from a variety of backgrounds and cultures, with different likes and dislikes, different opinions, different tastes, different thought patterns. But all of us are duty-bound to “[cast] down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God [and bring] every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). This is not optional but mandatory. When we are brought out of darkness into God’s marvelous light, we need to self-consciously reprogram our minds to think God’s thoughts after him. Our thinking, our reasoning and our thought-patterns must be brought under the lordship of Christ. We are not permitted to disagree with Jesus Christ. The idea of a professing Christian reserving the right to disagree with Christ on abortion or same-sex marriage or the difference between a man or a woman is unthinkable. Yet we live in a highly individualistic culture. There are a lot of men and women in public life who profess to be good Christians but who do not agree with Christ on these matters. They need to be called out and told, “You must choose: do you agree with Christ, or do you not? If you do not agree with Jesus Christ, then you are not a Christian. Christ must be Lord of all; a Christian does not have the right to disagree with his Master. When you profess faith in Jesus Christ, you voluntarily give up your right to disagree with Christ. If the Bible teaches something, then you need to get on board.”

So there is diversity in the Christian church, because we come from different backgrounds. Yet we are to do all within our power to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. When the Jerusalem council was confronted with the teaching that it was necessary for believing Gentiles to be circumcised, and to keep the law of Moses, it answered in one voice: “We stand firm on the gospel. Salvation is by Christ alone. The way of salvation and the terms of church fellowship are the same for Jews and Gentiles alike. What is required in order to become a communicant member of the Christian church is a credible profession of faith in Christ alone.” Such was the unity of the early church, and such must be the unity of the church today. But secondly, consider

2. Charity

Charity is a beautiful word that comes from a Latin root meaning love. In the words of the King James Version, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is *charity*”—that is love. We are not referring to romantic love, but to the love that all Christians are to have one for another. Jesus said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to

another.” Love for other members of the body is not optional. There must be no class distinctions within the body. Every member is important. Every member should be loved, the lovable and the unlovable, even those whose opinions on peripheral matters we may not agree with. Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now we know in part; but then shall we know even as also we are fully known. The church is not yet perfected, but it will be one day. In the meantime we must strive for unity but practice charity. We live in such a touchy world. I read the other day of a man losing his job for referring to Taiwan as a country! Academics have lost their jobs over forgetting to refer to students by their chosen pronouns. Brethren, these things ought not so to be—and cannot be within the church of Jesus Christ. We are to “love one another with a pure heart fervently.” We are to practice Christian charity.

The Jerusalem council was united on the gospel, but self-consciously chose to practice charity as well. The Gentile Christians were reminded of their duty not to cause needless offense to their Jewish brethren. Jewish Christians were taught to accept their Gentile brethren and “not trouble those from among the Gentiles who [were] turning to God.”

The Christian church is to practice charity. In the words of one poet, “Like a mighty army moves the church of God; brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod; we are not divided; all one body we, one in hope and doctrine, one in *charity*.”⁹ We must all have a sincere love for one another. Is this the desire of your heart—of mine? Are you charitable? If not, then you must repent and be reconciled to those you have offended. You should do this before coming to the Lord’s table, so that the practice of the Lord’s supper is in actuality a demonstration of the church’s true unity. Thirdly,

3. Consensus

Those of us who have attended meetings of presbytery and general assembly might notice that the wording of the final resolution is slightly different from what had been proposed. Remember, this motion had been proposed by James, who was one of the twelve apostles. Clearly, this man, though he is called “James the less” (ὁ μικρός, Mark 15:40), probably because he was either younger or smaller in stature than the other James, the son of Zebedee, was a man of great stature at the Jerusalem council. He was one of the Twelve. He was one of the bishops of the Jerusalem church—regarded as the mother church. He was adept in the Scriptures. He was a peacemaker, a conciliator. Consider the wording of the original motion, and compare it to the final, adopted motion:

Proposed: that Gentiles “abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.”

⁹ Sabine Baring-Gould, “Onward, Christian Soldiers”

Adopted: that Gentiles “abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

There are two differences: the change of a word, and the change of the word-order. The proposed motion said “things *polluted by* idols”; the motion that was finally adopted had “things *offered to* idols.” This had to do with meat that had been offered in heathen worship. As Paul would later write, “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market (KJV: “shambles”), asking no questions for conscience’ sake; for ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness’” (1 Cor. 10:25–26). Meats sold in the meat market that had been sourced from heathen temples might be available at a discount price, and thus more economical. But things *offered to* idols had become, in the minds of the more scrupulous brethren, things *polluted by* idols—that is, unfit for human consumption. The church will later learn that fellow-members of the body are not to be judged over trivial matters: “Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him” (Rom. 14). But for the time being, Gentiles were encouraged, out of charity, not to cause undue offense to their Jewish brethren.

Also, as I stated before, the word order is different. This is minor. But James could have said, “Hey, I am the leader of the Jerusalem church; I am offended that any of you should propose any changes to my wording”—yet he did not. Unity, charity and consensus were all valuable and worth pursuing.

Perhaps you’ve heard the familiar quote “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” This is a worthy maxim that has been attributed to various people, including Saint Augustine. Whatever its source, the word “essentials” needs to be defined. It cannot mean that any clear teaching of Scripture is non-essential. If the Bible teaches something, then it is essential; it is the Christian’s duty to follow it. But the gospel is preeminently essential. God saves sinners through faith in his Son. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Spirit is God—there are three Persons in the Godhead, yet there is one God. The Father conceived the plan of salvation in eternity past. He gave a people to the Son, and sent his Son into the world to save them. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He died on the cross to save us from hell. He sent his Spirit to draw his elect savingly to himself. All those who, taught by the Spirit, know that they are sinners with no hope of salvation outside of Christ, come to him and receive him in true faith are saved—washed in the Savior’s blood, redeemed by the Lamb, sealed with the Spirit, bound for heaven.

Let us, brothers and sisters, pursue unity, charity and consensus, to the glory of Christ. Amen.