

The Big Committee Meeting

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Someone once described a camel as “a horse designed by a committee.” That says more about committees than about camels!

Most people hate committee meetings. Reaching agreements can be incredibly difficult, especially when the topic under discussion is an emotional one. But ever since the first Pentecost, the church has been forced to tackle serious problems... and most of the time that has meant having a committee meeting.

One of the most important meetings happened very soon after the church was born. Had that meeting failed, the church would look very different today, if it existed at all.

The minutes of this meeting are recorded in Acts 15:1-35.

The situation was getting out of hand.

Everywhere Paul and Barnabas preached to Gentile believers,
they were attacked by Jewish Christians who demanded that
the Gentiles had to follow Jewish laws in order to be “real” Christians.
This conflict threatened to stop the spread of the Gospel
because the new believers didn’t know who or what to believe.

Things finally came to a head in Antioch, a city in Syria
where the first of the Gentile churches had been established.

They sent Paul and Barnabas,
along with some of the local believers,
to visit the apostles in Jerusalem and get an official decision.

When the two men arrived in Jerusalem,
the apostles and church elders greeted them with enthusiasm.
They wanted to hear all about the wonderful things God was doing
through Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles,
and they thanked God that the Gospel was spreading to them all...

But then some Jewish believers who used to be Pharisees
began to complain that these new believers weren’t following Jewish law.
They said these new converts had to be circumcised
and follow all the laws of Moses to be “really” saved.

So the apostles and elders got together and had a meeting...
and boy, was THAT a long meeting!
They knew they had to settle this problem now
before it could split the young church
and stop the spread of the Gospel dead in its tracks.

After a lot of discussion, Peter stood up and spoke to the committee.

More than just a leader among the apostles,
Peter was also the first apostle whom God sent to preach to the Gentiles.
(That is quite a story in itself, but it's a story for another time.)
So when Peter stood up to talk, everyone else listened.

"Brothers," he said, "you know that I have preached to the Gentiles too.
God sent me to some of them not so long ago,
to tell them about Jesus so they too could believe, just like us.
And you know that God proved He accepted them, just like he accepted us,
because He sent His Holy Spirit to them, just like He did to us.
He didn't treat them any differently than He treats us...
so why should WE treat them any differently?
Why burden them with laws we ourselves cannot keep?
Aren't we all saved the same way, as a special gift from Jesus?"

Peter's words pretty much ended the discussion.

After that, the other leaders wanted to hear from Paul and Barnabas—
about their work among the Gentiles
and the miracles God had done among them
and how they had responded to the Gospel.

Finally James, the leader of the apostles, stood up.

"The answer seems plain to me, brothers.
Peter told you how God revealed Himself to the Gentiles.
That, along with what Paul and Barnabas are telling us,
is exactly what God predicted long ago through His prophets.
I say we stop putting extra burdens on the Gentiles,
although I suggest we recommend that they avoid three things:
avoid eating food that has been sacrificed to idols;
avoid sexual immorality; and
avoid eating blood from butchered animals.
These are things no Jew would ever tolerate."

So the apostles and elders wrote a letter,
and the whole church in Jerusalem chose two of their own, Judas and Silas,
to go back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.
They would deliver the letter and let the Gentile believers know
that the leaders of the church accepted them as they were.
Not only did that bring great joy to the Gentile believers,
but Judas and Silas stayed for a while to teach and encourage them.
And when they returned to Jerusalem,
they carried greetings and good wishes from Antioch with them.
Of course, that didn't stop all the problems.
There were still Jews who insisted that
Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish laws
if they "really" wanted to follow God.
They followed Paul around, causing trouble everywhere he preached.

And we also know that Paul didn't believe that
eating food sacrificed to idols
was all that big a deal.
He told the Corinthians that those idols weren't real gods
but that they should avoid the food simply because
OTHER people didn't know any better.

But the committee was successful. The Gospel spread freely after that.

The work of a committee is a thankless one
because it's rare that their decisions satisfy everyone.
But God is so powerful
that he can take an group of imperfect people
and use them to change the world.

The Council of Jerusalem, as it is now known, is just one more proof of that.