

FROM HYPOCRISY TO COMPROMISE TO FAITHFULNESS

THE STORY OF ACTS 15



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— ONLINE —
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Paul and Barnabas in Antioch and Jerusalem

Acts 15:1-21, Kingdom New Testament

Some people came from Judaea to Antioch and, on arrival, began to teach the Christians that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised according to the custom of Moses. ² This caused considerable uproar and dispute between them and Paul and Barnabas, and the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas, and some others from their fellowship, to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, to try to sort out the problem. ³ So they were sent off by the church. They travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling people as they went about the conversion of the Gentiles. They brought great joy to the Christian communities.

⁴ When they arrived in Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church, the apostles and the elders, and they told them all the things that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers from the party of the Pharisees stood up.

‘They must be circumcised,’ they said, ‘and you must tell them to keep the law of Moses.’

⁶ The apostles and elders gathered together to see what to do about this matter. ⁷ After considerable argument, Peter got up.

‘My brothers,’ he said, ‘you know that from our early days together God chose that it should be from my mouth that the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore them witness, by giving them the holy spirit just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, but he purified their hearts through faith. ¹⁰ So now, why are you putting God to the test, by placing a yoke on the disciples’ neck which neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ Rather, we believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we shall be saved, just like them.’

¹² The whole company was silent, and listened to Barnabas and Paul describing the signs and wonders which God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they had finished, James replied.

‘My dear brothers,’ he said, ‘listen to me. ¹⁴ Symeon has explained how, at the beginning, God graciously favoured the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his own name. ¹⁵ This, indeed, is in accordance with the words of the prophets, which say,

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return, and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which had collapsed,
And I will build the ruins again, and set them straight,
¹⁷ So that the rest of the human race may seek the Lord,
And all the nations upon whom my name has been called.
Thus says the Lord, who has made these things ¹⁸ known from of old.

¹⁹ ‘Therefore this is my judgment: we should not cause extra difficulties for those of the Gentiles who have turned to God. ²⁰ Rather, we should send them a message, warning them to keep away from things that have been polluted by idols, from fornication, from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ Moses, after all, has from ancient times had people proclaiming him from city to city, since he is read in the synagogues sabbath after sabbath.’

Recap: The Church Changes in Antioch

As we launch into Acts 15, which is really one of the turning points in Luke's drama, let's just do a quick recap: Here we are back in Antioch, to begin with. In Antioch there is this rich, multicultural community of which a great number have come to faith in Jesus. And they are sharing together, as a family, including the common meals that a family would share. The non-Jewish believers who have come into faith have not been told they must get circumcised. Indeed, Paul, and it seems, Barnabas, have been teaching them quite clearly they don't have to. This is because it was always God's will to bring Gentiles into the family eventually.

The death of Jesus has dealt with the problem of pagan idolatry and uncleanness. That's very specific. It's part of the theology of the cross. That is; because of the cross, Gentiles who believe in Jesus are not unclean (circumcised or not). Conversely, if you were going to make them circumcised, then what you're saying is that actually the new thing has not occurred and that this is still simply a sub branch of ethnic, Jewish ways of life.

Visitors from Galatia

However, the beginning of Acts 15, some people come from Judea to Antioch and they say, 'Well, actually, these Christians can't be saved unless they are circumcised according to the custom of Moses'. And that puts the cat among the pigeons. Luke says, 'This caused considerable uproar and dispute between them, and Paul and Barnabas'. You bet it did. You can see the parallel Passage in Galatians 2:11 through 14. This is because Peter comes to Antioch and Peter is content, to begin with, to eat with the Gentiles. But then some other people come from James and at that point, Peter withdraws.

Paul is rather cautious about saying exactly what the other people who came from James said. He's very cautious about blaming James himself for it. That's one of the problems in Galatians, because around the same time (Luke does not tell us this) it looks as though some other people that gone claiming the authority of James or Peter. They had gone to Galatia, to the churches where Paul had been, to say, 'You have got to get circumcised'. How that happened, we don't know.

That's no doubt a shorthand summary of what happened. It may be that the Jewish Christians in Galatia in those churches Paul had just founded were under pressure from their non Christian Jewish neighbors to say, 'You better sort out these Gentiles who are claiming Jewish ascension because if they don't get circumcised we're all dead'. The Romans are not going to stand for it. If just anyone can now turn up and say I am a Jew so I don't have to worship Caesar do I?

That is going to be the cause of big trouble. Paul was already going to warn them 'Yes there will be trouble, because if you're not doing what physically you are supposed to do, you can expect persecution. God's Kingdom is going ahead. Caesar's Kingdom and other kingdoms are going to strike back'.

But what we have in Acts 15 is no mention of the Galatian crisis. There is simply a mention of the decision to go to Jerusalem to sort it all out. And, as I put the package together, it seems to me that in Galatians 2 Paul is describing something much sharper than what we have in Acts 15:1 -21 because not only does Paul confront Peter, whom he called 'Cephas' (his original Aramaic name), he explains to Peter in no uncertain terms that this just won't do. If you, a Jew, were going on eating with the Gentiles, how can you now force Gentiles to 'Judaize' in order to become a Jew. It just doesn't make sense, and ultimately, if the status of covenant membership came through the Torah, the law of Moses, circumcision and all, then you don't need a crucified messiah (Galatians 2:21). That's the real crunch.

Holding Back the Hope of Israel

So, I think at the same time Paul writes Galatians to describe the confrontation he had with Peter and, sadly, to tell us as well that it wasn't just Peter, but even Barnabas was carried away with what Paul describes as 'play acting'. The Greek word for play acting (*hypokrisei*) is what happens when an actor puts on a mask so that they are playing at being somebody else. And Paul's whole point is that if you're in the Messiah by baptism and faith, then that is your number one identity. If you insist on putting on the mask of ethnic Jewishness, then that is play acting. And there may be comprehensible reasons why you do it. But it's not telling the truth and it's not being straightforward with the way of the truth and the way of the gospel.

For Paul it comes as a shock. He and Barnabas have done this stuff together. They have prayed together. They walked together. They faced hostile crowds together. They've seen God working powerfully together. They have celebrated with mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile believers together. And back here in Antioch, Barnabas (who obviously knows those the people in Jerusalem a lot better than Paul does) knows that these people who had come from Jerusalem are in a bind because their non-Christian, Jewish friends of Jerusalem are saying something bad is happening out there.

This is holding back the hope of Israel. If you're not careful, the Romans are going to come and take us all to the cleaners. Do something about it. Go and tell those idiots in in Antioch or Galatia or anywhere else that they better come into line. If they want to have our privileges, they must have a circumcision. So Barnabas, because he loves people and he's a pastoral hearted guy, wants to do the right thing by them.

So we hear it in Paul's voice, 'Even Barnabas was carried away with hypocrisy'. I assume (not everyone does) that Paul and Barnabas had made that up after Paul had said what he said to Peter. He and Peter basically reconciled one to another. Paul probably reminded Peter that he, Peter, had gone and shared fellowship with Cornelius etc.... This really seems to be how God is at work. But they know that sooner or later Jerusalem has to be part of this.

I mentioned before that Paul and others insisted that they are part of a *single family*. You just can't have the family going off in different directions without even acknowledging that they are supposed to be united. So unity means tough talking, and tough talking is what they go off to do. So Paul and Barnabas make a very different trip to Jerusalem than the earlier one where they gone with relief money for the famine.

Verse 4, 'And when they got to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the apostles and, and they told them all the things that God had done with them. But some believers from the party of the Pharisees stood up.

'They must be circumcised,' they said, 'and you must tell them to keep the law of Moses.' Part of our problem here is the word 'Pharisees' had such bad press. I hear a lot people say: 'Pharisees, we have them in my church

and I don't like them. They are fussy nitpicking people'. That is because there are fussy nitpicking people in every tradition and of course some of the Pharisees were fussing nitpicking people. But that's not all they were. We know Paul, we know from going back to the earlier Pharisaic traditions, that to be a Pharisee meant to say that God wants all his people to be pure. God doesn't just want the priest in the temple to do the purity thing, while the rest of us just run along and it doesn't matter.

What God Wants

God wants this faith that we have to be something which affects every aspect of our lives, from the moment we wake up in the morning to the night. We go to bed at night praying that at the dinner table, in the bedroom, in the marketplace, in the shop or school, or wherever... we are going to be honoring God. And so they think through what it would mean to honor God with every single aspect of your lives, everything that you do. That's a wonderful and noble ideal, because it very quickly and easily swings round in two directions.

1. It goes into the fussy little details. 'We thought this through and if you're not keeping our standards, yeah you're out of line'.
2. 'This is the thing which shows that we are the real Jews and the other Jews are a bit suspect, and as for the pagans they're completely off the wall'. So the Pharisees always had that capacity, as sadly, do many traditions in the church to go to the bad.

A Nervous Reaction

What we see here is the kind of nervous reaction. These are Christian Pharisees in Jerusalem who are zealous for the law believing that if Jesus means anything it must be the fulfillment of the law that God gave Moses. But therefore they want to say that, 'There cannot be an exception clause. We've all got to give to the same standards in Antioch, in Galatia, anywhere if anyone comes to the family they must be circumcised'.

Inevitably there's an argument and Luke says tactfully, 'After considerable argument Peter got up'. I bet it was a considerable argument. But then Peter, of course, comes good. I sometimes think when Paul and Barnabas are on the road from Antioch all the way down to Jerusalem, I bet Paul

keeps on having in his mind all the wonderful, theological explanations that he will give when they get to Jerusalem.

I have a sense Barnabas is saying to him, 'Save it, keep it, it won't go to waste, but don't over-egg the pudding. When we get to Jerusalem, the main thing is to tell them what's happened in the church is what we have seen God doing. That is because if you go over the top and you, who was persecutor of the church not that long ago, and you start telling them all about Genesis and Exodus, Deuteronomy and Isaiah and so on they will say, 'who does this man think he is? We actually were with Jesus. We know who Jesus was. Jesus was a loyal Jew.'

It would have been very possible for Paul actually to blow it right there, even if he was right, to get on the wrong side of everybody. And so I think Barnabas says, look, 'Let Peter and James do the theological heavy lifting; let's pray and trust that they will'. And they do and Peter says, 'Remember. I went to Cornelius' house and this is what happened, this is how it worked out. Verse 8, 'And God, who knows the heart, bore them witness, by giving them the holy spirit'. And he says, 'It's by the grace of the Lord Jesus said we should be saved just like them'. They need grace to get into the family, but we Jews, we need grace as well. Otherwise why would you have a crucified messiah?

Then, in verse 12, Paul and Barnabas tell them all the good things have been going on, all the wonderful things that God had done among the Gentiles. And then, at last, James the brother of Jesus gets up. James is the one who's the kind of sheet anchor of the church in Jerusalem right the way through until he is killed by the by zealous activist in A.D. 62 by hardline Pharisees, obviously non-Christian Pharisees, because he has been bearing witness and praying.

He was great man of prayer and great man of faith. Now he quotes Amos where God says, 'After this I will return, and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which had collapsed,' In other words, yes we are a new temple movement.

In Galatians Peter, James, and John are referred to as the 'pillars'. This is, perhaps, because they're already thinking of the church as a new Temple and these men are the pillars of this new building. 'and I will build the ruins

again, and set them straight so that the rest of the human race may seek the Lord, and all the nations upon whom my name has been called’.

In other words, James sees only too clearly this is how scripture said. When I do the new Temple thing all the nations will come in. That is enough. James said, ‘Therefore, we should not cause extra difficulties for those of the Gentiles who have turned to God’. He proposes a compromise solution, which like all compromise solutions works and doesn't quite work. They're going to send a letter, quite controversial this letter, as to exactly who it was sent to and how far it was supplied.

Staying Away from Idols

But what's the point of this letter detailing verse 20 and 21 and then sent off later on? The point of the letter is that in every community there are Jews. So if there are Christian Gentiles coming in they must avoid giving offense wherever possible to these Jewish communities. And so he says, ‘We should warn them to keep away from things that have been polluted by idols. Idolatry is the root of all evil. If they're hanging around idol temples and doing all that stuff, how on earth can that possibly be right? And also abstain from fornication because the Jews have a very clear and explicit sexual ethics and that is continued right the way through in the Christian church.

Then he says, ‘From what is strangled and from blood’. In other words, please don't eat meat with the blood in it, but make sure it's killed in the proper way. And the explanation for that in Verse 21 is “Moses, after all, has from ancient times had people proclaiming him from city to city, since he is read in the synagogues, sabbath after sabbath.” In other words, all the Jewish communities know what the Mosaic Law says and so please do your best not to flout it and fall afoul of it, even though he is saying you don't have to get circumcised. It goes on;

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole assembly, decided to send people from their number, Judas Barsabbas and Silas (men well thought of by the Christian community) to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent a letter with them.’

Then they honor Barnabas and Paul. They say they are men, ‘who have risked their lives for the name of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. So we have

sent Judas and Silas, and they will tell you the same things face to face. For it seemed good to the holy spirit and to us not to lay any burden on you beyond the following necessary things: that you should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what has been strangled, and from fornication’.

This is a very basic list of requirements for a kind of interim quasi-Jewish, not quite Jewish community. They’re trying to navigate in the dark here. Nobody has thought of doing this before.

The Question No One Would Face

Nobody has faced the question: How can you be the heirs of Abraham and the Covenant and yet not be circumcised?

That seems to be a non sequitur to so many. They are showing a way of how to do it that seems to include so many compromises. It would be like the compromise of Acts 2:1-10 when the at the first visit (the visit because of the famine in Acts 11) Paul and Barnabas come and Peter, James, and John give them the right hand of Fellowship.

The deal then is that we, Paul and Barnabas, should go to the Gentiles and they would go to the Jews. What does that mean? It is not just ethnically because wherever Paul goes, he starts off with the synagogue. He doesn't just go to the marketplace. And it's hard to see that it would mean geographically, because Peter and some of the others do end up going to Corinth and Rome and other places. It looks as though it's a temporary expedient for the moment. Let's put it like this: You go this way we will go that way.

At the moment this letter looks like a temporary, expedient solution. You don't have to get circumcised but please try to avoid giving needless offense. So when they go back to Antioch with this news they are delighted because the main point has been granted.

The main point has been given. You do not have to get circumcised. Judas and Silas, being themselves prophets, say a good deal of encouragement and the church in Antioch is doing well. Paul and Barnabas stay on in Antioch even after Judas and Silas apparently go back. They are teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, as many others as well. All seems to

be fine. The crisis has been averted. But, as so often, you get over the big crisis and there's another one just around the corner.

An Excerpt from [Acts of the Apostles](#), a course by N.T. Wright Online