

Acts 090

Liberty

Acts 15:19-22

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Acts 1:8 is the outline of the book, recording the words of Christ to the disciples:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem [Acts 1-7], and in all Judea and Samaria [the outer areas outside of Jerusalem, the church's witness, Acts 8-12], and even to the remotest part of the earth [Acts 13-28]" (Acts 1:8).

Structure (Acts 1:8)

- Jerusalem (Acts 1–7)
- Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–12)
- **Remotest part of the earth (Acts 13–28)**
 - 1st missionary journey (Acts 13–14)
 - **Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-35)**
 - 2nd missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22)
 - 3rd missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:17)
 - Trip to Rome (Acts 21:18–28:31)



We are in that third section, Paul, having completed that first missionary journey into southern Galatia. As he leaves the borders of Israel and goes into southern Galatia on his first missionary journey, you see something very interesting happen as the gospel goes to Jewish synagogues. They turn it down primarily, and they almost run Paul out of Dodge, so to speak, run him out of town.

The Lord uses that to get the gospel to the Gentiles, the non-Jews, and they start getting saved in vast numbers, to the point where, by the time Paul finishes his first missionary journey, we have a crisis in the church: What do we do with all these Gentiles? The leadership of the church was still all Jewish. You do not have any Gentile converts in the body of Christ until Cornelius gets saved along with his group there in Caesarea Philippi.

Now we have a situation where the Gentile population is growing, and it may even eclipse the Jewish population within the church. The church has an issue: What do we do with all these saved Gentiles? The question is, do they have to come under the Law of Moses to be part of the church? You could see why the leadership would think that,

because that is the way it has worked with God going all the way back to Mount Sinai. If a Gentile wanted to walk with God, then they became what is called a Jewish proselyte, and they went under the Law of Moses to grow as a Christian.

The most famous gentile proselyte we have in the Bible is someone named Ruth, who was a Moabitess from the area of Jordan, modern-day Jordan. When she wanted to walk with the Lord, she said to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi, "Your God will be my God, and your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:16). If you want to grow as a believer in Yahweh, then you have to go under the Law of Moses to be part of the nation of Israel. The question is: Is that how it is going to work in the Church Age? Do you have to go under the Law of Moses to grow as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ? They have a big council meeting in Acts 15 to resolve this issue.

Paul returns to Syrian Antioch. That is where all the missionary journeys are started from, and two of the three end in Antioch. They have this crisis they need to figure out. Paul and Barnabas leave Antioch and travel to Jerusalem, where the apostles were—the leaders of the church—to get a word from the Lord to get this issue resolved. That is the occasion of Acts 15.

Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35)

- I. Occasion (1-5)
- II. Declarations (6-21)
 - A. Meeting convened (6)
 - B. Peter's address (7-11)
 - C. Barnabas' & Paul's testimony (12)
 - D. James' address (13-21)
 - 1. Introduction (13a)
 - 2. Addresses (13b)
 - 3. Peter's address (14)
 - 4. Old Testament citation (15-18)
 - a) Introduction (15)
 - b) Amos 9:11-12 (16-18)
 - 5. Conclusions (19-21)
 - a) Concerning the Gentiles (19-20)
 - (1) Adherence to OT Law not required (19)
 - (2) Abstentions to avoid offence (20)
 - (a) Food sacrificed to idols (20a)
 - (b) Fornication (20b)
 - (c) Things strangled (20c)
 - (d) Blood (20d)
 - b) Concerning Moses (21)
- III. Decision (22-29)
- IV. Delivery (30-35)

Then comes the declarations at this meeting in Jerusalem. This is commonly thought of as the first Jerusalem Council, but it really is not; it is the second Jerusalem Council.

The first Jerusalem Council took place in Acts 11, to resolve an issue that happened in Acts 10.

What happened in Acts 10? A gentile got saved. All of these Jewish believers are saying, "Can a Gentile really get saved?" They have a big powwow in Jerusalem in Acts 11 to say, "Yes, that can happen." That was Jerusalem Council number one. That was more of a justification issue: Can a Gentile really get saved? What we are dealing with in Acts 15 is the second Jerusalem Council, which is not a justification issue; it is a church issue, an ecclesiological issue. They already knew that a Gentile could get saved from Acts 10-11. The issue here is, do these new Gentiles that are believers in Christ have to come under the Law of Moses to grow as a Christian the way it has always worked for the nation of Israel, going back to Mount Sinai? That is what they are trying to figure out.

Here come the declarations. The meeting is convened (Acts 15:6). You cannot even have a meeting like this today. This ruling affected the whole body of Christ. The reason it did is because the apostles made the decision, the ones to whom had been given the power of binding and loosing. Let us say that I wanted to see something happen within Christianity. Could I have a meeting and make some kind of ruling and it would affect the whole body of Christ? The answer is that I do not have that power because I am not an apostle. The apostles have been dead for 2,000 years, so I do not have the power of binding and loosing the way the apostles had. It is very significant that the apostles are the ones that convened this meeting. If it had not been, and if it had been any other people, it would have no binding effect on us today. That is in Acts 15:6.

Then in Acts 15:7-11, Peter, the one that Jesus gave the keys to the Kingdom to, speaks up. He makes some great points, one of which is, "Us Jews have done a terrible job keeping the Law, so why in the world would we tell these Gentiles they have to keep the Law? we are the ones that received the Law from God at Mount Sinai and we have stunk up the whole place trying to do it" (Acts 15:11).

It is like my basketball coach. When we were playing poorly he would call us over to the sideline and say, "You guys are stinking up the place." The nation of Israel, they stunk up the place. They went into captivity because of their violations of the Law, etc. Peter says, "Us Jews have done a terrible job keeping the Law. Why would we think these Gentiles could maintain a yoke that we Jews could never maintain?"

Paul and Barnabas speak up, and they say, "God was favoring us on the first missionary journey because all these Gentiles were getting saved without the Law." Finally, here comes the heavy hitter. James the half brother of Christ, speaks up in Acts 15:13-21. This is the same James that would write the Epistle of James that you are familiar with. This is the same James that was the pastor of the Jerusalem church. He is someone that the apostles knew, and they could authenticate what he was saying.

He gives an introduction. (Acts 15:13). He addresses the brethren (Acts 15:13), and he makes a reference to what Peter just said (Acts 15:14). Then he comes in and gives this

tremendous Old Testament citation from Amos 9:11-15. We spent a lot of time analyzing how he is using the Book of Amos here, because it is a big matter of theological controversy. You can go back and review our four lessons that we did on that just before taking the Christmas break.

The bottom line is that James—and he has a reason from the Scripture to get this resolved, because in a book where there are constant voices from the Lord, like "The Lord said, 'Do this'" or "The Lord said, 'Do that'"—in a book where there are constant visions from God, there is nothing like that here. So James has to reason from the Scripture and the only Scripture they had at that time—remember, the New Testament had not yet been written except for a few books of the New Testament that were barely coming into existence—he has to reason from the Scripture regarding how to resolve this issue. He basically quotes, to make a long story short, Amos 9:11-15.

He says, "You know what? These Gentiles, once the Millennial Kingdom comes, are going to be full-fledged participants in the Millennial Kingdom. They are citizens in the Millennial Kingdom yet to come. (He is reasoning from God's purposes in history.) Since that is true, reasoning backwards, why would we throw up the Law of Moses against them as an encumbrance?" That is James's big contribution.

Then we come to the part that we have not studied yet, Acts 15:19-21, where James, still speaking, gives his conclusions. He gives his conclusions concerning the Gentiles (Acts 15:19-20), then concerning Moses and the Jewish people in all these different towns respecting the Law of Moses (Acts 15:21). What does he say to these concerning the Gentiles?

In Acts 15:19 he says that adherence to the Mosaic Law to become a member of the church is not required. You can come if you are saved as a Gentile, you come right on in. As a Gentile, you do not have to be like Ruth, who was a Jewish proselyte to become a full-fledged member of the church. He says that in Acts 15:19. Only an apostle—James, of course, not one of the original apostles, but the apostles all knew him, because he was the half-brother of Christ—only someone like that could make this kind of ruling.

"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:19).

You will notice this expression here: *"We are not going to trouble them."* That is how God looks at people who put unnecessary hurdles on those that want to walk with Him. That is what the Pharisees always do. "You want to be a part of this church? Then you better not smoke or chew or go with girls who do" kind of mentality. They get into all kinds of things about jewelry and earrings and what side of the head your hair is parted on (if you are fortunate enough to have hair still), what kind of clothes you are supposed to wear, and all these kinds of things. They make it look like if you want to walk with God, then all of these external requirements better be met. You better not go to movies that are outside of PG 13 or whatever.

People do this constantly. "If you want to go to this church then you have to wear these kinds of clothes and all this kind of stuff." How does God look at that kind of encumbrance? He says it is an unnecessary trouble on people. That is right there in Acts 15:19:

"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:19).

This is how Paul explained legalists in Galatians 1:6-7, where he says:

"I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are those who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6-7).

The bottom line is that you are saved by faith alone under the power of the Holy Spirit alone without the Mosaic Law. The bottom line is that you grow as a Christian by faith alone, under the power of the Holy Spirit alone as revealed in the Word of God alone. Anybody that wants to add something beyond that is putting a disturbance, an unnecessary hurdle, or an unnecessary encumbrance. That is all in Acts 15:19:

"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:19).

This is where James seems like he is contradicting himself. He preaches all this liberty and all of this freedom, but then he turns around and he says: "Abstain from these four things" (Acts 15:20). What are those four things? Here they are:

"But that we write to them that [the Gentiles turning to Christ] that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled—"

That would be sexual activity outside of the bonds of marriage. If someone is involved in sexual behavior outside of marriage, that is adultery. If someone is doing it as a single person not being married, that is called fornication. Those are things obviously, to stay away from.

"But that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:20).

You read that and say, "James, which is it? You just told everybody that they do not have to adhere to the Law of Moses to join the church, and then you throw up four restrictions from the Law of Moses. So what is going on?"

It looks like a contradiction until you understand it from this angle. The Bible, Paul the Apostle, and all the apostles, for that matter, are very, very clear: You do not have to come under the Law of Moses to be justified before God. That is by faith alone. You do not have to come under the Law of Moses to grow as a Christian. That is what Galatians 3:3 teaches.

Do you come under New Testament teaching? Yes., But we are dealing here with the Law of Moses. We do not have a lot of New Testament teaching yet when Acts 15 was written. Finally, you do not have to come under the Law of Moses to join the church. That is what the Jerusalem ruling was about. There may be times when you deliberately put yourself under the Law of Moses not for justification, not for sanctification, not for purposes of ecclesiology or church membership, but you do it so as to avoid being an offense to the Jews.

I think the background of all of this is something that Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are under law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I might by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Even though there is nobody more aggressive in the Bible than Paul, on this point, he just said over and over again, that you do not get saved by keeping the Law. You do not grow as a Christian by keeping the Law of Moses. Acts 15 is saying that you do not even have to go under the Law of Moses to join the church. Even though Paul taught all of this, there are times coming in the Book of Acts—once in Acts 16, once in Acts 18, and once in Acts 21—three times he puts himself under the Law.

The first instance involves the circumcision of Timothy. The second instance involves Paul taking something that you will find in the Book of Numbers called The Nazarite vow (Numbers 6). It is a vow that Samson took, if you remember from the Old Testament. Paul went under the Law and took that vow (Acts 18:18). Then in Acts 21:26, Paul, who preached over and over again against animal sacrifices, how animal sacrifices are unnecessary, because the cross of Christ fulfilled all animal sacrifices, you will see Paul himself issuing an animal sacrifice (Acts 21:26).

You are looking at this saying, "Paul, which is it? Will the real Paul please stand up? You say we are not under the Law, then you are putting people under the Law, and you are putting yourself under the Law." Why would he do it? He wants you to understand that he never did it for justification. In fact, he fought people that argued that you have to

go under the Law to be justified. He never did it for purposes of sanctification. In fact, he fought people like the Judaizers in the Book of Galatians, who were trying to put people under the Law to grow as a Christian. He never did it because he felt like he had to do it to join the church or to be a part of the church. The ruling of the Jerusalem Council said the exact opposite.

"Then Paul, why did you do it?" There is a very simple reason: he did it selectively in his life. He did it because he knew that if he did not do it, the people that he is trying to reach would be offended by him. It is very difficult to reach someone that you are simultaneously offending. In fact, unless God does a work, it is impossible. Paul says, "If I can take that offense away (and I think Paul's perspective is that the gospel is offensive enough), then I do not want to add an offense." Galatians 5:22 calls the gospel the stumbling block, the stumbling block of the cross. The gospel is offensive enough. "If I can remove some kind of man-made offense by submitting to something, then I will do it. If you will listen to me and it will give me an opportunity to reach you, then I will put myself under the Law."

Let me give you an example of how this works out in my life. I have a chance to speak at different conferences and things like that. There are some churches that are very casual. If I walk in wearing a tie and a suit they are offended, and I know that because I know them and they do not like that. If I am going to step into someone's pulpit with a tie on, knowing that the tie is offensive, you know what I will do with the tie? My preference is to wear ties—not Wednesday, but Sunday. You know what I will do with my preference? I will just say, "I do not need to adhere to my preference if you guys will listen to what I am saying. I will take the suit and tie off and I will put something more casual on if that means you are actually going to listen to what I am saying and not be simultaneously offended and focus the whole time on the fact that the guy has a tie."

There are other churches that you go into, and if you do not have a suit and tie the people freak out. What do you do in those cases? You put the suit and tie on. If they are going to focus on that issue the whole time and not listen to what I am saying, then I will accommodate whatever man-made rule exists out there.

Do you see how this works? That is how Paul functioned. Paul's driving thrust was not about his freedom in Christ, his rights. This is a very un-American way of thinking because we constantly think about our rights, our way of doing things. Paul's point is that you have a lot of freedom in Christ, but if I have to put aside something to avoid an offense which will allow me to more effectively minister, then I will go ahead and do that.

I think that is what James is saying here. James is saying to these Gentile converts, "Look, you have a ton of freedom in Christ that has nothing to do with the Law of Moses, but here are some things you ought to stay away from, because if you do not stay away from these things then you are going to offend the Jews. How in the world are you going to reach the Jews when in their minds you are disrespecting something that is very important to them, the Law of Moses, which had been in existence for 1,500 years?"

The first thing James says to stay away from is food sacrificed to idols. That is a provision of the Mosaic Law.

"Otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifices to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice" (Exodus 34:15).

Under the Law of Moses you did not eat food sacrificed to idols. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8, says, "If you want to eat food sacrificed to idols as a Church Age Christian, then you go right ahead and do that, but do not do it in the presence of somebody who has a weaker understanding of these things than you have, because you are going to be simultaneously tearing that person down without realizing it."

Do I have the opportunity to eat food sacrificed to idols? You bet I can do that, but why would you insist on that freedom so aggressively and not lay it aside? Is that not what Christ did? Christ came into this world not to demand His own rights, but to lay them aside. Lay those things aside if it means more effectively serving someone, more effectively reaching someone, more effectively evangelizing someone, etc.

This whole subject comes up with alcoholic beverages. Is there a verse in the Bible that says, "Thus saith the Lord, 'Never consume alcohol?'" When you mow your lawn in the Houston sun and you go into your house and you have a beer afterwards to cool down, is there something in the Bible that says, "Thus saith the Lord, 'Thou shalt not ever do that.'" You are not going to find that in the Bible. What you will find in the Bible are prohibitions against drunkenness. I can show you those verses, but there is not a "thus saith the Lord: No alcoholic beverages whatsoever."

This is one of those freedom in Christ issues. However, when you exercise that freedom, why would you do that in the presence of a recovering alcoholic? Then what you are doing is demanding your freedom to the point where it is destroying somebody else. There are people out there that have all kinds of rules. I had a roommate once who was a recovering alcoholic, and he knew that if he took one sip of this or one sip of that, then he was gone. He did not want anything in the apartment with any alcohol in it whatsoever such as cooking things and those types of things.

When those kinds of things came up, I just abstained. I could have gotten into a theological fight with everybody saying, "This is my right. I can drink this and drink that." But I laid aside the right for his benefit, because I knew that my exercise of that right would be a detriment to him.

That is what you are dealing with Paul. Paul was all about rights and freedom, but he was also about volitionally laying them aside for the benefit of somebody else. I think that is the spirit in which you have to capture James's remarks. If you do not look at it from that lens, it looks like James is contradicting himself. "You are not under the Law, but you are under the Law."

The bottom line is you are not under the Law—the Law of Moses I am talking about—but be careful about how you wield that right because there might be a devout Jew around or a brand new Christian coming out of Judaism that has very strong opinions about that, and that person is going to need some time to grow. Do not exercise that right in the presence of somebody that is going to be so offended by what you are doing that you cannot even reach him anymore.

Keep your eye on the big picture here. The big picture is world evangelization. That is what we are all about: the Great Commission. It is not about, "This right is mine. That right is mine." Although those rights indeed are yours.

The second thing that they are to abstain from is fornication. That is also in Acts 15:20. It comes right out of Leviticus 18:6-18.

"None of you shall approach any blood relative of his to uncover nakedness; I am the Lord. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, that is, the nakedness of your mother. She is your mother; you are not to uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness. The nakedness of your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born outside, their nakedness you shall not uncover. The nakedness of your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter, their nakedness you shall not uncover; for their nakedness is yours" (Leviticus 18:6-10).

What James is saying here is that you need to respect the sexual mores of the Law of Moses so as to avoid an offense to the Jews. Can you say to yourself, "You know what? Nobody is around for me to offend, so I will just engage in all kinds of sexual immorality"? Is that what the Bible is teaching? No. Sorry to disappoint, because sexual immorality, when you commit it, does not only violate the Law of Moses, it violates the Law of Christ, which is in the New Testament.

Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated for us in the New Testament, although those commandments are part of the Law of Christ and the Law of the Spirit, and not the Law of Moses. The Law of Christ, which is what we are under, which is really not being developed here, looks a lot like the Law of Moses at points, but it has key differences.

Just because two different systems have the same prohibitions does not mean the two systems are one and the same. I am from California. California has laws on its books against stealing. In 1999, we moved to Texas. I got to the promised land as fast as I could, by the way. Texas has, on its books and in its laws, prohibitions against stealing, but if I commit a crime in Texas by stealing something, I am not going to be tried in California. Although, arguably in California, they are a little leaner, shall we say, than in Texas (but that is another issue). California has its own separate legal system.

Just because two legal systems have similar things in them does not mean legal system A is legal system B. If you steal in Texas you will not be tried in California; you will be tried in Texas. If you steal in California you will not be tried in Texas; you will be tried in California. The two legal systems look similar, but they are different.

What James is dealing with here is: We are not under the Law of Moses, but that does not give somebody carte blanche freedom to go out and start committing sexual immorality. If you commit sexual immorality as a Christian, you are guilty under the Law of Christ, which is New Testament revelation. A lot of those ideas are yet to be developed in the New Testament, but James is specifically dealing with the Old Testament and telling these Gentiles, "Be very careful about how you exercise your freedoms so as to avoid offending the Jews. Once you offend the Jews it is very difficult, if not impossible, to reach the Jews."

The third thing that the Gentiles are to stay away from is things strangled. That is from Leviticus 17:13, which says:

"So when any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth" (Leviticus 17:13).

Do not eat something strangled in the presence of the Jewish people, or in front of a brand new Christian that has a weaker understanding of these things because you are unnecessarily offense to him. Although, if you are by yourself, you are free to eat things strangled.

Stay away from blood. I do not know of anybody that consumes blood. I guess that was an issue back in the day. That is from Leviticus 17:10-14, and it says:

""Any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, "No person among you may eat blood, nor may any alien who sojourns among you eat blood." So when any man from the sons of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, in hunting catches a beast or a bird which may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with the earth. For as the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, "You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off"" (Leviticus 17:10-14).

The Book of Leviticus, Old Testament law says, "Do not consume blood." But as a New Testament Christian if it does not violate the Law of Christ, I guess you are free to consume blood if you want to do that. Do not invite me over for your party; I am not

interested in doing that. As a New Testament Christian, you are free to eat things strangled, if that is what you are into. As a New Testament Christian, you are free to eat food sacrificed to idols, if that is what you are into, but do not do those things in the presence of someone who thinks that is a sin. Take that freedom and lay it aside so that you can be a better minister to them, a better servant to them, a better evangelist to them, and so you can reach them.

That is the spirit in which these remarks are offered, and unless you understand that angle, James does not make any sense. First, James says that you are free from the Law. Then he says, "Do not go under the Law." I think the way to understand it is that you are free from the Mosaic Law for purposes of justification; you are free from the Mosaic Law for purposes of sanctification; and you are free from the Mosaic Law for purposes of ecclesiology. However, even though you have that freedom and you are on the right side of the theological argument, do not exercise that freedom in the presence of someone who does not understand what you understand.

It is a tough balancing act here. We are free in Christ. I can do an awful lot as a New Testament Christian that people under the Law of Moses could never do. I am also in the business of monitoring people around me all the time, wondering if I exercise this right or that right, am I putting an unnecessary encumbrance or offense upon them? James explains why in Acts 15:21 concerning the Gentiles concerning the Law of Moses:

"For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21).

What James is saying here is, "Do not offend the Jews who hear the Law of God read in every Gentile city. That is where the gospel is going. It is going into all these cities, and they all have synagogues. When you walk into that city, your goal is to reach the unsaved people. Now, how in the world are you going to reach those people if you are disrespecting their law? Now, you may not be disrespecting their law because you are free in Christ.

If you have a theological debate on it, you will probably end up being the winner, but who cares? Have you ever heard the saying: Winning an argument but losing a heart? You can be right and your rights could be accurate, and you can alienate someone in the process of pursuing your rights to such an extent that they do not want anything to do with you. They do not want to hear anything you have to say.

You may have very strong opinions about whether the pastor should have a tie on or not. I have my own perspective on that. My view on it is that if you go talk to your financial counselor or your lawyer or your doctor and he comes out dressed casually, it diminishes their professionalism in my mind. If I am standing behind a pulpit on Sunday talking about eternal things, should I not look the part since what I am doing is actually more eternal than what you get from a doctor or a lawyer or a financial counselor?

That is my private belief system. I could be completely correct in that belief system, but I am not going to demand my right to do that in a church that gets offended if I put the stupid tie on. There are pastors that have the exact opposite perspective, that we should be casual. That is what they say. Let us say I was of that mindset. I am not going to demand that freedom, assuming they are right with that, in a church where people are offended if you do not have a suit and tie on behind the pulpit.

I think, in the United States, we are very good at demanding our rights. We are not so good at laying them aside voluntarily, volitionally, for the benefit of somebody else. We have a tendency, yours truly included, to think of only ourselves in this—my rights, my freedom—when the gospel says of Jesus that He came into the world not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

Talk about a guy that laid aside His rights! My goodness. Jesus did that. He gave up heaven for a season. He was in a position of glory at the Father's right hand. He volitionally, on His own accord, gave it up for a season—not His deity, but the privileges that He had. Of course, He regained those after He ascended back to the Father's right hand, but for 33 years? If you are the richest person in the world, would you give that up for 33 years for the benefit of someone else and live like a poor person? Would you do that on your own accord?

I look at that and I say, "I could never do that. I am an American. Why would I do something like that?" Wait a minute. I am an American, and I am not putting down this country. I love this country. If you cut me open, I would bleed red, white, and blue. Honestly, I am a very patriotic person. However, I am an American second; I am a Christian first. What I follow is Jesus, who gave up things for the benefit of somebody else. I think that is more of the mindset we need to find ourselves in, or else we are going to lose the purpose for which we are here on the earth.

Why are we even here? We are here to reach the lost, are we not? We are here to edify those less mature. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to do that when you are simultaneously offending somebody, because you are demanding and insisting on a particular right that you have.

"As the gospel goes into all these cities, you have to keep in mind," James says, "that the Law of Moses is going to be read everywhere you go. So put yourself under the Law of Moses, not for justification, sanctification, or ecclesiology, but put yourself under the Law of Moses to reach those folks."

Then you come to Acts 15:22-29. James is finished talking. The declarations have all been given. Finally, we get a decision in this whole thing (Acts 15:22-29). First, the emissaries are selected. This is a decision happening in Jerusalem, and it is going to be delivered to Christian churches all over the known world. There is no internet; there is no Wi-Fi connection here; there is no email. How is everybody else going to learn of a decision that the apostles and only the apostles could make in Jerusalem? We need to

have people that go out and deliver the news of this decision. The emissaries are described in Acts 15:22:

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren" (Acts 15:22).

Who are the emissaries of this decision? First of all, we are going to send some folks out from the apostles and the elders. Who are the apostles? The apostles are the ones that were present in the ministry of Jesus from the beginning. They were the ones that saw the resurrected Christ. There are 12 of them. Judas committed suicide, as we know. He was replaced by Matthias in Acts 1. It is those guys that the Lord used as the foundations of the church (Ephesians 2:20). That is why only their decision here could have a church wide impact, because these guys are still alive, and they are the ones that have been given this power of binding and loosing.

"Having been built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20).

The cornerstone is the first stone in a temple structure that goes in, if you are into archaic architecture and building construction. There was a process by which temples were built in the Greco-Roman world. You put the cornerstone in first, on the ground first, and you used that to gauge where every other stone in the building went. It is the most important stone.

The cornerstone is Jesus. He is the cornerstone of the church. Then once that stone is in place, you put in the foundation stones. That is the structure that the temple is going to be built on. Once that happens, then come in the walls and eventually the roof. God has been building this temple, which is a metaphor for the church, for 2,000 years. That is why it mentions the apostles here making this decision.

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:22).

Where did these elders come from? Who are these elders? The first time we were introduced to elders was back in Acts 11 concerning the Jerusalem church. They had apostles and they had elders. Who were the elders? The elders are the guys that are going to take over after the apostles are dead, because the apostles are not going to be here forever. Once they die, which happened back in the first century—the last living apostle that we have is John who wrote the Book of Revelation—after these guys die, they have to be replaced by somebody.

The elders are going to replace the apostles as the leaders of the church. This is why this decision had to be made. While the apostles are still alive. To them was given a unique place as the foundation stones of the church.

This is like how they chose deacons back in Acts 6:5:

"This statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch" (Acts 6:5).

It lists seven deacons that had to do with the widows being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Everybody ran to the apostles to solve the problem. The apostles said, "If we get involved in this, it would take our attention away from the Word of God and prayer. So let us raise up a new office here called the deacons, and they will take care of the widows. Then we apostles can give ourselves to our priorities, prayer and the Word of God."

When they made that decision, the rest of the church said, "That is a great decision," but the authority to make the decision came from the apostles. It is not like they were voting on it. The rest of the church says, "Great idea," and that is what is happening here. The apostles are making a move, which Jesus gave them the power to do. "Resolve this stuff. Figure it out. Yes, I will give you a word from God or I will give you a vision at times. Other times, there is not going to be any word from God or any vision. You are going to have to reason from Hebrew Bible."

This is what they have done here: "Let us let the Gentiles in without putting up the Law of Moses as an encumbrance." The apostles made the move; they made the decision; and it affected every church from that point on. Everyone else said, "Way to go. We like that. Great decision." The authority stayed with the apostles. That is the point I am trying to get at here.

Then it mentions who these emissaries are going to be: Paul and Barnabas, whom we know; then someone named Judas; and someone named Silas. Who are those guys?

Let me read to you this quote from Arnold Fruchtenbaum:

"The whole church made the decision to choose men out of their company, meaning members of the church of Jerusalem, to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch so that they could witness to the validity of their report. Two men were chosen. The first was Judas or Judah, who was also known as Barsabbas, which means 'Son of the Sabbath.' This is the only time he is mentioned in Scripture, and nothing else is known about him. He may have been the brother of Joseph Barsabbas of Acts 1:23."¹

We know very little about this guy other than that he obviously had a very good reputation in Jerusalem. He was entrusted with delivering this letter to Antioch, and from there it would go to the rest of the churches.

¹ Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 327.

"The second man was Silas, which was his Hebrew name, about whom much more is known. His Roman name is Silvanus. He became Paul's companion on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14-15; 18:5). He is also mentioned in several Epistles (II Corinthians 1:19; I Thessalonians 1:1; I Peter 5:12). According to Acts 15:32, he had the gift of prophecy."²

Look at Acts 15:32. I love this guy Silas. What does it say here?

"Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message" (Acts 15:32).

I say, "Lord, you put that in there just for me, didn't you?" "Pastor, your sermons are a little too long. We need to beat the Baptists to the cafeteria." Paul preached all night long, so you guys actually have it pretty easy.

That is who these guys are. They were prophets in the sense that they exhorted the brethren "with a lengthy message."

"According to Acts 15:32, he had the gift of prophecy. Judas and Silas were chief men among the brethren. They were leaders of the church of Jerusalem. This gave them authoritative standing for what they had to say to the church of Antioch."³

Paul and Barnabas are going to articulate this ruling, but Judas and Silas are going to verify it, validate it, corroborate it, and deliver it in written form. That fits the pattern of God pretty well, because God says: "On the evidence of two or three witnesses, let a matter be confirmed" (Deuteronomy 19:15). That is the principle you find in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15).

It is also in the New Testament:

"Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two to three witnesses" (1 Timothy 5:19).

We see God following this ancient principle of two to three witnesses here. We do not only have two, we do not only have three, but we have four witnesses.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.