

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

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The Spreading Flame Series

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



On the web at [www.bethel-madison.org](http://www.bethel-madison.org)



## The Sermon Text — Acts 15:1-20

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’

The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

“After this I will return,

and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;

from its ruins I will rebuild it,

and I will set it up,

so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—

even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.”

Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.

## SERMON – The Council

The Jesus movement started when he selected 12 men from Galilee to be his disciples. The men, some illiterate or barely literate, were fishermen, tax collectors and farmers. At first it was just the 13 of them, but slowly their numbers grew. After this initial group a handful of women began to travel with them, always walking a few hundred yards behind. Finally the crowds began to increase, at times growing into the thousands.

For three years the twelve traveled and listened to him as he taught them about God. Their classroom was a beach beside the lake, a large tree on a hill overlooking the Jordan River, or a street corner in a small city. The disciples were amazed at his teaching. He talked about God in the most intimate of terms, calling him Abba, or Daddy. It was like a child speaking lovingly about his father. When he was asked to explain things, or was challenged, He responded by telling stories or parables. “There was once a man who had two sons,” he once began. Some of his teaching they understood, some of it was like listening to someone talk in riddles.

These men also marveled at his ability to heal. He could touch a person and their palsied limbs were made whole; he could lay his hands on those with fevers and they sat right up. He could even bring the dead back to life.

They were all Jewish – The Teacher, the disciples and the audience. Initially, it appeared that Jesus was not interested in the non-Jewish world. “I was sent only to lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he once said to a foreign woman who wanted him to heal her daughter. Slowly, as he met increased opposition from Jewish leaders he began to pay attention to the “outsiders” who often demonstrated more faith in him than his Jewish brothers and sisters.

In their third year with him the hopes of the disciples soared when they entered Jerusalem and were met by a noisy and excited crowd. People tore branches off the trees and greeted Jesus who came riding on a donkey. They shouted, Hosanna to the Son of David, which is akin to: Hail to the chief, or three cheers for the next king.

Four days later Jesus was dead, hanging on a cross, reserved for the worst of criminals. It was as if someone tore their hearts out of their chests. Then, another reversal, the resurrection. The dead man was alive! Alive he invited his friends to meet him back in their home territory. Again he taught them, and this time what he said made total sense. He was sending them out, often two by two, to teach the world what they had learned. This time when he left them they felt ready to begin their mission.

Their mission, they believed at first, was to put a fresh coat of paint on their Jewish faith. It was to help Jewish people, including their fuddy duddy leaders, to do the will of God. The goal was to do more than memorize Bible verses. Do God’s will included feeding the poor, and caring for widows. It was about all those things that Glen Beck hates in the church, the things he obviously doesn’t understand about Jesus. (Please note: I am not taking a political stand; Mr. Beck is taking a religious stand.) Soon the twelve were traveling all over the Mediterranean world, wherever there were colonies of Jews. After all, this was a Jewish reform movement.

At first the word began to drift back to Jerusalem that Jews were responding positively wherever the disciples went. Then the word came back that they were experiencing opposition wherever they went. And then a new message came back: non-Jews were being baptized. They heard it first from Philip who had baptized an Ethiopian official. They heard it from Peter who had baptized a Roman soldier (Cornelius) and his household. They heard it from Paul and Barnabas who had great success as far away as Greece. Though the opposition was growing among the Jewish leaders, Greek and African converts by the hundreds were joining the cause. It was amazing!

The news that the teachings of Jesus were being accepted by non-Jews was greeted with near total enthusiasm, but there was a word of caution coming from a group of men who were former Pharisees. In order to be followers of Jesus, these men taught, males had to be circumcised. After all, Jesus and all of the original twelve disciples had been circumcised. If this was a Jewish reform movement the male converts had to become Jews before they became followers of the Way (or Christians).

To respond to their critics Peter, Paul and Barnabas – the evangelists in the field – went back to Jerusalem, to the Mother Church, to report and to talk about circumcision and faith with James, the pastor of the Mother church. James was probably the brother of Jesus. A hearing took place where the conservative faction argued that an important part of the faith is the Old Testament law which includes circumcision. After all, they said, we are Jews first and then followers of Jesus.

Peter, and then Paul, argued that they were followers of Jesus first. Their life was shaped by grace. It wasn't Jesus and the law; it wasn't Jesus and circumcision; it was Jesus, first and last.

In the last Bethel picture directory there is a brief history of the church that says, "The late 1800s were a time of theological strife for all Norwegian Lutheran congregations in America. A schism evolved over the subject of predestination, and for a brief time, the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church became a member of the short-lived synod known as the "Anti-Missourian Brotherhood." A small minority broke away and formed Our Savior's Lutheran Church."

The arguments that divided our church and other churches in the 1800s were almost always abstract. They were theological arguments that were speculative and quite frankly not crucial to the life of faith. They certainly did not lead to greater evangelism or mission. The argument in Jerusalem, on the other hand, was about who can live with God and how we live with God. There ought to be a lesson there for all of us.

The debate centered around this question: Is there something we need to do before we have faith in Jesus? Today, from the right and from the left, people belong to the "Jesus and" group. From the right we have people say, "You can be a Christian if you clean up your life. You have a drinking problem, so if you stop drinking, and put your faith in God, you'll be saved."

Or they say, "To be a member of our church you have to confess that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, and be baptized." The person responds "I was baptized at First Lutheran."

"Sorry, the pastor says, "We don't recognize that baptism." Or he says, "You were baptized by sprinkling; we baptize by immersion." In other words, the way you were baptized comes ahead of faith in Jesus. Or he says, "You didn't consent to your baptism, so you have to be baptized all over."

From the left it is Jesus and social justice. If you believe in Jesus and work for immigration reform, you are a Christian. The causes are many: stopping the war, taking the right stand on same-sex marriages or global warming. Both groups talk about Jesus and...

It is strange to tell people that God loves them for Christ's sake and then turn around and say, "Of course you have to do things our way. "You have to be sincere," You have to be re-baptized. You have to work for peace. All of this makes faith something we have to do. It makes faith a work.

Faith isn't what we do; it is a poverty of spirit. Faith is going to God with empty hands and a hungry heart and praying to be filled. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." That is why infant baptism is such an important experience. The child has done nothing to earn or deserve the grace of God. We become a child of God by grace alone.

At a recent new member class I announced that we are saved by Grace. The key to life with God, I said, is what God has done, not what we have done. I said, "That is what the Reformation is all about." One of the people in the class insisted that the main thing is our acceptance of God's love.

"How," I asked the person in private, "Can you make the acceptance bigger than the deed. Let's say you decide to adopt a child. What is more important, the adoption of the parents or the acceptance of the child of the adoption? It is pretty clear to me that the act of the parents, like the act of God, exceeds everything else."

Does that mean you don't have to do anything? Does it mean you can trust in Jesus and then do anything you want, including whoring around? Does it mean that you can cheat people or take advantage of the poor?

After they listened to Peter and Paul and others, James, the leader said: I agree with Peter and Paul. "We will not force Gentiles to become Jews, but we will ask them to refrain from activities associated with idols, to guard against immorality and to serve foods that are not offensive to Jewish Christians."

That leads to a new question: Now that you don't have to do anything to be saved, what are you going to do? Here is some advice. Don't get caught up in practices that endanger your faith, your life or your health, such things as gambling, sexual immorality, greed or white collar theft. Not doing these things does not make you a person of faith, but a person of faith is better off not doing them.

The church listened to its leaders, and went back to its major task: Sharing the good news that in Jesus Christ and only in Jesus Christ do we have life and salvation. That is still our major task today. Amen © 2010