

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

The Jerusalem Council

Chapter Fifteen

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Acts 15:1 “And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Acts 15:2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

The apostles recognized that a severe problem was arising within the early church and it needed to be dealt with openly, decidedly, and quickly. This problem could have festered and led quickly to the splitting and downfall of the church but of course God was not going to let that happen. It was very difficult for the Jews to let go of their many years of training in the law and attempts to obey the law. Similarly it is very difficult for us who have learned something about Christianity that is wrong to let go of it. We must learn from this teaching that we should not try to hide our differences but we should be openly discussing them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Jew saw Christianity as the culmination of all of the old testament but the new converts saw Christianity as a new movement not influenced by tradition but solely based upon the person of Jesus Christ. There is truth and error in both understandings. Certainly God began His work long ago and the work of Jesus Christ is the completion of the Law. The Christian should understand the history of his religion but without being forced to obey rituals that have been completed by the work of Jesus. Circumcision was originally meant as a sign of the total dependence of the person on God but it had come to indicate self righteousness. Rituals always have the danger of becoming idols and tools of self righteousness. This problem is not a pernt!

It is helpful to note that Acts chapter 15 and the book of Galatia complement each other. One is written from the viewpoint of Luke and the other by the viewpoint of Paul. Thus it will help us to read both of them in this study.

Acts 15:3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

Acts 15:4 And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:5 But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.””

They had a particular destination but along the way they did not hesitate to discuss “in detail” what the Holy Spirit had been doing as the Word of God was being spread to all the nations. All of the brethren were overjoyed to hear of the work of God among the Gentiles. The word used for “brethren” indeed does mean a fellow believer so the true believers were accepting the work of God among the Gentiles as a fulfillment of the teachings of the prophets and of the teachings of Jesus.

Acts 15:6 “And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

Here is a sentence that tells us nothing about what was said but we know that some time passed as these people separated themselves from the others and discussed the issue privately. But Paul does tell us something about the private discussion in his letter to the Galatians.

Gal 2:1 “Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also.

Gal 2:2 And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain.

Gal 2:3 But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

Gal 2:4 But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.

Gal 2:5 But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

Gal 2:6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)-- well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.

Gal 2:7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised

Gal 2:8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles),

Gal 2:9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

Gal 2:10 They only asked us to remember the poor-- the very thing I also was eager to do.”

Paul then relates to the Galatians how he had to oppose Peter who, by his actions, condemned what he told to be the way of God to the Gentiles. Paul was determined to get the matter of the proper furthering of the Gospel to all people in the open and solidly stated so that all might understand.

Gal 2:11 “But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

Gal 2:12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.

Gal 2:13 And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

Gal 2:14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

Our pride is a terrible force that we must overcome. Peter was afraid of what people would say and do to him when he denied Christ three times. Now Peter's desire to be accepted by the Jewish party led him to act in opposition to his conscience so that he became a hypocrite by acting opposite to what he knew to be truth. Paul did not let Peter get away with this behavior for such could have split the early church. With this background we can better understand what now happened at the Jerusalem Council as the people came back together.

Acts 15:7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 "And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

Acts 15:9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

Acts 15:11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.""

Peter made an eloquent argument that in essence says that if God chooses the Gentiles to be His children who are we to argue? Peter stated a fact and then a deduction. Who indeed are we to show disrespect to God and not obey what He so clearly teaches? Reading this statement by Peter I think that we can safely infer that Paul convinced Peter to repent from his earlier behavior and to support the argument for accepting the Gentiles into the Church without any ritualistic acts.

Acts 15:12 "And all the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

We do not know the identity of the speaker but he, like Peter, stated the facts of the repetition by God in their missionary trip of what He had done through Peter. God was bringing people into His fellowship without ritual and without ceremony.

Acts 15:13 And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me.

Acts 15:14 "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

Acts 15:15 "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

Acts 15:16 'After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it,

Acts 15:17 In order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,'

Acts 15:18 Says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

The half-brother of Jesus Christ, James, was a respected leader of the Church and he spoke relating the actions of God throughout history. He stated that what they were now seeing was spoken by prophesy in the former times.

Acts 15:19 "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

Acts 15:20 but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

Acts 15:21 "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.""

James did not speak here as an authority but as an individual. Some have said that this statement by James was "ex cathedra", but that is not correct for the way the text is written clearly indicates that this is a personal understanding of the events and not, in and of itself, meant to be a binding statement.

James did not address the issue of circumcision except in a negative sense by not mentioning it. He only stated that the Gentile Christians must abstain from things contaminated by idols, from fornication, from what has been strangled, and from drinking blood. Death by strangulation would not result in the blood being totally withdrawn from the animal and so such a death by a food source was not to be allowed.

Acts 15:22 "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas-- Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, Acts 15:23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

Acts 15:24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

Acts 15:25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The first sentence is a statement about a meeting that they all had after the speeches by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James. They then decided to send a delegation to report their decisions.

Acts 15:27 “Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

Acts 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

Acts 15:29 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.”

Verse 28 again makes it clear that the decision of this group was not just a man-centered decision but one that has the backing of the Holy Spirit. This important meeting gives us the method of making decisions in the church. We should meet, discuss the facts, find deductions from the facts, pray and then issue “verdicts” based upon the validation of the Word of God.

Acts 15:30 “So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

Acts 15:31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Acts 15:32 And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

Acts 15:33 And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

Acts 15:34 [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]

Acts 15:35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.”

This meeting was extremely important. If they had not had the meeting and come to a Godly decision based upon the facts made clear by God surely there would have been a split in the early church that would still exist. One faction would be based upon a ritualistic combination of trust in Jesus and elements of Jewish requirements for self righteousness and the other would just be based upon the work of Jesus without the rich history of the work of God. Both would be much poorer than the whole became. Although one side “lost” in this agreement, there was no bitterness but only a growing strength of the church as the people were encouraged to accept each other because God had chosen them as His children. Verse 32 tells us that some people were late for dinner! What a great message that must have been by Judas and Silas, both prophets.

Acts 15:36 “And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.”

Paul now wanted to go back to the churches they had planted to encourage them and to inquire as to their physical and spiritual health. Paul may have heard of some problems or he may have just been exercising excellent insights into the proper development of a congregation of believers.

Acts 15:37 “And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also.

Acts 15:38 But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.

Acts 15:39 And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus.

Acts 15:40 But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

Acts 15:41 And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

This episode seems like an unsightly development among the missionaries as Barnabas and Paul split up over the matter of taking Mark along on the journey. We contemplated earlier that perhaps Paul developed malaria on his first missionary journey and that Mark did not stay with them to help him. Did Paul have such ill feelings toward Mark that he did not forgive him? I doubt that it was a matter of Paul not forgiving Mark for he knew the teachings of Jesus on forgiveness. But when someone reveals a negative character trait to us it may be smart to act toward that person in events that might further reveal such a character problem in great caution. I really try to forgive people for what they have done to me but I do not think it wise for me to totally forget how a person has acted under some particular situation, particularly when I am facing such a situation again.

Perhaps Paul was also acting in regard to a remark by our Lord:

Luke 9:62 “But Jesus said to him, “No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.””

It could have seemed to Paul that Mark was not fit for the kingdom of God at this moment but we know that Paul later thought very highly of Mark:

2Tim 4:11 “Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for service.”

The Bible does not tell us what happened to Barnabas but tradition tells us that Barnabas served on Cyprus and died there as an old man. We do not know who founded the churches at Syria and Cilicia but they are north of Antioch and toward Tarsus, Paul’s home so perhaps Paul founded them during the time before Barnabas got Paul to come teach. If they were churches that Paul had founded we know he would have been very happy to see that they were still there doing well.

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