

Acts Chapter Fifteen

Acts 15:1-3

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." 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. 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.

- God has fulfilled His covenant promises—sent Jesus as Messiah—opening the door to covenant with the nations.
- Paul and Barnabas have been planting gentile churches—meanwhile—church in Judea—made up of Jewish converts/many Pharisees—are struggling with what this mixture means.
- The issue is not ritual, membership or ceremony—it is about facts concerning relationship with Christ. Those who fail to understand relationship will make ritual central.
- Some men came from Judea and began to teach without authority to do so.
- Paul/Barnabas—great dissension and debate—confrontation
- Pharisees require conforming to Mosaic Law as a point of salvation.
- This is why Paul writes..."Christ crucified...to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness..." Jews are accustomed to what they must do to be considered holy.
- Gospel had two aspects:

The facts—essential—Paul gives these in I Cor 15:1-5—death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

The interpretation: what Paul uses the Book of Galatians to set out—contention in the church was not over the facts—but how they were interpreted.

Acts 15:4-6

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. 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."

And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

- When Paul ministered—he did not allow believers to continue in their pagan practices—Pharisees had to give up their own efforts for salvation (Gal 2:16)
- This council is fully explained in Galatians
- Pharisees want to add something to the gospel—that would turn Christianity into religion.
- Judaizers taught: Gentiles must be initiated in Judaism through circumcision, and must live under Mosaic Law.

Acts 15:7-12

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. "And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. "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?" But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

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.

- After much debate—Peter speaks—had probably contributed to debate as well.
- Peter has had a personal encounter—a vision—that was basis for his heart change. Perhaps it is more difficult to change the mind. (Peter had been taken by surprise with vision).
- Cleansing their hearts by faith—not through ritual cleansing or sacrifice. All who come to Christ are saved and cleansed by faith.
- Put God to the test—Gal 3:2-3

- As Jews—unable to keep the law.
- Peter makes the point that God fully received the gentiles apart from their being circumcised.
- Though it was a heated debate—two sides emotionally engaged—yet all believers and wanting to respond to the Holy Spirit.

Acts 15:13-21

And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. "And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written,

**'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,

IN ORDER THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE
LORD,
AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,'**

SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS KNOWN FROM OF OLD. "Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, 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. "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

- James: brother of Jude, brother of Jesus, wrote epistle
- Called Peter-'Simeon'—might indicate that debate was in Aramaic.
- James is in agreement with Peter—recognizes that they are dealing with a work of God.
- Quotes Amos 9:11-12—these words come after a section concerning God's judgment.
- Early church believed that with Jesus coming as Messiah—not only would nations come it—Israel would be restored.
- It is my judgment—it appears James takes the key role of leadership in the Jerusalem church.

- Conclusion: Gentiles do not need to be circumcised—they don't have to become Jewish in order to become Christians. They are not held in an inferior category.
- As the church continues to grow—it must consider how their behavior effects their witness in Jewish communities—so no offense is taken.
- Though gentiles are not required to live under Mosaic law—should be governed by law of love—especially as they share meals (I Cor 8-9)

Acts 15:22-29

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, 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.

“ Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their words*, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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

“ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 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.”

- Two Jewish believers return with Paul and Barnabas to bear witness to verdict of the council. They send living witnesses—as well as the letter to verify and confirm.
- Those who disturbed with their words—corresponds directly with problem mentioned in Gal 2:12-13
- These Judaizers were keeping church divided at core level.

- 'Beloved Paul and Barnabas'—affirms them—they are not to be regarded as holding an unorthodox position.
- Rather than passing on strict rules—they are passing on a new way to think. The church is learning to walk by the Spirit corporately—in midst of conflict.
- Gentile believers are called to leave their old ways behind—idolatry/pagan practices.

Acts 15:30-35

So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. And after they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

- Some manuscripts do not include vs 34
- Vs 33—states Judas and Silas return to Jerusalem
- Vs 40—says Paul chose Silas as his companion—since it appears confusing—many manuscripts leave vs 34 out.

Acts 15:36-41

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." And Barnabas was desirous of taking John, called Mark, along with them also. 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. And there arose such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and departed, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

- Paul understood the importance of strengthening and encouraging the young church plants. He had a heart to disciple

as well as evangelize.

- Sharp disagreement—paroxysmos=convulsive; heightened emotions, raised voices
- Paul is remembering what took place in Pisidian Antioch—he didn't feel that he could rely on John Mark.
- Barnabas—ever the encourager—also cousin to John Mark—wants to extend grace—offer a second chance.
- Someone must be wrong here. Both had good reasons—but bad attitudes. This is a long-term relationship at point of great strain.
- Paul chooses Silas to take journey with him. Silas is a Roman citizen—is also known as Silvanus—appears in letters to Thessalonica and Corinthians.
- Result: two groups go out instead of one. Barnabas and Mark go to Cyprus and strengthen the work there. Paul takes Silas to revisit Syria, Cilicia and beyond.

Acts Chapter Fifteen—Workbook

Key Words:

Harmonize:

Read Amos 9 and Jeremiah 12—to see the quote in Acts 15:16-18 in context.

Dig:

- 1) What did circumcision represent to the church?
- 2) What was the first response made when men began to teach in Antioch that salvation depended on circumcision?
- 3) How might verses 14:27 and 15:34 impact the debate/discussion?
- 4) Who is in agreement with Paul and Barnabas at this gathering?
- 5) What is the Tabernacle of David?
- 6) Are verses 20 and 21 tied together?
- 7) How is the debate resolved?
- 8) What giftings do Judas and Silas have? What would this gift mean in the early church? What do Paul and Barnabas find themselves in conflict about? How is the conflict resolved?
- 9) What is the difference between preaching and teaching?

Discuss:

- 1) What does the church take into account as they debate the role of the law in a believer's life? Do any of these same debates show up in the church today?
- 2) What elements of resolving the debate are important for the church functioning together today?
- 3) When Barnabas and Paul separate from one another—does this harm the church or bring benefit to the church?

Point of Prayer:

Pray for any unreconciled relationship you are aware of in the Body of Christ.

Integrate:

What other scriptures come to mind as you read this chapter?

Application:

- 1) Have you experienced judgment from other believers?
- 2) What happened to your relationship as a result of this judgment?
- 3) Is there someone you go to for help when you face a conflict?
- 4) Is there a difference between peacemaking and peacekeeping? Is one more difficult than the other?

- 5) Have you discovered anything that helps you to reconcile with someone else?
- 6) How do you draw a theological conclusion? Have any of your conclusions ever been challenged? What was the outcome?
- 7) Have you experienced betrayal, rejection or abandonment in the church context? What was the outcome?