

## 22. Jerusalem Conference on the Gentiles' Obligation to the Law of Moses: Acts 15

Acts 14 closed with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch from their first missionary journey. When they got there, they briefed the church on "all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." They stayed in Antioch with the disciples for a long time.

Acts 15 opens with a dispute in the church that occurred when men came from Judea and taught that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised to be saved. This dissension and its resolution constitute a shift of epic proportion in how the church treated Gentiles.

### ***A Sharp Dispute on Binding the Law of Moses on the Gentiles***

Acts 15:1-4

*15 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.*

The men who came down from Judea (called today Judaizing teachers) were clearly false teachers who made circumcision a matter of law, binding it upon Christians in order for them to be saved. This is the first documented case of Jews attempting to bind elements of the law of Moses on Gentile Christians. This issue was to plague the church of the first century. In fact, Paul will go on to refute these false doctrines in detail in Romans and Galatians, and the writer of Hebrews will refute them in his letter. Many false teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century look to the Old Testament and the law of Moses to support their false doctrines. In this example, in Acts, they were specifically trying to bind circumcision; and not just bind it, but they taught without it "you cannot be saved."

Since we have the scriptures recorded for us, we should be able to see the clear division between the old and new covenants. Paul answered this false teaching in Gal 3:10-14:

10 All who rely on **observing the law** are under a **curse**, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." 11 Clearly **no one is justified** before God **by the law**, because, "The righteous will live by faith." 12 The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." 13 Christ **redeemed us** from **the curse of the law** by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." 14 He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the

Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit [Emphasis added].

In Gal 5:2-4, Paul extended his argument to include circumcision, calling it of no value and saying that it alienates us from Christ:

2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be **of no value to you at all**. 3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4 You who are trying to be justified by law **have been alienated from Christ**; you have fallen away from grace [Emphasis added].

If a person keeps one part of the law, he is obligated to keep the whole law, which is impossible. *Those who keep the law are fallen from grace* speaks to modern practices such as instrumental music, burning incense, church buildings as sanctuaries, plurality of wives, infant baptism as dedication, keeping the Sabbath day, and many, many others.

Paul, Barnabas, and their company of believers came to Jerusalem after reporting to the churches along the way how that the Gentiles had been converted. They met with the church in Jerusalem and apostles and elders, all of whom welcomed them. They reported to them all that God had done through them.

### ***Believers Who Were Pharisees Contend with Barnabas and Paul***

Acts 15:5

5 *Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."*

The Pharisees were the equivalent to a political party in the theistic Jewish state in the period between the Old and New Testaments:

A Jewish sect of the intertestamental period noted for strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary).

The Pharisees extend the argument from binding circumcision to be saved to binding the requirement to obey the law of Moses. Luke describes these Pharisees as believers, indicating their position in the church with the further commitment to bind the law of Moses in keeping with the beliefs of their party. These party beliefs extended beyond the law of Moses to the traditions handed down from their predecessors. In Acts 23:8, Luke made the distinction between the Sadducees and Pharisees: "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all."

The Lord reviewed and condemned the practices of the Pharisees, which bind tradition in Matt 23. In Matt 15:1-2; 6-9, Jesus also condemned their binding of the traditions:

15 Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, 2 "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"

6 he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 "These people honor me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
9 They worship me in vain;  
their teachings are but rules taught by men."

The Pharisees were trying to bring their practices and beliefs into the church.

### ***The Apostles and Elders Consider the Question***

Acts 15:6-11

*6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

As the apostles and elders considered the questions, Peter took the lead reminding them that God had chosen him as the one first to take the gospel to the Gentiles. When Peter took the message of the gospel to them, they believed, and God made no distinction between them (Gentiles) and us (Jews). That he purified their hearts by faith does not mutually exclude the other acts of obedience, for Peter wrote 1 Peter 1:22a: "22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth . . ."

The idea that these Judaizing teachers were putting a yoke on the Gentiles that neither these elders and apostles nor their fathers were able to bear, was first voiced by the Lord in Acts 23. No one could live up to the law free of sin, and they were unable to bear it. The law led to spiritual death and in effect cursed them: "10 All who rely on **observing the law** are under a **curse**, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.'" Gal 3:10.

Peter's strong assertion is that Gentiles are saved just as the Jews are: through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

### ***Paul and Barnabas Report and James Responds***

Acts 15:12-15

*12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. 13 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:*

Paul and Barnabas supported Peter's contention that God approved the Gentiles by his extending to them the Holy Spirit. They did this by telling of the signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles. These signs and wonders confirmed the word that they preached. In Acts 14:3, Luke recorded, " 3 So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time

there, speaking boldly for the **Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace** by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. [Emphasis added].

However, it was James, the brother of the Lord, who spoke most effectively. He began with what Peter had said about the gospel going to the Gentiles beginning with Cornelius, and then extended that argument through the agreement that the prophets had with it.

Acts 15:16-18

16 "'After this I will return  
and rebuild David's fallen tent.  
Its ruins I will rebuild,  
and I will restore it,  
17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,  
says the Lord, who does these things'  
18 that have been known for ages.

Peter quotes Amos 9:11-12 in order to assert that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and the Gentiles may bear his name.

Acts 15:19-21

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

James then argues that they should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who turn to God. James presents four points, binding upon all men from the earliest days: abstain from food polluted by idols, abstain from sexual immorality, abstain from meat of strangled animals, and abstain from blood.

These and no more were to be required of the Gentiles, according to James.

### ***The Apostles, Elders, and the Whole Church Responds***

Acts 15:22-23a

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:

The whole church was united in this agreement on the issue of binding the law of Moses on Gentiles. Of the two men chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas—Judas and Silas—Silas is the better known. He was with Paul on his second missionary journey, and he is among the writers listed with Paul at the beginning of the letters to the Thessalonians. Peter includes him as a helper in 1 Peter 5:12: "12 With the help of Silas, whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, . . ."

The integrity of their action rests on the unanimity of the apostles, elders, and whole church at Jerusalem, and on the fact that Judas and Silas were leaders among the brothers. These men carry the following letter with them:

Acts 15:23b-29

*The apostles and elders, your brothers,*

*To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:*

*Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.*

*Farewell.*

The letter condemns the acts of the Judaizing teachers, who went out without authorization to trouble and disturb the church. The letter also approves Barnabas and Paul, and authorizes Judas and Silas, who are to confirm by word of mouth what the letter says.

The content of the letter includes the same four basic points made by James, asserting that neither the Holy Spirit nor they want to burden the Gentiles with anything beyond these four requirements:

*You are to abstain from food sacrifices to idols.* When pagan idolaters ate the food sacrificed to idols, they communed with idols. According to Paul in 1 Cor 10:18-22, this is what made the act of eating this food forbidden:

18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

*You are to abstain from blood.* God asserted the principle of not eating the lifeblood of any creature long before the law of Moses. In that sense, prohibition against eating lifeblood was a law to all people for all time. All people were one before the law of Moses separated the Jews from the nations (Gentiles). In Gen 9:4-6, God spoke:

4 "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. 5 And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

6 "Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed;  
for in the image of God

has God made man.

This law, which predated the law of Moses, was reiterated for the Israelites in the law of Moses in Lev 17:11-14

11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. 12 Therefore I say to the Israelites, "None of you may eat blood, nor may an alien living among you eat blood."

13 "Any Israelite or any alien living among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, 14 because the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off."

*Abstain from the meat of strangled animals.* The original prohibition in Gen 9:4-6 above also prohibited eating the "meat that has its life blood still in it." In practical application, these two commands strike at the same sin—eating and/or drinking lifeblood. However, if the word of God had said only one or the other, people would have said that they could do one or the other.

*Abstain from sexual immorality.* The record of God forbidding adultery and sexual immorality begins with the Israelites and the ten commandments. However, in the days of Abraham the sin was condemned by example, according to Jude 7:

7 In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

In the New Testament, Christ extended the sin of adultery to the thoughts of one's heart in Matt 5:27-28 27 "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Paul gave the sin of sexual immorality a special meaning in 1 Cor 6:18-20:

18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. 19 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; 20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

In Rev 2:20, the Lord connects sexual immorality as a common practice in worshipping idols:

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.

In Num 25:1-3, the word connects the dots between sexual immorality, eating meat sacrifices to idols, and bowing down to worship these false Gods:

25 While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in **sexual immorality** with Moabite women, 2 who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate

and **bowed down** before these gods. 3 So **Israel joined in worshipping** the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them. [Emphasis added.]

### **Antioch Receives the Letter**

Acts 15:30-35

*30 The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.*

Just as the entire church in Jerusalem agreed to send the letter, so did the entire church at Antioch receive the letter, being glad for its encouragement. After remaining some time in Antioch, encouraging and strengthening the brothers, Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch teaching and preaching the word of the Lord.

### **Paul Sets out on His Second Journey**

Acts 15:36-41

*36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." 37 Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, 38 but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. 39 They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

Paul and Barnabas determined to revisit the churches that they had established during the first missionary journey. However, a dispute over whether to take John Mark arose, since he had deserted them in Pamphylia. [See the detail notes on this dispute in Acts 13:13-14.] The company split in two with Barnabas and Mark sailing for Cyprus; and Paul and Silas, who evidently returned from Jerusalem, (Acts 15:33) strengthened the churches through Syria and Cilicia. Paul was on his way for the second missionary journey. With two teams now working, the dispute, which could have hurt the church, became an asset.