

Friends, don't get me wrong. By no means do I count myself as an expert in all of this, but I've got my eyes on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

Philippians 3:13-14 The Message Bible

First Love Ministries, Inc.

Prayer Study #243

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

CHAPTER 15

Debate Over Gentiles Keeping the Law

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."
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.
3. So, being sent 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.
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.
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."

Paul and Barnabas have completed their first missionary journey, and the new churches are 100% Gentile. The Church in Judea, however, is made up mostly of Jewish Pharisees who believe strongly in the Laws of Moses and have no intention of giving it up. Furthermore, they believe that these Gentile believers are not even really saved unless the males are circumcised and both male and female adhere to the Laws of Moses. The crux of the matter, however, goes deeper than whether these gentile believers should keep the law. The real question is whether they are even saved if they do not. It is a question between law and grace. Of course at this time Paul had not written so eloquently about this issue as he did later in almost all of his epistles, especially in Romans and Galatians, where he goes so far as to say, "*Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law....*" And if Galatians 2:15-16: "*We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the*

works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” But, at this time, the issue has not been decided, and it was the cause of a heated debate between these Jews from Judea and Paul and Barnabas.

They decide to address this issue before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. J. Vernon McGee reminds us that this was the first Church council in the history of the church but certainly not the last. The Church has had councils to decide such great issues as the validity and inerrancy of the Scriptures and the deity of Christ and the fact that He is both God and man.

Again, the question being raised fundamentally was “What did Christ do for you on the cross?” Was His death enough to save those who accepted Him or did they need to go through something else, such as keeping the Mosaic law, to really be saved?

Peter Preaches Salvation Through Grace

6. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.
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.
8. “So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us.
9. “And made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.
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?
11. “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

Peter finally got up and summarized the argument for the side that believed that people are saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter had already taken this position at the time of the conversion of Cornelius. He had been totally uncomfortable with going to the house of a Gentile where the males were uncircumcised and where the Mosaic law, especially as pertained to eating, were not followed. Yet the Lord marvelously baptized these uncircumcised Gentiles in the Holy Spirit.

Peter makes an astonishing admission in these last two verses. First, even the Jews who followed the law were unable to really keep it.

Secondly, Jews are saved in the same way that Gentiles are: through grace and not by works.

Paul and Barnabas Testify

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.

I am sure this multitude, even those in the Mosiac Law camp, were spellbound by the testimonies that Barnabas and Paul declared. I suspect that we are rarely told of the miracles and deliverances and the personal prophecies and the healings that took place on Barnabas and Paul's First Missionary Journey. Perhaps Luke did not want to tell too much so that the focus would always be on Jesus and not men, even outstanding Christian men like Barnabas and Paul.

James Proves Gentiles Are Free from the Law

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

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

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

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;*

17. *So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who does all these things.'*

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

19. "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.

20. "But that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

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

We cannot be 100% who this James was. We know that it was not the James who was the brother of John for he was the first of the Apostles who was martyred by Herod and had been dead for several years. I believe and most theologians believe and tradition says that this was James, the half-brother of Jesus. At any rate, he was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He had had a special resurrection appearance of Jesus to him alone. (This is recounted in 1st Corinthians 15:7). Galatians 1:19 implies that he was a pillar in the Church in Jerusalem. Tradition

tells us that his knees were as hard as a camel's knees because he knelt in prayer so much.

I think that James brilliantly brought the whole group to a resolution of these matters. First, he states the facts of Simon Peter's dealing with the Gentiles, then he uses Scripture to back up his position, and finally he gives 4 easy rules for Gentiles to keep, which would make them more acceptable to the Pharisees who were Christian.

This first rule pertained to meat offered to idols. This was a big issue in the early Church and even Paul deals with it very specifically in 1st Corinthians 8 and 9. The people would offer a meat offering to a Roman god. Only a small portion was actually burned on the altar. The rest was returned to the worshiper and often used in a dinner party with the worshipers friends. The priests also got their portion and, what they did not eat, they would sell. No Christian should, of course, eat this meat offered to idols.

The second thing is an issue that is very much alive today, even in the Body of Christ: abstain from sexual immorality. It has been said that chastity was the only completely new virtue that Christianity brought into the world. Christians are called to be pure even in an impure world.

Finally, the Gentiles were to abstain from eating things that had been strangled or from things in which the blood had not been drained off. To the Jews the blood was the life and life belonged to God alone. I suspect that there are also some health issues involved in eating things with blood. The Gentiles were ordered thus to eat meats only prepared in the Jewish way.

These were simple regulations and regulations easy to follow. This resolution to the problem, however, was monumental and broke down the last barrier between the Jewish and Gentile believers, establishing Christianity as one Body with Jews and Gentiles being one.

The Council Sends an Official Letter

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.
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.

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-
 25. It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,
 26. Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
 27. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.
 28. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:
 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.

Apparently, all accepted these new rules for the Church. There seems to have been no disunity. The council sends both Barnabas and Paul, along with two other witnesses, Judas and Silas, with a letter to explain the new procedures.

Report to Antioch

30. So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter.
31. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.
32. Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words.
33. And after they stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.
34. However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there.
35. Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

As we said last week, the church at Antioch is becoming the center of the Christian Church. What could have been offensive becomes a source of encouragement to the new believers. Also, I am sure that they spent much time in personal prophecy and in building relationships between the believers in Jerusalem and the believers in Antioch.

Contention over John Mark

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.

37. Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John Mark.

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.

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

40. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.

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

This is one of the saddest stories in the New Testament to me. Paul was a teacher but also an evangelist and wanted to get back to the field ripe for harvest. He was chomping at the bits to go back to the churches which he and Barnabas had established. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark on the Second Missionary journey. Paul adamantly refused and wanted nothing to do with the young man who had abandoned and deserted them in Pamphylia. The argument was so strong between Paul and Barnabas that they parted ways. Each man was partially right and each man partially wrong. In later times, most likely because of the mentoring of Barnabas, John Mark became mature and became accepted and reconciled and profitable to Paul, but this would take several years (Colossians 4:10; 2nd Timothy 4:11; and Philemon 24).

At this point Barnabas' missionary work is not recorded anymore in Scripture. Tradition says that he went back Cyprus where he was born, and did what previous scriptures have indicated was his heart's passion: to evangelize his own people. From the strong church in Cyprus missionaries were sent out to evangelize Northern Africa. The Church certainly owes much gratitude to Barnabas for not only spreading the Christian Church but also discipling Mark who would later write one of the most important books of the New Testament.

Now we are introduced to Silas. Silas was a Jewish Christian and also a Roman citizen, like Paul. He was a prophet. Not only did he work with Paul, but he also was associated with Peter and either wrote or carried Peter's first epistle (1st Peter 5:12). He also is probably the Silvanus who would later preach (2nd Corinthians 1:19; 1st Thessalonians 1:1, and 2nd Thessalonians 1:1).

Oh, What a Savior

Marvin P. Dalton

1948

Once I was straying
In sin's dark valley
No hope within could I see
But they searched through Heaven
And found a Savior
To save a poor lost soul like me

Death's chilly waters
I'll soon be crossing
But His hand will lead me safely o'er
Then I'll join that chorus
In that great city
I'll sing up there forever and ever more

CHORUS

O what a Savior
O Hallelujah
His heart was broken
On Calvary
His hands were nail scared
His side was riven
He gave His life's blood for even me