

TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
IHOP BIBLE STUDY

12 Acts – “The Council at Jerusalem and its response” -- with commentary

Acts 15: 1 - 21, “The Council at Jerusalem;” Acts 15: 22 to 35, “The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers.”

The purpose of the Book of Acts is to record the activity of the Holy Spirit in the Vision and Ministry of Peter and Paul. **Today’s study is the 12th of 20 lessons.**

A contextual statement:

Interestingly, *The Interpreter’s Bible* makes the following observation. In the book of Acts, “The Lord is not returned, but in the meantime the word of God is being carried on by the church. The Gentile mission is itself the eschatological action of God.” (*The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1971. p. 730.)

This I want to affirm as our perspective. **We will study this book from the perspective of the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit.** This puts us out on the cusp of a deep and foreboding spiritual hole that is eternally deep. The Holy Spirit is that intuited presence within us that urges us to “Jump.” “Jump!” To take this leap of faith means to surrender ourselves to the eternal deeps. The discovery, to which I can personally testify, is that this deep, dark, mysterious hole is the place where God lives within us. As we lose control of everything— our-selves, our relationships to neighbor and to God— then we can discover that God really does sustain us. But the experience is like falling, and it is not entirely comfortable. But it works.

According to our Study Chart we are in the second major division of the Book of Acts. The first as “The Testimony of Peter.” The Second is “The Testimony of Paul.” You’ll note on the chart that this is “Paul’s 1st Missionary Journey to Asia Minor,” and this is the first portion of this journey. The second portion deals with the Council at Jerusalem. While this council is not a part of the journey itself, it does function as an interlude between the first and second journeys.

Read the assigned scriptures.

This week I am presenting to you a little workshop. After you read the scripture of only 23 verses, I ask you to take 15 minutes to work the process and see where it takes you. **Actually, I’d like you to share with me your discovery before next Monday, May 9th.**

The method used is called Finding the Deep Underlying Problem. (In other places, this process is called “Underlying Contradictions.”) Actually, when you read this scripture, unless you do this little exercise, this scripture doesn’t make much sense. Using this process makes the scripture clear.

Actually, the rest of the New Testament can utilize this method too; as you will experience later.

Please give this a try, and **I encourage you to share with me your work.**

Remember, **ALL OF US TOGETHER ARE SMARTER THAN ANY OF US ALONE.**

A NOTE CONCERNING EXPLORING THE DEEP PROBLEM: One of our IHOP Bible Study members shared with us a commentary paper titled, “Christians and the Law of

Moses.” (Produced by Churchwide Church of God.) Their conclusion concerning the discrepancy between the purpose of the Jerusalem Council and the Council’s Pastoral Letter is this: “Why, then, these four rules? Some scholars say the Jews believed that these laws dated back to the time of Noah, and therefore applied to all nations. Others say that all four rules were associated with idolatry. Some say that these four laws of Moses is fully convincing.”

Do you see the problem? Even scholars as conservative as these, are uncertain why the council spent so much time addressing the issue of circumcision and then write a letter about idol meat/blood and sexual promiscuity.

However, those of you who did this “deep problem” exercise may have a better idea.

Read on for a different conclusion! You’ll find more information about identifying the Deep Problem at the end of today’s session.

I. In one or two sentences summarize the purpose for the Jerusalem Council.

WS: (Thanks to Bob Brown for the following material) Basically an agreement on how to understand God’s Law so that Jewish and Gentile Christians could work together in faith.

WS: Now, from the point of view of Deep Problem analysis, it is important that this is understood as a surface issue, it is an irritant! This is not the deep problem.

II. Vss. 1 -- 5, What is the problem preventing (blocking) the church’s mission to the Gentiles?

BB: The Jewish Christians insisted that the *Gentiles* had to submit to the rite of circumcision for salvation.

WS: Again, the Jerusalem Council is struggling with the surface issue in their attempt to identify the Deep Problem.

III. Vss. 6 - 21, Apparently, Peter addresses this problem head on. What solution does he provide?

BB: That God chose them to bring the words of the gospel to the *Gentiles*. That God gave the *Gentiles* the Holy Spirit and made no distinction.

WS: Once again, Peter is addressing the surface issue.

IV. Vss. 22 – 30, Summarize the content of the Pastoral Letter to the Churches. What is the central message? (Are you puzzled?)

BB: That the *Gentiles* did not have to be circumcised, but should stay away from polluted food, sexual immorality, meat from strangled animals and consuming blood.

WS: Obviously, this is the solution prescribed by the Jerusalem Council for the *Gentile* churches. So, what is the Deep Problem?

V. Now that you’ve read the real solution provided by the Jerusalem Council, speculate on what was going on in the local churches that really was blocking the ministry. You can let your mind run freely here, but obviously the real solution has something to do with the real deep struggle faced by the early *Gentile/Jewish* churches.

BB: Some Jewish Christians thought that the Laws of Moses should be strictly

enforced. Some thought that the Gentile Christians would soon outnumber them.

WS: Bob's given us the traditional answer. Here's mine:

The Deep Problem is that the Gentile Churches have not learned to apply WWJD? For Christians this is our ethical stance. We live by placing the cross of Christ *between us and anyone and anything else*. Before we enter into any kind of a relationship we *always* ask the question "What would Jesus Do?"

VI. Vss. 31 - 35, What was the response of those at Antioch? Why?

BB: They were very happy. By taking their concerns to the leaders of the Christian Church, their concerns and disagreements were settled.

Come on, now. Please share your insights with me. It will take you all of 15 minutes.

Alright, folks, talk to me.

WS: Now, for the lesson about identifying the Deep Problem. It is important to get the following principle clearly worked into our heads. "Our situation is never our problem!

Our problem is in the relationship we choose to take to our situation.

1. First, let it be said that the issue of circumcision is a smoke screen covering up the deeper problem of the misuse of other human beings as well as the environment.

2. Concerning the eating of sacrificed animals and its blood, this was not something naughty. Rather it was something disrespectful of other people's beliefs. Remember, Paul (confirmed by Peter) tells us in other places that we can eat anything as long as it does not offend our brothers and sisters. A for instance: If you are attending a party with a member of AA, it is inappropriate to choose to drink a beer in her/his presence.

This is not saying it is naughty to drink a beer. It is, however, unchristian for us to drink in front of a reformed drunk. Can you hear the choice we make? Can you decipher the relationship we need to take to our situation? We can choose to discipline ourselves on behalf of a brother or sister.

3. Concerning sexual immorality, the same principle applies. We have a choice to make to either satisfy ourselves to fulfill some selfish need, or we can choose to live in obedience to the cross. It is the cross that reminds us that we can sacrifice our selfish needs on behalf of our sisters and brothers.