

Bible Text: Acts 15:1-11
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Our Scripture text is taken from Acts chapter 15 beginning at verse 1, page 1718.

1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. 5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.” 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the

grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”
(Acts 15:1–11)

The word of the Lord. [“Thanks be to God.”]

May we pray.

Lord, help me clearly and concisely and compellingly to expound, exegete, and explain what is going on in Acts 15. And then, Lord, very carefully, by the work of your Holy Spirit, to apply this chapter to us and our life circumstances. We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

WHAT IS A GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND WHAT IS A PRESBYTERY?

Now, I’ve entitled this sermon, “The First General Assembly.” There were meetings of church leadership prior to this in other places, and so later on we’ll discover that Paul admonishes Timothy to stir up the gift that was within him that came to him through the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.

So, what is a presbytery? A presbytery is a gathering of elders, and that’s what is talked about in Paul’s letter to Timothy, laying on of the hands of presbytery, and in the church in Antioch.

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders (presbutérion, πρεσβυτέριον) laid their hands on you. (1 Timothy 4:14)

And they went up from Antioch to Jerusalem, but in our way of thinking, they would have gone down from Antioch to Jerusalem because Antioch was north. But in the Bible, Jerusalem is the center of the earth, and so people go up to Jerusalem no matter where they are.

I will plunder and loot and turn my hand against the resettled ruins and the people gathered from the nations, rich in livestock and goods, living at the center (ṭabbûr, טַבּוּר, “Navel,” Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner (1958), *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), Vol. 2, p. 367) of the land. (Ezekiel 38:12)

So anyhow, they had had a wonderfully successful missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas. They had been sent by the church in Acts 13 to go out and do missionary work to reach lost people.

That's the great, great, great reason we exist. We glorify God by enjoying him and sharing him with other people. And so, in Antioch, they did something that Jesus had commissioned the church in Jerusalem to do. And that is, before Jesus left, just before He ascended to heaven, in the first chapter of Acts, you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

And so, the church was about doing that. And in the course of time, in Acts chapter 10, the Holy Spirit gave a vision to a Gentile Roman military officer named Cornelius, and he also spoke to Peter through a vision. to accept other people, no matter who they are, no matter what they're like, no matter their culture, no matter what their taste, no matter what their food choices, to accept them as equals in Christ.

He had this vision of a great sheet being lowered from heaven in which were all kinds of nasty things. The kinds of things people eat in the state where I live, Louisiana. And so anyhow, they had all these things, including snakes and lizards, and all kinds of animals that are regarded as unclean. And the Lord said to him, as this sheet rises and falls, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." And he said, "No, no, Lord, don't ask me to do that. I've never eaten anything that wasn't kosher." And God basically says to him, "Peter, what God has called kosher. Don't you call it unkosher." And that's basically the message.

10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." 14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." 15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." 16

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. (Acts 10:10–16)

And so, these guys arrive, having been sent by this Roman centurion, Cornelius, right at the time Peter has had this vision.

So, he goes with them, and when he gets to Cornelius' house and he asks him, why have you sent for me? They begin to tell him. And what happens is he begins to share the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus, died for our sins. He died for your sins. He died for the sins of the world, though it's applied only to those who believe.

So, he begins to explain the gospel to them, and as he does, something astounding happened. They had not been baptized. They had not been circumcised. No ordinance, sealing ordinance of the Church of the Old Testament or of the New had been done to them at all, and the Holy Spirit fell on them and manifested Himself in supernatural signs and wonders.

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 47 “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” (Acts 10:44–47)

And then, of course, Peter got criticized. Whenever God does a new thing, it's going to evoke criticism. People said, “Why'd you do that? How did you think that this was honoring God for you to go and eat inside the homes of Gentiles?” You think people got upset like that? Oh yes, they got very upset.

THE OLD JEWISH LAWS OF SEPARATION ARE OVER.

“You violated fundamental law of separation,” because that law of separation was writ large over the entire Old Testament. It was designed to keep the Jews pure to the Lord and not to be contaminated by the nations around them who killed their own children and did all kinds of terrible abominations that we've seen over the past few months in the sermon series

“Bible Characters.” But as Peter explained, the Holy Spirit opened their minds and their hearts to accept who he was saying, as he reported in Acts 11.

And then in Acts 12, as you go through the book, you discover that Peter, James, and John, the original core disciples, James, the brother of John, had been executed by King Herod. And then in Acts 13, we come to the thing where the church in Antioch, which is a church with Gentiles and Jews, sends Paul and Barnabas out to preach the gospel. And so, they travel, Acts 13.

Acts 14, they experience tremendous persecution. In fact, Paul in Acts 14 was used by God to do an extraordinary miracle. And a man who had been lame from his mother’s womb, was healed, and stood up. And at that point, the pagan Gentiles who witnessed this began to cry out and say, the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men. And they called Barnabas Zeus, and they call Paul Apollo or Hermes because Paul was the chief speaker and Barnabas, the silent one, they viewed was Zeus himself. And so, what happens is the priest of Zeus comes out with oxen to sacrifice and garlands of flowers. And so, what happens is that Paul and Barnabas scream and said, “Men, men, don’t do this terrible thing. We’re just people like you. We’re ordinary people.” And he tells them about God.

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. 14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 “Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. (Acts 14:11–15)

And then all of a sudden, the people who hated Paul because Paul had proven to them from the Bible, from the Old Testament, what the Jews today

call the Tanakh, he had proven to them conclusively, infallibly, and irresistibly that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Messiah of Israel.

WHEN PEOPLE SEE THE TRUTH, THEY EITHER REPENT OR THEY MURDER.

And there's only one thing you're going to do when somebody proves something to you from the Bible. You're either going to acknowledge it, and accept it by faith, or you're going to get angry and gnash your teeth and be angry and have murderous rage in your heart. And so, these people began to follow. Wherever Paul and Barnabas were traveling, they followed them, and stirred up the crowds.

They arrived there in Laconian, and they began to stir up the crowd. And what did they do? They stoned Paul. And they thought they'd stoned him to death, and they dragged him outside of the city.

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. (Acts 14:19)

But the converts, as well as a small evangelistic team that traveled with Paul, stood around Paul in a circle. And what happened? Paul got up. He had been stoned to death, even though he hadn't died. God raised him up, and I'm sure he was not feeling comfortable as he rose up. But he walked into the city, stayed overnight, and then they went on their way.

20 But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. (Acts 14:20)

And so, they come back, and they report all the things that God had done when they arrived back at the church in Antioch. And so, in the church at Antioch, once again, we have opposition. And if you look there at verse 5, Acts 15:5, page 17-18, some of the believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees.

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

CONTROVERSIES MUST BE RESOLVED.

Now think about it, can a Pharisee be a believer? Oh yes. Oh yes. Can a Sadducee be a believer? Oh yes. And can ordinary people be a believer? Yes. Just because you've been born again, just because you've repented of your sins and cast yourself on God's mercy in the Lord Jesus Christ, doesn't mean that all your thinking is crystal clear.

So, these are true Christians, but they have this idea stuck in their minds that is hindering not only their witness to the world, but they want to stop the witness to the world that is being carried on. And so, we see there in verse five, some of the believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

And so that's controversy that begins in Antioch. The church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas along with some of the other people in the church to go, we would say, down to Jerusalem and to present the case and say, "Fellow believers, apostles, elders, and the whole church in Jerusalem, tell us what we ought to do here."

OUR GENERAL ASSEMBLY IS MODELED ON THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

Now we had a situation like that at our General Assembly. We had a Presbytery, Midwest Presbytery, who had a situation. that was a disturbing situation. And so, they asked our General Assembly to rule on it. It was an amazing coincidence. The moderator of that presbytery had been a member of my congregation as a little boy in Wichita, Kansas.

The two years that I served in Kansas, the moderator had been a member, a non-communing member of my congregation there. And he's now a pastor, and he happened to be the moderator of Midwest Presbytery. And so, they petitioned the General Assembly for a ruling.

WHAT IS PROJECTION?

Now, what happened is that some people, and you've got to understand something, there are a number of psychological defense mechanisms, and so

when I become suspicious over something I shouldn't be suspicious over, that's called a projection. A projection. So, I project on other people.

Projection: Attributing one's own maladaptive inner impulses to someone else. For example, someone who commits an episode of infidelity in their marriage may then accuse their partner of infidelity or may become more suspicious of their partner. (Ryan Bailey; Jose Pico, "Defense Mechanisms," *National Library of Medicine* (Bethesda, MD: National Library of Medicine), Retrieved June 25, 2024 from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559106/>)

It's kind of like this, you remember when Joseph's brothers meet him after their daddy died, and they go to him, and they're thinking, "Oh no, what would we do to Joseph if he had done to us what we did to him?" And so, they project onto Joseph, their own hearts.

15 When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" 16 So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: 17 'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. 18 His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. 19 But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. 21 So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:15–21)

And so, we have to understand something. It doesn't mean we should never be suspicious. We should certainly show discernment. But people began to be suspicious. And what they're doing is projecting their own deceptive natures.

If I'm a deceptive person by nature—that's how you get elected to public office generally. If I am deceptive by nature, I will tend to project that on other people. So, I'm thinking to myself, you know, "I know what I would do here," and so this gets projected. I'm not saying that those who were concerned about what was going on in Midwest Presbytery were all paranoid, deceptive people. That's not my intention whatsoever. It just raised a controversy. And so, it's very similar to what we see here in Acts 15.

WE MUST MAINTAIN ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH.

And the people were concerned, and they appeal to what I'm going to say was the first General Assembly in the entire One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church. That's what we say in the Nicene Creed: *unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam*.

What do we mean by catholic? It comes from two Greek words: *kata*, κατά, meaning "according to," and *holos*, ὅλος, meaning "whole" or "entire." It means whole, world-wide, or universal.

And so, at that time, there was only one church. There were not many denominations. There were no factions that split. And maintaining the unity of the one, holy, universal, or catholic, church that was also apostolic was vital.

What does the word apostolic mean? It doesn't mean that **only** those that were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Christ were apostles (Acts 1:21-22). If you use the word apostle and you look it up through scripture, you discover that an apostle—well, Steve Nix and I were apostles this past week. It simply means a person who is sent on a commission.

And so, when we think of the apostolic church, we're not thinking of the word apostle in that sense, but we're thinking of those whom God the Holy Spirit ordained to give us scripture.

And God ordained that one man, for sure, Luke the doctor, who never saw the Lord Jesus at all, but yet he was used by the Holy Spirit to give us the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

And so, this is what I would say is a better word than apostolic, Bible-based. That's what we mean when we say in the Nicene Creed, apostolic. We mean Bible-based, Scripture-based.

The Bible, and the Bible alone, is the rock on which we build our doctrine or our teaching. So, I believe in one, holy, universal church built on the foundation of the Bible alone.

Now, I want to say something when I say that in the Nicene Creed. The church has an aspect that we see, and the church has an aspect that only God sees.

HOW GOD VIEWS THE CHURCH DIFFERS FROM HOW WE VIEW IT.

You know, when God looks at the church with all of the troubles that it has, and divisions, and troubles throughout the world, different approaches to doing things, he sees one holy, catholic, universal church founded on the Bible. He sees it that way. He sees it that way.

Do you know that when the Lord looks at you, in spite of what you may have done this past week, whether you lost your temper and said something ugly to somebody—I did that at least twice this week, and I said something ugly to somebody twice—I had to ask their forgiveness, and they granted it.

And whether we've done something bad, even if we've done first-degree murder, the moment that you repent of that, confess it to God, and cast yourself on God's mercy in Jesus, you know how he sees you? He sees you like Jesus. Perfect, without flaw, without blemish.

The church as God sees it is different than the church as humans see it. When I look at the church today, I look at a church that is ripped apart with Modernists on the one hand and Fundamentalists on the other, and so many factions and divisions in the church.

But the true church, which is the church that only God sees, he sees us as perfect. The spotless pure bride of Christ. And how God sees us now is one day how we will see the church and that is the great hope.

We lament. That means we mourn, but we lament with hope. And so, we're not like those that grieve without hope. Because our hope is that one day the church, as God sees it now, will be the church as we see it. And all nations, tribes, and tongues, and people will be united in praise to the Lord Jesus Christ before the throne of God, worshipping.

So anyhow, you have this faction here. And they're suspicious. And they project on other people what they themselves are feeling. But here's how they resolve it. They go up to Jerusalem. They meet together. They hash it out. They let the Pharisee party have their say. They don't cut them off and say, "You're out of order!" They let the Pharisee party have their say. And then notice what happens.

Verse 6, Acts 15:6, page 1718:

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion (notice, much discussion), Peter got up and addressed them (and he tells the story that we just recounted.).
(Acts 15:6-7)

And so, then you notice he doesn't mince his words. He spoke very sharply, very plainly, very clearly when he said this in verse 10.

Now then, why do you try to test God? (Acts 15:10)

Put God to the test. That's one of the things that Satan was attempting to do with Jesus.

Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (Luke 4:12)

And Peter said, you're attempting to put God to the test. You're trying to put a yoke on these believers that we have not been able to do, nor our fathers. And notice what he says there in verse 11.

11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (Acts 15:11)

You know what he's affirming? He's affirming what we call the doctrine of justification by faith alone. We are saved by grace alone, and the means is

faith alone. And what that means is that it's by means of faith alone that we receive that grace, but that faith is never alone. It's always accompanied by a changed life. And so, he stands up and he says that, and then notice verse 12, because this is very important. I'm going to go a little bit longer today. He says in verse 12:

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. (Acts 15:12)

And then look at verse 13. When they finished, James spoke up.

When they finished, James spoke up (Acts 15:13).

Now, who is this James? Remember that John's brother, James, was killed by Herod (Acts 12:1-2). This James is the half-brother of Jesus. Remember that Mary and Joseph had other children. It's really plain in the Bible unless you have a deep-seated prejudice and bias to seeing it. It's very plain. And we know that the children by Joseph and Mary, who were not full-blooded brothers and sisters of Jesus, because Jesus had no human father. The Holy Spirit did a miracle on that ovum, or egg, of the Virgin Mary, causing it to produce a real and true human being that was combined with God Almighty, his eternal Son, combined with that human nature. But Mary and Joseph went on to have children together, brothers and sisters, who were not believers and who mocked Jesus. And that's a story for another day (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; John 7:3-5).

But notice at this point, he has become a believer. And not only has he become a believer, but this half-brother of Jesus has become the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14; 1 Corinthians 15:7). Not Peter, not John, not Andrew, not any of the original 12, or the one elected to take the place of Judas (Acts 1:21-26). It is this half-brother of Jesus called "James the Just," who becomes the leader of the church in Jerusalem.

And so, he sums it up. Look at this.

"Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 16 "After this I will return and rebuild

David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that have been known for ages. 19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." (Acts 15:13-21).

Now we're going to stop there and turn to the book of Amos for just a moment, and I'll wrap it up today with Amos, because this will be part one, and God willing, next Lord's Day will be part two on the First General Assembly, and you'll see how God sometimes blesses division. So, if we turn to page 1431, here you have from the Hebrew text in verse 11, Amos 9, 11 and 12.

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, 12 so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name," declares the LORD, who will do these things. (Amos 9:11-12)

Now, if you were to hold your hand there and flip your hand back to Acts 15, you'll notice they're different.

"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that have been known for ages. (Acts 15:16-18)

THE GREEK TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW BIBLE IS USEFUL.

Why is it different? And I'll give you a little quick textual lesson. Our oldest complete Hebrew manuscript, *Codex Leningradensis*, is dated from around 1000 AD. That is 1000 of the Christian Era. That's our oldest complete Hebrew manuscript. Now we have fragments of the Hebrew Bible here and

there, but that's the oldest complete Hebrew text. It's only a little over a thousand years old.

And lo and behold, we discovered something when a little boy by the name of Muhammad the Wolf was playing near the Dead Sea. He was a little shepherd boy, and he threw a rock, and that rock happened to go through a tiny cave, and it hit something inside, and he heard it, and he went to investigate, and that's when we discovered, in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Now the Dead Sea Scrolls are an amazing find because they demonstrate that these documents in Hebrew from before the time of Jesus correspond to the Hebrew text, by and large, a hundred percent. But there are places where it's slightly different.

Now here's something, hold on to your hat: Where it's different, the Hebrew text of the Dead Sea Scrolls tends to line up with the Greek Septuagint. Now I know I'm getting really technical, but what happened is a couple of hundred years before the Lord Jesus, as the Jews had been dispersed with the Babylonian captivity and decided, many, not to come back. But because they could make money and trade in all these nations of the world according to the plan of God, they built synagogues throughout the Greek Empire and the Persian Empire and the Roman Empire. Let's see, yes, I've reversed them, but anyhow.

So, what they have is, you have Jewish people who were living throughout the known world, the Greek word for that, we get the word ecumenical from it, the *oikouménē* (οἰκουμένη, meaning world-wide), and they met in synagogues, and they had their Hebrew scriptures. But the rabbis in Jerusalem realized that it's important that we put the Bible in the language of the people.

So, if we only had a Hebrew Bible here this morning, we'd be, by and large, just bumfuzzled. What in the world does this mean? It's read from right to left, and this, that, and the other. And so, they translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, and that Greek translation became the Bible of the Jews who lived throughout the known world, that Greek translation. We call it the Septuagint because according to tradition, either 70 or 72 scholars who were very competent in Hebrew, but also knew classical Greek, did that translation work.

Now here's the thing. The half-brother of the Lord, James the Just, is quoting from the Greek Septuagint here.

11 “On that day I will raise up the tent of David that is fallen and rebuild its ruins and raise up its destruction, and rebuild it as the days of old 12 in order that those remaining of humans and all the nations upon whom my name has been called might seek out me,” Says the Lord. (*A New English Translation of the Septuagint*)

11 ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ ἀναστήσω τὴν σκηνὴν Δαυὶδ τὴν πεπτωκυῖαν καὶ ἀνοικοδομήσω τὰ πεπτωκότα αὐτῆς καὶ τὰ κατεσκαμμένα αὐτῆς ἀναστήσω καὶ ἀνοικοδομήσω αὐτήν καθὼς αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ αἰῶνος, 12 ὅπως ἐκζητήσωσιν οἱ κατάλοιποι τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, ἐφ' οὓς ἐπικέκληται τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐπ' αὐτούς, λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιῶν ταῦτα. (Amos 9:11–12)

Is he? I'm not sure. He's quoting from a text that conforms to the Greek Septuagint, but it differs at certain points from the Hebrew Bible. And the Dead Sea Scrolls support, in Hebrew, what James the Just is saying.

In other words, where there's a difference between the Hebrew Bible and the Greek translation of it, we discover that these old words in Greek sometimes reflect an older Hebrew manuscript.

And so, what he says, and here's where it's significantly different, he says that “the residue of men (notice verse 12), that they may possess the remnant of Edom.” The **translators** of the Hebrew text render that, instead of that “remnant of Edom,” “remnant of men,” that Greek word means male or female (anthrōpos, ἄνθρωπος), the remnant of men, and all the nations, we get the word “ethnic” from that (ethnos, ἔθνος), that bear my name declares the Lord who will do these things.

And so, here's where I want to sum it up, and we'll pick it up, God willing, next week.

It should be the goal of every denomination to be true to the Word of God. And that's what they were doing at their General Assembly, the very first General Assembly in the history of the Christian church, which was

comprised of elders and apostles and ordinary people from all over the church that met in Jerusalem.

And so, what they strive for is to become absolutely united. Now if you're going to be absolutely united, that means there's a lot of give and take. That means that your preferences and my preferences need to be laid aside and to do what God says in his written Word. And that's what they did in the church in Jerusalem, and they came to these rulings. And they ruled as a united church.

UNITY MEANS STANDING FOR WHAT MATTERS MOST.

And I'm going to assume that it included in Acts 15:5, page 17-18, some of the believers who belong to the party of the Pharisees. They said, "Okay, we've got to unite on this. We have to have a united front. The world is watching us. What are we united on? And what we're united on is to reach all the nations, all the Gentiles, all ethnicities, that's basic." Those are synonyms I'm using. All ethnicities. And if you're going to reach all ethnicities, there's certain things that are fundamental and essential and basic. And those things were, if you can read right there, quoting from James the Just, he says in verse 20, page 1719:

Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:20)

That meat that's strangled is neither *halal* (that's the Muslim word), or *kosher*. So, you kill the animal, you don't drain the blood, you leave all that blood in there because demons love blood. I'll just say that. And then he says, "And from blood."

So those are the fundamentals they laid down. This is what we're going to do. This is the yoke we're going to lay on them. Because all men everywhere ought to observe these things. And they let go of Moses, and they say, if you want to hear about Moses, go to a synagogue and he'll be preached and taught there. So that's the burden.

Now, this is where I want to press this for a moment.

God is calling the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and God is calling Trinity Presbyterian Church to unite around what is essential, basic Bible truth.

WE MUST DIE TO OUR PREFERENCES.

But our own personal taste, whether it's the kind of music we like or the kind of food we like, he's calling us to die to that, to give that up in order to win our neighbors. You know, I've found difficulty as I've tried to reach out in other cultures.

I will never forget when I was doing a pastors' conference near Mexico City, and we were meeting in a hacienda, and there was a peacock around, running around, and I was served something, and I'm going to say it was unwashed tripe.

Anybody here ever had tripe? Does anybody here know what tripe is? Tripe, the organs, inner organs of a, in this case, a pig, and they're cooked, but you've got to clean them really good, really good, and we call some of those things chitlins. In fact, where my daddy's people are from, Salley, South Carolina, they have a chitlin—you know, people have fishing tournaments and celebrate the roses or celebrate—people have festivals. They actually have a chitlin festival in Sallie, South Carolina.

Anyhow, if you don't clean the chitlins really, really well, and you end up boiling them.

I took one bite. And have you ever had your back of your throat close up? I mean, have you ever had it? It's like your throat said, "Hmm, no way, Bob. I ain't going to take that down my throat." And I got to swallow it. And finally, I prayed for grace, and I swallowed it. And then I had it on my plate. And then I had rice on there, and I had beans on there. And so, I did what I used to do as a little boy.

Have you ever hidden food under other food? I'm doing it all around there, and I'm praying for that peacock to come over there.

My mother, as she got older, no longer liked to eat nutritious food, and therefore, she wanted to eat only ice cream. And we had a dog named Ralphie, smartest dog I ever knew in my whole life. He could bounce a

basketball in a circle and run around with it. And Ralphie was an indoor-outdoor dog, and my mother, Dear soul, taught at Vanderbilt at one time—my mother would take her food and look around, and she would put it in her hand and hold it down, hoping that Ralphie would come and eat it.

I had hoped that peacock would come because that was just really gross and nasty. But when you're going to reach out to other cultures, where people do things differently, where they eat different food than you eat and all, it's difficult, and you need to pray for a good stomach. And God will protect you. And so, this is my burden, and it's the burden of my denomination, your denomination, that we would reach all our neighbors in a three-mile and a five-mile radius of this church.

What is the composition of our neighborhood? Now I'm really glad to see Brittany this morning and her grandmother, Miss Carol, who comes faithfully. I pray she's not sick.

TRUE EVANGELISM BRINGS PEOPLE INTO A LOCAL CONGREGATION.

But there are very few people who live in our neighborhood anymore that were part of us when we first founded in the mid-1960s. So, my burden and my challenge to you is: Study how to win our friends and neighbors to Jesus and to bring them into the church. And to bring them into the church because real evangelism is never an abstraction.

Real evangelism is to bring people into the church. That's the core of the message, and I want to address myself in closing to anyone who's watching.

What am I talking about? What I'm talking about is this. The first century church was a church that was attempting to be absolutely united on what was essential, what were the core doctrines of Christianity and how they would be applied to the outside world. Why were they concerned?

Let me speak to you from my heart. They were concerned because if you are not a believer, you're in the gravest danger, because whoever dies without knowing Jesus will go to hell.

And you say, "Man, I don't like that message." Well, I understand. Paul got stoned, and you may not be here to stone me, but that's an unpleasant truth.

But if I'm to be faithful to my calling as a herald, a preacher of the gospel, I have to tell you the truth. God forbid that I would not tell you the truth.

You're in the gravest danger if you've never repented of your sins: That means turned from them and ask God to help you conquer them. You'll never conquer them in this life completely. And ask Him to conquer them, and then ask Him to forgive your sins. Because God will always forgive people when they ask him to forgive them. If you're sorry for your sins, and you ask his help, and ask him to turn you. And then you ask him to forgive you, he will. Because the blood of Jesus Christ God's Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:8-10).

May we pray.

Lord, we pray that you would take the first part of this message, the first General Assembly, and you would apply it to all our hearts and to the hearts of those who are on the internet and will be seeing this.

We pray that it will touch their hearts, that men and women and boys and girls will come to Jesus through this simple message. And through this simple message being applied to this local church, we will see this church grow phenomenally as we welcome our neighbors, even as we had such an encouragement this morning as I came in and saw some neighborhood folks here. Lord, would you grant that we become full of our neighborhood, and help us, Lord, to identify what matters most as we spread the gospel and worship you in spirit and in truth. In Jesus' name, amen.