

# The Jerusalem Controversy

by George Warnock

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*The Council of Jerusalem decided to receive Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel on the basis of faith in Christ, without subjecting them to the law and ritual of circumcision.*

**Scripture:** Acts 15:16

**Topics:** "Inclusion in Christ", "The Jerusalem Council"

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## Description

George Warnock addresses the Jerusalem Council's pivotal decision regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the faith, emphasizing that salvation is available to all, regardless of their background. He highlights that early Judaism recognized the validity of Gentiles who embraced the covenant, citing examples like Rahab and Ruth, who became integral to Israel's lineage. The sermon underscores that the apostles, particularly Peter and James, affirmed that faith in Christ, rather than adherence to Jewish law, is the basis for acceptance into the community of believers. Warnock calls for modern Christians to align with the early Church's understanding of God's inclusive plan, moving beyond racial and legalistic barriers. He concludes by urging believers to embrace the spiritual restoration symbolized by the Tabernacle of David, which welcomes all who seek the Lord.

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## Transcript

Now there was no question in the minds of any of the apostles or of the Jewish teachers, as to whether or not the Gentiles could be saved... and this was not the issue. Early Judaism clearly recognized what so many Christian teachers have failed to recognize: that a heathen Gentile who came into Israel and submitted to the covenant ordinances became from that day forward a bona fide, valid Israelite. Moses distinctly taught that there was to be one law for Israel, and for the foreigner who dwelt in their midst. (See Ex. 12:48; Lev. 24:22.) Intermarriage between the Israelites and other nations was often forbidden, or if allowed there were certain rituals required of the incoming foreigner; but it was not because God was erecting certain racial barriers. It was because of the heathen gods they worshipped, and the effect this could have on the people who knew and worshipped the one true God. At this Council, they all must have been aware that on many occasions in their history some very prominent Israelites were either outright Gentile heathens by birth, or had Gentile blood in their veins. Rahab the harlot of Jericho was received into Israel, and become one of them. And in fact we find her name in the ancestral line of the Lord Jesus! Ruth the Gentile from Moab not only came into Israel, but she became the great-grandmother of king David, from whose line Jesus was born. And Ruth's husband, Boaz, was descended from Rahab the Gentile harlot, and Boaz became David's great-grandfather. Again, when Mordecai became a governor

under the Persian king, in the time of Esther, such fear gripped the Gentiles of the 127 provinces of Persia, that "many of the people of the land became Jews" (Esth. 8:17). No Jew who was familiar with the Old Testament could argue that Gentiles could not become Israelites by embracing the covenants and submitting to the ordinances of the law. I think this alone should settle the argument that has come forth in recent generations concerning the racial preeminence of certain nations and peoples of the earth. Even a bona fide Israelite, born of the stock of Israel, was cut off if he did not submit to the covenant of circumcision. (See Gen. 17:14.) And as we have pointed out, a Gentile who came in and submitted to the God of Israel--and their laws and rituals--was received as a bona fide Israelite.

This, then, became the real issue of the Council of Jerusalem. And this was the question: "Are we to continue to receive Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel on the basis of circumcision and the law, as we have in the past? Or shall we receive them as brethren because of their faith in Christ, without subjecting them to these ordinances?" And this was what Paul and Barnabas were so insistent upon; for they knew that God had broken down this "wall of partition" between them because of the Cross.

The argument went on and on. Peter showed how God had opened a door to the Gentiles, quite apart from any Jewish rituals, giving them the Holy Ghost even as He did to the believers in Jerusalem, and making "no difference" between Jew and Gentile. Then Paul and Barnabas testified as to how God had opened an effectual door to the Gentiles in their ministry, quite apart from any legal rituals and ordinances. But it remained for James, respected highly by the Jewish Christians, to bring forth an argument from the scriptures that would settle the whole issue. James told the Council that they ought not try to make Jews out of Gentiles according to the old law, because God promised even in the scriptures that the Tabernacle of David would be rebuilt, and in that new order God would receive the Gentiles as His very own, and place His Name upon them. Some Christian teachers quote from James to confirm that at the end of the Church age God would rebuild the Tabernacle of David. But James was clearly saying that God was now rebuilding the Tabernacle of David, as Amos had prophesied. James was not prophesying anything. He was rather quoting from the prophet Amos so as to clearly show the Council that this age-old prophecy of Amos was now in the process of fulfillment: "After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" (Acts 15:16-17).

James was not prophesying this. He was telling the Council that Amos had prophesied this, and that now it was happening! The prophecy was there and then being fulfilled! God had promised that when the Tabernacle of David was rebuilt, many Gentiles would seek after the Lord, and come to know the God of Israel. Therefore on the basis of this long unfulfilled prophecy James advised the Council to accept the fact that "the residue of men [or, the rest of mankind]" were in God's plan from the beginning, and were now to be received as brethren in this hour of the rebuilding of the Tabernacle of David.

Of course, James could have quoted many scriptures from the prophets that spoke of the salvation of the Gentiles, but as we have pointed out, this was no problem with the Jewish teachers. The problem was much deeper than that: "Can we receive Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel apart from the Law and the ritual of circumcision?" Therefore God in His wisdom did not emphasize these other prophecies on this occasion, but chose rather to relate the salvation of the Gentiles to the Tabernacle of David... and in so doing there could be no mistaking what God had in mind. For here in the Tabernacle of David we have an institution that had no relation to temple, and temple ritual, and nothing to do with brazen altars and lavers and altars of incense. And most important, after the dedication of Mount Zion with the sacrifices of

animals, never again do we hear of sacrifices of blood being offered on Mount Zion. From the day of the dedication of the Tabernacle of David and on, the sacrifices on this mount were to be sacrifices of praise and worship unto God. The prophecy of Amos could therefore in no way be construed to refer to a little flimsy goats' hair tent such as David might have had there at the first. To the apostle James it was quite evident that the reference of Amos to the Tabernacle of David related to the spiritual restoration of the glory of David's kingdom. Have you ever heard of any Jewish teacher, ancient or modern, or any Christian teacher, proclaiming that glorious day when a literal Tent of David would once again rise up on the top of old Mount Zion in Jerusalem? This would be unthinkable. But we do hear a lot about a beautiful temple something like Solomon's, that is supposed to be built there in Jerusalem some day. And yet the only promise in the New Testament that refers to the rebuilding of the house of David is the one concerning the "Tent of David"--which every one recognizes as a spiritual "Tent," and not a flimsy piece of cloth like the one that David erected there in the beginning.

So ended the first Council at Jerusalem. But we cannot believe that all the teachers in the Church at Jerusalem wholeheartedly embraced the decision of the Council. For a long time afterward Paul had to contend with the "leaven" of Judaism in the churches where he had ministered the pure Gospel of Christ. Today vast multitudes in the Church are once again taking sides with those who opposed Paul and Peter and Stephen, and other Christian teachers of the early Church. Peter tells us that God made "no difference" between men. Stephen declared, "the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48), and was stoned for declaring it. Paul said, "There is no difference..." It is about time that Christians everywhere begin to take sides with the great apostles and teachers of the early Church... rather than with modern-day theologians. Why do we find it difficult to believe that the apostles and prophets of the New Testament knew how to interpret Old Testament prophecy? If we can accept this premise, then we must embrace the fact that God's promises were made to Abraham's Seed (singular), and not to Abraham's many seeds (plural), according to the flesh. And that this Seed is Christ along with those who have come into Christ through the faith of Abraham. (See Rom. 4:9-13; Gal. 3:16; 4:28.) Once we find grace to accept the apostolic interpretation of the Old Testament as the revelation of the Spirit of God, then we can safely lay aside the dispensational barriers that men have erected, and recognize Old Testament prophecy, as interpreted by the apostles, as the one and only valid interpretation concerning the true Israel. And the Old Testament becomes more meaningful to us because both Peter and Paul declared that what the prophets wrote, concerned those people who received the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (See Rom. 16:26; 1 Pet. 1:10-12.)

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