

Monday 7:00pm, H 105 (1st floor, High School--foot of stairs, behind the gym, by the vending machine area), Tuesday 7:00am, Family, Room, CCCM – Phil Twente, cell #714 425 9221; email – ptwente@gmail.com For past studies, audio plus notes, go to: <http://www.missioncalvary.com/> Click on “Bible Studies” on the left column. References include commentaries by numerous pastor/teachers.

CONFLICT OVER CIRCUMCISION

Act 15:1 And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Act 15:2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Act 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

Act 15:4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Act 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Act 15:6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Act 15:7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Act 15:8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us,

V.1-2 The Jewish belief was that in **order to be saved, you had to become a Jew**, a very strong feeling in the early church. You had to be baptized and you had to then **had to be circumcised and to obey the law of Moses**. They felt that was necessary in order to be saved. Now many of the Jews in Jerusalem were accepting Jesus Christ, but they still held to the belief **that only Jews could be saved**. Now many Gentiles are receiving Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas went on the first missionary journey with great success. Now the church in Antioch was basically a Gentile church. And so Peter makes mention of this going up to Jerusalem to settle this divisive issue. **The issue of what relationship the Gentile believers would have to the law of Moses**. Is it necessary to become a Jew in order to be saved? Is salvation through faith alone? Or are works necessary? Must you add works to your faith in order to be saved? **Gal. 2:1-16** gives us some insight on this whole incident, not given to us in the Book of Acts. Paul declares people that came from the church in Jerusalem **to spy out the liberty that the Gentile believers had**. And their purpose was to bring them into the bondage of the law.

V. 3 On their way they stopped by the different fellowships. It is interesting how the church was growing, fellowships in Phoenicia and in Samaria. Stopping through the churches, they were **sharing the wonderful work of God among the Gentile believers**. How that the Gentile world was receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ.

V. 4 Paul said to the Galatians, they had a private meeting with the leadership. With James and John and Peter, they had this private meeting and then they went into an open, public meeting to discuss the issues.

V. 5 Those who had the Pharisaic background were insisting the Gentile must adhere to the law of Moses and to the ritual. The ritual of circumcision. (**Gen. 17:9-14**)

Vs. 6-7 Peter is recounting the fact, (10th chapter), how that the Lord sent him to the Gentiles. The choice has been God's; the privilege his. As he was at the house of Cornelius, while speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon them, when they believed the gospel that Peter preached (**Acts. 10:34-43**). Paul later wrote to the Galatians and he said, **receive you the Spirit by the hearing of faith, or by the works of the law**. The obvious answer was that **they had received the Spirit through the hearing of faith**. They heard of this wonderful gift of God and they received by the faith the gift of God. Not by the works of the law. **The Holy Spirit was not given to them** because they had done certain works, because they had achieved a certain degree of holiness or righteousness. But **it was just God's gift, bestowed upon them when they heard by faith and believed by faith the word that was preached**.

v. 8 So God, **knowing the heart**. Now here Peter declares the omniscience of God. He knows the heart of men. He knows my thoughts before I ever think them. God knows what I'm going to think. And that's interesting to me how that **God knows my thoughts from their origin**. **Ps. 139:1-4; Acts 15:18**

The conflict here is that although there were Jews who believed in Christ, **they held to the view that without circumcision, converts could not be saved!** Not only were they stressing that circumcision was the God-given sign of the covenant, but they were going further and making it a condition of salvation. Jesus's saving was not enough, not sufficient for salvation, one must add to faith circumcision, and to that one must adhere to the law of Moses. **The issue was huge! The way of salvation was at stake! The gospel was in dispute! The very foundations of the Christian faith were being undermined.**

The issue can be clarified by a series of questions:

1. Is the sinner saved by the sheer grace of God in and through Christ crucified when one simply believes?
2. Has Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection **done everything necessary for salvation?**
3. Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance?
4. Is **justification by faith alone**, or through a mixture of faith and works; grace and the law; Jesus and Moses?
5. Are Gentile believers a sect of Judaism, or authentic members of a multi-national family.

It was **not some Jewish cultural practices** which were at stake, but **the truth of the gospel and the future of the church?**

v. 7 Now Peter speaks. His contribution was to remind the assembly of the Cornelius incident. In his message, he addressed the opposition directly. **We Jews have not obtained salvation by obedience to the law, so how can we expect Gentiles to do so?** No, we believe (v.11) **it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.**

Act 15:9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Act 15:10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Act 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.

Act 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

Act 15:13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me:

Act 15:14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

Act 15:15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

Act 15:16 'AFTER THIS I WILL RETURN AND WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID, WHICH HAS FALLEN DOWN; I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL SET IT UP;

Act 15:17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, EVEN ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, SAYS THE LORD WHO DOES ALL THESE THINGS.'

Act 15:18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Act 15:19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Act 15:20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

v.9 Peter declares that God has put no difference between us and them. That is us, Jews, and them, the Gentiles.) **purifying their hearts by faith.** Now the Jews were saved by faith. The Gentiles were saved by faith. The Jews were not saved by the works of the law. **Rom. 4:9-12; 9:32:** God is purifying our hearts through faith and He is purifying their hearts through faith. He has put no difference between us. We all must come to Jesus Christ believing and trusting in Him for our salvation.

v.10 Peter is **acknowledging that this law as it was being taught by the Pharisees was unbearable.** So why lay on them a yoke we could not bear?

v.11 We conclude that we are saved by grace as they are. **Cf. Eph. 2:8-9**

v.12 Previously God was said to work; with them (14.27) and (15.4); now "through" them as His agents. The emphasis on the signs and wonders is intended not to denigrate the preaching of the word, but because they confirmed and validated it.

v.13 James, one of the brothers of Jesus, waited until the missionary apostles had completed their evidence, then responded, "listen to me"

v.14 Then referring to Peter by his Hebrew name, he summarized his testimony. His statement was more significant than it appears on the surface, as the expressions "people" and "for His name" are regularly applied in the Old Testament to Israel. James is now expressing his belief that Gentile believers now belonged to the true Israel, called and chose by God to belong to His one and only people and glorify His name. **(Amos 9:11-12)**

vs. 15-21 Church Councils have no authority in the church unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with the Scripture. To substantiate this, James quoted **Amos 9:11-12**. There we are told of two related truths. God promises first to restore David's fallen ten and rebuild its ruins so that, secondly a Gentile remnant will seek the Lord. In other words, through the Davidic Christ, Gentiles will be included in His new community. Thus, James declared himself in full agreement with Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. The inclusion of the Gentiles was not a divine after-thought, but foretold by the prophets. Scripture in itself confirming the facts of the missionaries' experience. He was ready to give his firm proposal, which in fact the other leaders endorsed, so that the decision was unanimous and the letter went out in the name of the apostles and elders, with the whole church.

v.12 Now Paul speaks and makes his final affirmation. We notice that he is echoing the gospel statement which Paul had made to him in Antioch, while publicly challenging him. Together they make it plain that **salvation is through the grace of Jesus Christ and by faith in Jesus Christ. Grace and faith cannot be separated.**

v.13 **God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.** Interesting phrase. God visited the Gentiles to take out a people for His name. There is an interesting Scripture in Luke where Jesus says that Jerusalem will be trodden under the foot of the Gentiles **until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.** But then Paul in Romans eleven, speaks about the fullness of the Gentiles, coming in. In other words, God who knows all things and God who is sovereign in all things, had prophesied in the Scripture that the Gentiles were to receive the gospel. They were to be saved. But there seems to be a certain number, that God knowing all things, would know of Gentiles, who would believe. And blindness has happened to Israel in part **until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.** Then God will deal with the Jewish race again. But this fullness of the Gentiles, an interesting phrase. Here you have the same idea. **To visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name. And God today is still gathering from the Gentiles a people for His name.**

v.18 *"Known to God from eternity are all His works.* God in Isaiah sort of declared. I am God. There is no God like Me. I declare the end from the beginning. And to me **one of the strongest apologetics as far as proving that the Bible is God's word is this prophetic aspect in the Bible.** How God showed them things that are going to come long before they ever came. These marvelous prophecies in the Scriptures that proved just what James declared here. Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Are you using prophecies adequately when witnessing?

Act 15:21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

THE JERUSALEM DECREE

Act 15:22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

Act 15:23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Act 15:24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law"—to whom we gave no such commandment—

Act 15:25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

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

Act 15:27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.

Act 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

Act 15:29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

v. 22 The Council agreed with James' summary. The combination of prophetic Scripture and apostolic experience seemed conclusive to them, as it had done to him. And James's proposal of Gentile Christian abstinence in four cultural areas seemed a wise policy to promote mutual tolerance and fellowship.

v. 23 The church did not decide only to choose emissaries to send to the church of Antioch, however, from whom the request had come to adjudicate in this controversy, but also to write a letter to the churches with a Gentile membership, in order to convey the decisions.

vs. 24 The Jerusalem church and its leaders made three important points in their letter. First, the disassociated themselves from the circumcision party and therefore, by clear implication, from the requirement of circumcision.

v. 25-26 Secondly they made it abundantly clear that the men they had now agreed to send, Judas and Silas, did have their full approval and support.

v. 27 They would not only deliver the letter, but also confirm by word of mouth what it contained.

v. 28 Thirdly, they enunciated their unanimous decision, made by the Holy Spirit and us, not to burden Gentile converts with anything (certainly not with circumcision) beyond the following requirements:

v. 29 Namely the four specified abstentions. The letter's conclusion, which expresses more a recommendation than a command, was that "*If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.*"

v. 28 "*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:* Here's the secret. Today every major denomination has its conventions. They get at the convention and they have these big arguments. They have splits. A hundred churches will pull out of the convention, you know. It seems like the conventions are bringing more dissension than unity. **For really the purpose was to develop unity.** This calling of the meeting in Jerusalem. **But notice it seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us!** Oh, would to God at these conventions that they would gather for prayer and seeking the mind of God and what is the Holy Spirit saying about the issues. These issues that are being debated. What is the mind of God on these issues? Oh, that from these conventions we could write and say, it seemed good to **the Holy Spirit and to us! That this is the mind of the Spirit. This is how the Spirit of God is leading us in these issues.**

CONTINUING MINISTRY IN SYRIA

Act 15:30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.

Act 15:31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

Act 15:32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.

Act 15:33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

Act 15:34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.

Act 15:35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

DIVISION OVER JOHN MARK

Act 15:36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."

Act 15:37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.

Act 15:38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.

Act 15:39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus;

Act 15:40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.

Act 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

v. 30 Antioch was named at the head of the letter as its first recipient, because it was there that the original controversy had broken out and from there that the appeal for help had come.

v. 31 Now they were glad to receive the wonderful news that Gentiles who had believe in Jesus wee to be accepted as Christians, without the need to become Jews, as well.

v. 32 Judas and Silas, not identified as prophets as well, stayed on for some time to encourage and strengthen the brethren.

v. 33 They then returned to Jerusalem, sent on their way with the blessing of peace.

v. 34 This may have been added to explain how in v. 40, Silas was in Antioch.

v. 35 Paul and Barnabas stayed and with many others taught and evangelized the word of the Lord.

v. 36 The single province of Syria and Cilicia had been the scene of some of Paul's earliest evangelistic endeavors (Acts 9:30). Evidently there were some Gentile churches there, for they are named at the head of the letter. Paul made his proposal to Barnabas that they should revisit the Galatian converts and see how they were doing.

v. 37 Barnabas agreed, but wanted to take his cousin John Mark with them perhaps to give him a second chance.

v. 38 But Paul consider this unwise, for he took a serious view of Mark's desertion and lack of perseverance.

v. 39 The disagreement between them was so sharp that they parted company, Barnabas taking Mark and sailing for his home country Cyprus.

v. 40 Meanwhile Paul chose Silas, whose recent ministry in Antioch had evidently impressed him and they were commended by the church to the grace of the Lord.

v. 41 Just as Paul and Barnabas had been for their missionary journey (14:26). God certainly overruled this disagreement, since as a result of ti, out of one par, two were made. But this example of God's providence may not be used as an excuse of Christian quarreling.

Vs. 30-16:5 Having shared with his readers the rest of the letter, Luke now documents its reception by the largely Gentile churches, first in Syrian Antioch (vs. 30-35), secondly in Syria and Cilicia (vs. 36-40) and thirdly in Galatia (16:1-5)

Vs. 35-36 "Then after some days" -- There was a gap of time between verse thirty-five and thirty-six.

Indeterminate, we don't know how long it was. But between verse thirty-five, they went on for quite a while, "teaching and preaching the word of the Lord". A great thing!

Questions:

1. True or False - The calling of a Church Council can be extremely valuable if its purpose is to clarify doctrine and promote peace. Was that accomplished in the first Council, given in chapter 15?

2. The issue for the first Church Council be clarified by a series of questions:

- a. Is the sinner saved by the sheer grace of God in and through Christ crucified when one simply believes?
- b. Has Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection done everything necessary for salvation?
- c. Or are we saved partly through the grace of Christ and partly through our own good works and religious performance?
- d. Is justification by faith alone, or through a mixture of faith and works; grace and the law; Jesus and Moses?
- d5. Are Gentile believers a sect of Judaism, or authentic members of a multi-national family.

3. What were Peter's last words in the Book of Acts? (v.11)

4. What two general, but significant, changes occur regarding the content of the Book of Acts, following Chapter 15 to the end of it?

5. Do you see the operation of any spiritual gifts in James summary comments in verses 13-21? If so, which gifts? What was one of the reasons the crowd listened attentively to James. (Gal. 2:9)

6. Who/what groups approved of the Jerusalem Decree? Who disapproved?

7. Is it ever the best course of actions where believers disagree for them to work separately?

8. Is Acts 15 a good model for the church? Why? Were they a church that sought God's wisdom and guidance to settle the issues that arose?