

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

ACTS CHAPTER 15

“THE GREAT DEBATE”

“You must be circumcised in order to be saved!” That is how Chapter 15 begins. That is what initiated the great debate. We read, *“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.’”* (15:1)

It is inconceivable that a literal operation on human flesh would sanctify and qualify one’s soul for entrance into heaven, but that is what some Jewish loyalists tried to impose upon the new converts in the city of Antioch. As a result a historic debate took place. Paul, Barnabas and other members of the church in Antioch journeyed to the mother church in Jerusalem where the first Council of the Christian church was convened to debate the issue.

The outcome of the debate would determine the future of the church. Let us analyze the debate that took place, who was involved and what the result was for them and for us today.

I. THE HEATED CONTROVERSY. Acts 15:1-2

“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.’ 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.”

The problem that caused the heated controversy was brought on by the preaching of the pure, plain, and powerful Gospel of Jesus Christ by Paul and Barnabas. The result was that many had been saved, both Jews and Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas had been preaching everywhere that salvation was by grace, through faith, in the Lord Jesus Christ. They had been preaching that salvation was solely by faith with no admixture of good works and this caused a heated controversy.

Actually, salvation by the grace of God alone, through faith alone, was on trial. The issue was: “Is salvation by grace or is the acquisition of it aided by human good works?” As we look at this heated controversy, consider two areas: (1) the demand that was made and (2) the disagreement that resulted.

A. The Demand That Was Made. v.1

One day some self-appointed Christian Jews who were mixing Law Keeping with Grace, whom we call “Legalists,” came from Jerusalem to Antioch and said, “You will never be saved unless you are circumcised.” They were not just expressing their opinion but they were laying down a dogma that circumcision was imperative; it was an absolute must in order to be saved.

Here is where churches continue to divide today. To Jesus' "*You must be born again*" some, like these in Chapter 15, add: "You must be baptized"; "You must unite with the church"; "You must worship on one particular day"; "You must belong to this certain church", etc.

The question to be answered here is crystal clear: is salvation all of grace, or are externals to be added as a condition of salvation? These Jewish leaders would admit that you must trust Jesus Christ, but they were saying that that was not enough, you must also add something else; faith is not enough, you must add some human achievements to the process.

If that is true, it is a direct contradiction to these following words: "*He (Jesus Christ) is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.*" (Hebrews 7:25) The worst enemy of the gospel of the grace of God is the person who makes salvation dependent upon Jesus Christ plus someone or something else. That is what these Jewish antagonists were attempting to do when they demanded that those who believed in Jesus Christ for salvation must also be circumcised. They were zealous Christian Jews who had not yet fully understood the distinction between The Law of Moses and the Gospel of Grace. They belonged to the Pharisee Party (v.5) They were in a transition period. They probably meant well, but they were perpetuating error.

B. The Dissension That Resulted. v.2a

"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."

The apostle Paul immediately and vehemently denounced such devilish doctrine. Later Paul wrote the book of Galatians to deal with this very subject. In Galatians chapter 2, Paul refers to this encounter here in Acts Chapter 15. He writes, "*to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.*" (Gal.2:15)

C. The Decision They Reached. V.2b

Because the dissension and debate was so heated, we read that "*they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.*" It was necessary for the young churches to be united in doctrine, to speak with one voice. It would not do for the church in Jerusalem to be teaching one thing and the church in Antioch to be teaching just the opposite.

This decision was not necessary in the sense that the church at Antioch had no authority to settle the question, but because these Jewish trouble-makers had come from Jerusalem intimating that they had the authority of the Jerusalem church behind them, it was considered appropriate that representatives from the church in Antioch should go to Jerusalem and discuss this matter and get it settled once and for all, which they did.

II. THE HISTORIC COUNCIL. Acts 15:3-21

A. The Delegation Arrived. 15:3-6

"Paul and Barnabas and certain others were received by the church and They

reported all things that God had done with them. Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.”

However, when they got to Jerusalem, Pastor James, the pastor of the Jerusalem church, made it quite clear that the church in Jerusalem did not send these men to Antioch. He said, *“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.” (15:24)*

B. The Defense Was Argued. 15:7-18

The public discussion was summed up in three statements, one by Peter, one by Paul and one by James. Peter took the floor first. (vs. 7-18) No one was better qualified to address the subject than the apostle Peter, a converted Jew. His argument was based upon the case of Cornelius recorded in Acts Chapter 10. He reminded this same Council that when they had heard about the conversion of the Gentile, Cornelius, they did not require that he and the other Gentiles who had exercised saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, be circumcised. He was asking them, "Are you now going to repeal the decision you made back then?"

The second speaker was Paul. He tells of his recent missionary journey with Barnabas and reports about the conversion of multitudes of Gentiles who had been saved without the least knowledge of circumcision or any knowledge of the Law of Moses. (v.12)

The third speaker was James, the pastor of the Jerusalem church and the moderator of the Council. He showed that what Peter and Paul had said was in perfect harmony with the Scriptures. One of the most significant statements in the book of Acts is verse 15, *“with this the words of the prophets agree.”* James then quotes the words of the prophet Amos recorded in Amos 9:11-12 and repeated here in Acts 15 - *“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; 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.”* (vs.16-17)

James' summation is this: Peter, Paul, and Barnabas have been in agreement with prophecy. And as a result, the defense rested their case and the opposition was silenced.

C. The Decision Was Announced. 15:19

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

Evidently the council voted or in some way indicated their decision, and James, the moderator of the Council and pastor of the church, announced the decision of the council. He said that the Gentile believers must be left alone and were not to be troubled by the Jewish believers.

This decision was a triumph for grace, and settled once for all that salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Later on Paul wrote in the book of Ephesians, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* (Eph. 2:8-9)

The Great Debate resulted in the glorious gospel of the grace of God being exonerated and it has been the theme of God honored gospel preaching from that day to this. Many lessons can be learned from this debate. We should remember the words of Philip Melanchthon, a reformer, who stated: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

III. THE HERALDED CORRESPONDENCE. 15:23-29

A. The Details It Contained. 15:24-29

After the council had reached its decision and James had announced the result, it was agreed that a letter should be sent to the church in Antioch and elsewhere declaring the position of the Council. The letter proclaimed liberty and encouraged purity. *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 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."* (v.29)

B. The Delight of The Church. 15:30-31

When the postman delivered the letter from the church council in Jerusalem to the church in Antioch it was met with great joy. *"When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement."* (v.31)

This letter has been called the Magna Carta of the Christian church. It was the Emancipation Proclamation from the Mosaic Law as a means of salvation and it caused great joy among the Gentile believers in Antioch.

Illustration: I visited a man in the hospital who was not expected to live long. When I reached his room another minister was talking with him and I heard the minister say to the patient, "Unless you get out of this bed and get baptized you will go to hell!"

After that minister left the room I took my Bible and showed the gentleman several New Testament verses that emphasized the necessity of placing of one's faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. I not only read the verses to him but handed him the Bible and had him read the verses for himself. After he read those verses he said to me, "I want to receive Jesus Christ as my Savior. I know he died for me." In a simple prayer he placed the matter of his soul's salvation totally into the hands that had been pierced for him on the cross of Calvary. I kept in touch with the gentleman who did recover from his serious illness and lived for several years as a trophy of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

IV. THE HAGGLING COMPANIONS. 15:36-41

God tells it like it is; He paints the picture warts and all. After the tremendous positive development at the Jerusalem Church Conference, Paul, Barnabas and their companions returned to Antioch and continued their ministry. (v.35) Everything went along smoothly for a while until a disagreement developed between, of all people, Paul and Barnabas!

The Bible does not flatter its heroes. Here in this conflict, both Paul and Barnabas are seen engaging in a very human activity, that of quarreling! It is sad but it is true - two giants of the

faith faced off in a verbal battle. Paul squared off with his traveling companion and coworker, Barnabas, over an issue that both men felt strongly about, and neither was willing to budge. Because each was convinced he was right, they were not able to come to an agreement and the result was that a great team split up. But through it all God's work continued to advance in spite of human frailties. Paul and Barnabas were united about doctrine and were inseparable on big issues but they were divided on a little issue. They were great in public ministry, but it was a private matter that separated them. How could such a thing happen? Well, it started with a small disagreement. Why did they quarrel?

A. Their Personal Desires. 15:36-37

“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.”(v.36)

Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the cities in which they had ministered on their first missionary journey. This was to be the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey. Paul is seen throughout as the leader of the Paul and Barnabas team. Barnabas evidently agreed to Paul's proposal up to this point, however, that is as far as Barnabas' agreement went.

“Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark.” (v.37) the Greek word for "determined" means "to be minded with strong purpose" and has the idea behind it that Barnabas continually stood his ground and would not give in. Right here in this area of personal desires and personal preferences is where most quarrels among Christians begin. Our clashes are not usually doctrinal but relate to personal preferences.

B. Their Pointed Disagreement. 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.”

Disagreements are never pleasant, but they need not be fatal to our fellowship with one another. Quarreling is like buttermilk -- the longer it stands, the more sour it becomes! This quarrel between Paul and Barnabas got pretty sour - for we read that the contention was sharp between them.

C. Their Painful Division. 15:39-41

“Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

It would be nice if we could say that these men settled their differences, but it did not work out that way. Two strong wills clashed and they parted company and went off in two different directions. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas and set off on his second missionary journey.

There is a sadness in the parting of these two good Christian men. They had been friends for a long time and had worked so well together on that first missionary journey. But now they

part, seemingly in anger, and never worked together again. But God can overrule and the result was that there were now two missionary teams instead of one. The sovereign God can bring good out of bad, success out of failure and advance out of adversarial relationships.

It seems that the church in Antioch sided with Paul for we read that Paul was "*commended by the brethren to the grace of God.*" I am sure that the disagreements and division left Paul with a heavy heart. He had won an argument, but had lost a companion in ministry. There is always loss when Christians quarrel!

Here were two godly men in disagreement. Both looked at the problem from different angles and the result was "*sharp contention.*" Perhaps both were right. Sometimes the best we can do is to agree to disagree - that's better than falling out! Psalm 133 says, "*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.*" Unity is always our goal, but sometimes unity is not realized even by godly people.

Some people spend more time restoring antique's than they do restoring relationships. If antiques are worth the time and energy and expense involved in restoring them, how much more is it worth the time and energy to repair broken relationships especially when the cause of Jesus Christ suffers if relationships are allowed to continue to fester.

Henry Drummond, the English preacher of bygone years, said: "How many prodigals are kept out of the Kingdom of God by the unlovely characters of those who profess to be inside." What a great world this would be if people would spend as much energy practicing their religion as they spend quarreling about it!

If there is a conflict between you and some other person or persons, I want to encourage you to get it settled. Life is too short to make enemies of those who are our brothers and sisters in the family of God. May the words of the familiar song, "Onward! Christian Soldiers!" be true of us all:

"Like a mighty army moves the church of God;
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided, all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity."

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