

“Unity Accomplished”  
(Acts 15:22-29)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. The problem: the Judaizers – is there something we must do besides believe in Christ to be saved?
  - a. Judaizers had come from Judea (the center of Jewish Christianity) to Antioch (the center of Gentile Christianity) and unsettled the Gentile believers – made them think they weren’t saved, there was something more to do, something still necessary to complete their salvation, something to do before God would accept them (v. 24).
  - b. They had come from Jerusalem – “some of our number” – and so appeared to have the support of the Jerusalem church (v. 24).
  - c. But the leaders in Jerusalem had not instructed them to go and preach this message; they had not sent them (v. 24).
  - d. Paul and Barnabas withstood them – argued against them, tried to convince them otherwise, tried to protect the Gentile converts against a heresy that would condemn them, if they believed it.
  - e. And when they couldn’t convince them, knowing it came from Jerusalem and fearing perhaps that this might be the direction of that church, the brethren (leadership) sent Paul and Barnabas to the source to settle the issue.
2. The solution: the apostles and elders came together to look into the matter.
  - a. The leaders allowed the Judaizers their day in court; but they also argued against their position:
    - (i) Peter argued the fact that the Gentiles, to whom the Lord had sent him to preach, believed and were sealed by God with the Holy Spirit through faith alone, apart from circumcision and the ceremonial law (vv. 7-11).
    - (ii) Paul and Barnabas also argued that God had worked with them as they preached this same Gospel with signs and wonders, proving that this was His message (v. 12). God had borne witness to the truth of this Gospel in two different ways.
    - (iii) But there was also the witness He gave from the Scripture: James pointed out that the Lord said through Amos the prophet that He would return and restore the house of David, so that the rest of mankind might seek the Lord (9).
  - b. Summing things up, James declared that the Gentiles who were turning to Christ did not need to be circumcised, but ought to be careful in a few areas not unnecessarily to offend their Jewish brethren or neighbors.
    - (i) Now this wasn’t just James’ opinion: he was not the archbishop or the pope of the NT church.
    - (ii) This was the decision of the whole Council – the Judaizers were wrong – the Lord has set us free from the observance of the Mosaic traditions, at least in regard to salvation.

## B. Preview.

1. All that was left now was to communicate this decision to the church at Antioch and the other churches that might have been affected by the Judaizers' teaching.
2. And so the apostles and elders decided– with the whole church's agreement – to send Paul and Barnabas, with some others from their number back to Antioch with a letter.
3. It's this letter we want to consider this morning, and what we'll see are 2 things:
  - a. First, the sending of the letter and its content.
  - b. Second, the blessing of the Lord that allowed them to sent that letter.

## II. Sermon.

### A. We see first the sending of the letter and its content.

1. First, let's consider who commissioned and delivered it:
  - a. The same authority that debated the matter – the apostles and elders – were the same authority that commissioned the letter and its messengers (v. 22).
    - (i) They were the ones in whose name it was sent: “The apostles and the brethren who are elders” (v. 23).
      - (a) The Lord had given them the authority to minister His Word.
      - (b) It was therefore their decision to make.
    - (ii) And the rest of the brethren – the “whole church” – agreed.
      - (a) The Lord calls us to godly submission to His elders.
      - (b) He doesn't require credulity or blind obedience – as the Roman Church teaches through their implicit faith – but subjection to the undershepherds of Christ as they guide the church in *His* ways.
  - b. We also see by whom they sent the letter: “Paul and Barnabas – Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren” (v. 22).
    - (i) They sent it by the two main pastors of the church at Antioch.
    - (ii) And they included two more among their own leaders to confirm the message they brought (v. 27).
    - (iii) By the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact is to be established (Matt. 18:16). The Lord gave the Antioch church two more witnesses – besides Paul and Barnabas – to ensure that they would accept it.
2. Second, we see to whom it is addressed: “to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles” (v. 23).
  - a. These are the churches that were affected by the Judaizers' teaching – the Gentiles churches, those not brought up in the Jewish tradition.
  - b. They were sent first to Antioch, and from there they would go throughout Syria and Cilicia, and the bordering cities, strengthening the brethren in the Gospel.
  - c. We should always thank the Lord for giving His church faithful men who are able and willing to confirm us in the truth.
3. Finally, we see again the reason for the letter:
  - a. First, to make sure the Gentiles understand that they – the leaders in Jerusalem – do not agree with the Judaizers: “Since we have heard that some of our number to

whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls” (v. 24).

- (i) We’ve already seen this: these men were not sent by the Jerusalem church, even though they came from there.
- (ii) These Judaizers had questioned the Gentile believers’ faith by their teachings, causing them a great deal of uncertainty.
- (iii) But the leaders of Jerusalem wanted them to know that these Judaizers were wrong.
- (iv) To confirm this, they sent their pastors back, further confirmed in the truth – Paul and Barnabas, men who had risked everything, even their own lives, in order to promote the work of Christ (v. 26).
- (v) And to further confirm it, Judas and Silas (v. 27).

- b. Second, to affirm what they were to observe regarding the Mosaic/Ceremonial Law: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell” (vv. 28-29).

- (i) They were to avoid eating things sacrificed to idols, from eating blood, from eating meat with the blood still in it (things strangled), and from everything the Law considered to be unclean (the word for fornication having a broader meaning than sexual immorality).
- (ii) Since they were living around Jews, and since many of the first Christians were Jews, it would be wise to avoid those things that would put a stumbling block in the way of the Gospel or cause unnecessary offense.
- (iii) Again, we are not to use Christian liberty to tear each other down, but to build each other up.

- B. Second, and most important for our purpose here, we see the underlying blessing of the Lord that allowed this letter to be written in the first place: that by God’s grace they had been enabled to work through the issue to become of one mind: “it seemed good to us, having become of one mind” (v. 25).

- 1. This unity came from the Holy Spirit; and that in two ways:

- a. He was the One who led them to this oneness of mind in the Holy Scripture: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit” (v. 28).
  - (i) How do they know it seemed good to Him?
    - (a) Because of His testimony on the Gentiles (gift of the Spirit).
    - (b) Because of His enabling the apostles to work signs and wonders in connection with the Gospel.
    - (c) Because of His testimony through the Scripture (Amos 9).

- (ii) This was His mind on the subject.

- b. And He was the One who gave them the desire to receive the truth that brought unity: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and *to us*” (v. 28).

- (i) He was the principle of grace working in their hearts to show them this was His will.
  - (ii) He was the One working in them to desire to follow the truth and to be unified among themselves.
  - (iii) The fact that He worked through them in these ways is why they achieved unity.
- 2. Isn't this what we should desire for ourselves and for the body of Christ today?
  - a. The Lord has blessed us with a great deal of unity.
    - (i) This is something we should jealously guard: we haven't always had it, and it's only by His grace that we do now.
    - (ii) At the same time, we should continue, in God's grace and through His love, to work through our differences to agreement, as much as possible, in all things.
      - (a) As Paul exhorted the Corinthian church, "Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10).
      - (b) We should pray that the Lord would open our eyes to His truth, by His Spirit, that we would all see things as He sees them.
      - (c) We'll most likely never agree on everything in this life, but let's agree on as much as we are able and cover over our differences in love.
      - (d) Thankfully, we will all agree one day in heaven.
  - b. Let's also pray that the Lord would bless His church as a whole with unity.
    - (i) If we are to love all our neighbors as ourselves, how much more are we to love fellow Christians.
    - (ii) If we have the Spirit of God in us, we also desire that the body of Christ be one, and it grieves us that it isn't – both the differences in doctrine, as well as the way we respond to those differences.
    - (iii) We do need to remember that even though we might disagree with other believers in many areas, if they are truly trusting in Jesus Christ, they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same body, and we will be spending eternity with them by God's grace.
    - (iv) Purity of doctrine is important, but if they hold to the essentials, then love is more important than our differences.
    - (v) Let's include them in our prayers as well, that the Lord might lead them into His truth.
      - (a) He certainly does in essentials: He will never allow any of the elect to perish for lack of knowledge.
      - (b) But He doesn't as strongly in non-essentials (as evidenced by our disagreements) perhaps to teach us to love one another, though we differ.
      - (c) Let's remember that as we come to the table: the one loaf doesn't simply represent this congregation, but the whole body of Christ. Amen.