

THE ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 15:1-35 The crisis concerning the Gentiles

*Why was it so difficult for Jewish Christians to view Gentiles as brethren?

*How did the issue get settled?

*How do we know what the church today should be like?

Acts 15:1-5 The issue arises

We saw at the end of chapter 14 that Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch, excited to report to the brethren that God had “opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.” The gospel had gone farther than ever before, and the Lord had worked powerfully to bring the Gentiles to Himself. However, this news did not please some people. Some men from Judea, where Jerusalem was, came to Antioch and began to say that the new Gentile Christians had to become Jews in order to be saved; they needed to obey the Law of Moses, including being circumcised.

Why were they saying that? Wasn't it clear by now that Christ had done away with the Old Covenant and brought in the new one? Not in the minds of most Jewish Christians at that time, especially in and around Jerusalem. They saw Christianity as the perfection of Judaism. They thought Christ simply completed what was lacking in the Law, so that Christianity was basically Judaism + Jesus. But it was still Judaism to them. The apostles had been teaching that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 2:36), that the Law of Moses had been abolished (Acts 13:39) and that the teachings of Christ were the current law (Acts 3:23), that all nations were free to enter Christ's kingdom (Acts 10:34-35), and that the kingdom was a spiritual kingdom (Acts 7:48). The Jewish Christians also saw Jesus as the Messiah, but they believed the Law of Moses was still abiding and was the law for the church, that only Jews could be a part of the kingdom, and that the kingdom was basically earthly. Because of these misconceptions, most Jewish disciples still made a distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and thought that Gentiles had to submit to the Law of Moses in order to be a member of the church (the “new Israel”).

Paul and Barnabas knew that this was a serious problem that threatened God's work among the Gentiles. They first debated with the false teachers, but that did not succeed. Something more drastic needed to be done. The brethren decided that Paul and Barnabas should go straight to where the false doctrine had come from: Judea. There they could let the other apostles and inspired men what was going on, and together they could make sure that Christians all throughout the region understood the truth.

On the way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas told the churches they passed by about the conversion of the Gentiles. Everyone rejoiced at the news. In Jerusalem, the apostles and the elders and the whole church welcomed them, and gladly listened to their stories about the Gentiles. But sure enough, the same issue that brought Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem came up as they gave their report: did the Gentiles have to follow the Law of Moses in order to be Christians?

Note: Can we blame the Jews?

In a way, we can understand why the Jews had so much trouble making the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant. They had learned all their lives that the Law of Moses was the only valid moral law, and so to get rid of that law would seem like abandoning all law. And even Paul said that the introduction of the Gentiles

by faith into God's kingdom was like a mystery that God had revealed to the apostles and prophets (see Ephesians 3:1-7; Colossians 1:25-28).

So we can't blame them for not understanding immediately. However, they still should have accepted the teaching of God's messengers, the apostles. There are many times today where we might not understand why the apostles wrote something down in the New Testament. But we need to have enough faith to follow God's pattern instead of our own reasoning.

Acts 15:6-11 The meeting in Jerusalem

Soon the apostles and elders got together to discuss the issue. There was a lot of debate at first, but finally Peter stood up and answered the question definitely. He reminded the brethren of his experiences with Cornelius and his household, how God had saved them, not because they were Jews and careful keepers of the Law of Moses, but because they believed in Christ. God made no distinction then between the Jews and the Gentiles. Peter's question was: why should we? And if we did force them to keep the Law of Moses, then that would burden them against God's wishes. Peter emphasized that all men are saved, not by keeping the Law perfectly, but because of Christ's grace.

Note: A "Church Conference"?

An example of something that many denominations do today despite the New Testament pattern is "church conferences" or similar events, where representatives from each of their churches come to a meeting to decide what the church should believe. Such an event is very different from what we see here in Acts 15. Here, a few men from a church where there was a problem (Antioch) went to where the problem originated (Jerusalem) to try and settle the issue. In this meeting in Acts 15, the Holy Spirit was revealing His will through the apostles and other inspired men (see Acts 15:8, 28; Galatians 2:1-2). It was not a bunch of men who aren't certain of the truth voting on what the church should believe, like many denominations practice today. When we decide what to believe, we should only listen to the New Testament, where the apostles' words are written, and should ignore man-made councils.

Acts 15:12-21 The issue resolved

After Peter finished his reasoning, Paul and Barnabas continued by telling everyone how God Himself had supported their preaching among the Gentiles with miracles. James (the brother of Jesus, who by this time had become a leader in the Jerusalem church) also spoke in support of the Gentiles. He referred to an Old Testament prophecy that said that God would include Gentiles in His new kingdom. James also suggested that they write a letter to explain that God would accept them, but they still needed to lead pure lives.

Note: How do we know what to believe?

When we are discussing doctrine, we should use the same reasoning methods as Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James. Peter drew a necessary inference that God had accepted the Gentiles as they were because He gave Cornelius and his household the Holy Spirit. Paul and Barnabas referred to an example where God had approved their activity. James found a Scripture that explicitly stated that the Gentiles would be part of God's house. If we can't find an implication, an example, or a command in the Bible to believe or practice something, then we should not do it.

Acts 15:22-35 Spreading the news

The church liked James's suggestion, and sent a letter back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and a couple other men. The letter contained the answer to the issue: all people were acceptable to God on the basis of faith in Christ, not on the Law of Moses. But this didn't mean that Christians could just live however they felt like. The new Gentile converts needed to renounce the wickedness of paganism and everything associated with it (see verses 28 and 29). The letter and the men carrying it brought great joy and encouragement to all the disciples who heard the news.

Fill in the blank spaces in the chart:

ISSUE	APOSTLES' TEACHING	MOST JEWISH CHRISTIANS
<i>Jesus</i>	_____ (see Acts 2:36)	Messiah
<i>Law of Moses</i>	_____ (see Acts 13:39)	Still in effect
<i>Current law (for the church)</i>	Christ's law/law of faith (Galatians 6:2; Romans 3:27)	_____ (see Acts 15:5)
<i>God's people</i>	_____ (see Acts 10:34-35)	Jews only; Gentiles had to become Jews to be Christians
<i>Emphasis</i>	Spiritual (1 Peter 2:5)	_____ (see Acts 15:1)

True or false:

- ___ 1. Before they went to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas weren't sure about whether the Gentiles had to keep the Law of Moses.
- ___ 2. The leaders in the church in Jerusalem refused to welcome Paul and Barnabas.
- ___ 3. We need to listen to God's messengers, the apostles, whether or not we can always understand the reasons behind their teachings in the New Testament.
- ___ 4. The Holy Spirit used the meeting to reveal His will for the Gentiles.
- ___ 5. The Scriptures had prophesied that Gentiles would be a part of God's people.
- ___ 6. Because they didn't have to keep the Law of Moses, Gentiles were free to live however they wanted.

Choose the right answer:

- ___ 1. Who did NOT speak up in the meeting in Jerusalem to say that Gentile Christians didn't need to keep Moses' Law? a) Peter, b) Gamaliel, c) James the brother of Jesus, or d) Paul.
- ___ 2. What is NOT a legitimate way of finding out what to believe when we look into the Bible? a) a direct command or statement, b) an example that God approved, c) a clear implication, or d) if a church conference or council says it's true.
- ___ 3. How did the church in Jerusalem spread the news about their resolution? a) word of mouth, b) television, c) a letter, or d) they didn't.

After you've filled out the answers, send this lesson back to the person who sent it to you with your name and address. They will correct your answers and discuss any questions or comments you have on the text.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Or, send it to:

Brigham Eubanks
258 Highland Avenue
Piscataway, NJ, 08854

Or, by email to:

beeubanks@juno.com