

The Acts of the Apostles

LESSON 19

The Conflict over Circumcision (Acts 15:1-5)

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.” 2 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. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. 4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

Satan had not been able to destroy or deter the growth of the church by means of external violence and persecution, so now he attempts to destroy it from within with internal strife.

What was the source of the strife?

Evidently there were those in the church in Judea (most likely Jerusalem itself) who believed that the message Paul was preaching among the Gentiles was an incomplete message. Paul was not preaching the doctrine of circumcision as it had been taught under Abraham and Moses.

As a result they had taken it upon themselves to travel to many of the churches that Paul and Barnabas had established to set these new believers straight. Their message could be summarized as follows:

- They evidently made negative statements about Paul’s incomplete message.
- They insisted that those who received Christ needed to be circumcised according to the Mosaic order.
- They also insisted that the new believers keep other ceremonial aspects of the Law of Moses.

As one can imagine, these self-appointed custodians of truth caused great confusion among these newly formed churches. Because they came from Jerusalem the origin of Christianity, their words carried a certain amount of weight. In addition, they seemed to reflect the fact that this is what the apostles in Jerusalem were teaching.

Paul was extremely upset by what was going on and personally confronted many of these teachers. The book of Galatians reflects how he felt about this whole issue. He viewed this issue

as a confusion of covenants and their preaching as “another gospel” and a perversion of the truth (Gal. 1:6-8).

I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

He encouraged these converts to stand fast in their liberty in Christ (Gal. 5:1).

Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.

What was the recommended plan of action? Paul knew that if he was to quench the fires that had been started by these false teachers, he would need an official statement from the apostolic leaders at the Jerusalem church.

What was the atmosphere in Jerusalem? The atmosphere in Jerusalem was divided on the issue. While many rejoiced at the conversion of the Gentiles others were troubled. The ones who were particularly troubled were those believers who had been Pharisees before coming to Christ. Pharisees had been known for being sticklers regarding the “letter of the law.”

The truth of the matter is that up to this time the Jerusalem church had not really needed to deal with the issue of the Gentiles, because it was a city filled with Jews. The Jewish believers had a difficult time understanding the relationship of the old order to the new order. Most of them practiced both or a blending of the old and the new.

It was obvious that a formal meeting was needed to address this issue.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6-21)

It is important to understand just exactly what this gathering was and what it was not. It was not a general church council. Some have suggested that this was a worldwide church council that was a forerunner of subsequent church councils convened in later church history.

It was not an example of central church government. Some have suggested that this is an example of the church at Jerusalem exercising its authority as the mother church over all other churches. This would be their justification for denominationalism and external control.

It was not an example of one church dictating to other churches how they must function. Some have suggested that this proves that the local churches were not autonomous and were required to line up behind the dictates or policy rulings of another church.

It is important to understand what this gathering was. It was a case of a conflict between two

great churches and the messages that were coming from each of them—Antioch and Jerusalem. It was a local church problem that was taken to the source of the problem. It was a local church (Jerusalem) trying to rectify a mess that had been caused by its own membership and their erroneous teaching (Acts 15:24).

Since 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...

It is important to understand who participated in this meeting and who did not (Acts 15:6, 12).

Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

This meeting was convened by the Jerusalem church leadership to consider this matter. It included the resident apostles (who served as elders in the local church). It included the other elders of the Jerusalem church. It included those who were bringing the complaint—Paul and Barnabas.

This meeting was not an open meeting and it did not include the false teachers and any others who might have been upset by the controversy.

It is important to understand how this meeting was conducted. This is one of the few cases where an actual elders meeting is described in the New Testament. In Acts chapter 1 the apostles met to discuss the replacement of Judas, but this chapter describes an eldership in action.

- Proposal (Acts 1:15; 15:6)

This involved the presentation of the issue at hand or placing the agenda item on the table.

- Discussion (Acts 1:23; 15:7, 12, 13)

Once the issue was on the table the meeting was opened up to those in attendance for debating, testimony, the gathering and sharing of data, sharing appropriate scripture verses and the like.

In this context there was some open disputing (vs. 7). Notice how that even though there were strong opinions, the discussion took place in an orderly way (vs. 12, 13). In this context Peter gave a testimony of his experience at the house of Cornelius (vs. 7-11). He concluded that God had already made His will known.

Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Acts 15:10

In this context Paul and Barnabas gave testimony of their ministry among the Gentiles (vs. 12).

- Prayer (Acts 1:24)

While no prayer is specifically mentioned in this gathering it was a vital part of the gathering in Acts chapter 1.

- Agreement (Acts 1:26; 15:22, 25)

As the discussion continued there was a growing consensus that was confirmed by the Scripture and the senior leader of the Jerusalem church.

Notice the unique role that James the brother of the Lord played especially at the conclusion of the discussion (vs. 13-21).

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. Acts 15:19-21

- He summarized the discussion.
- He quoted from the Scripture.
- He made a statement of judgment on the matter.
- He proposed a plan of action.

Action (Acts 1:26; 15:30)

The early church was committed to the principle of unity. Until that unity was felt by those present, no action was taken. The unity itself became a testimony of God's grace upon the meeting and the direction of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to understand what this meeting accomplished and what it did not accomplish.

- It did not settle the issue for many of those who were not part of the decision process particularly the Judaizers (Acts 21:18-21).

On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."

- It did not settle what was to be the relationship of the Jewish converts to Christianity and the Law of Moses.

Even though the Gentiles that were coming to Christ were not to be bound by the law, the Jewish converts still seemed to maintain a close connection. Many feel that this is one of the reasons why Jerusalem was destroyed, to help these believers make a break with Judaism once and for all.

The Circulation of the Jerusalem Letter (Acts 15:22-35)

It was proposed that a letter be written to reflect this decision and that the letter be circulated among the Gentile churches. It would be carried by chosen or respected leaders (Judas and Silas) from the Jerusalem church to give weight to it (Acts 15:22, 27, 32). It would be read at the Antioch church first (Acts 15:30-31). It would be circulated by Paul and Silas on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:4).

It would accomplish several things. It would denounce the false teachers who had claimed authority from Jerusalem. It would clarify the position of the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church. It would assure people that Paul and Barnabas were God's chosen instruments and well respected in Jerusalem.

The Conflict over John Mark (Acts 15:36-41)

Undoubtedly this conflict over circumcision and the issuance of a formal letter triggered a desire in Paul and Barnabas to go back to the churches that they had founded (vs. 36).

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." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 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. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Unfortunately they had a conflict of their own relating to whether or not John Mark should go with them as their assistant.

What do we know about John Mark?

So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. Acts 12:12

- His mother was a prominent figure in the Christian community in Jerusalem.
- His father was probably dead.

- His father figure was now his uncle Barnabas (Col. 4:10).
- His home was large indicating wealth.
- His home was a center of Christian gatherings.
- He was used to being around those in ministry.
- He had a good understanding of the Christian life.
- He was most likely a Roman citizen (Mark, a Roman name).

What happened to John Mark on the first missionary journey? John Mark was selected by Paul and Barnabas to assist them on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5).

And when they arrived in Salamis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. They also had John as their assistant.

This assistant role was one of a servant or helper. It was not a preaching role but one of taking care of some of the natural things that any such journey would entail.

They had John along to help out as needed. –Msg

John Mark cut his mission short and went home early (Acts 13:13).

Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem.

The actual reason for his departure is not given here, but it could not have been for what Paul considered a good reason. Paul was not interested in taking him on the second journey even though quite a few years had transpired. Some have suggested many possible reasons for John Marks departure.

- Homesickness
- Anxiety for mother's safety
- Home duties
- Struggled with the Gentile message (He left after Sergius Paulus got saved.)
- Fear of perilous travel (Pamphylia had a bad reputation for danger).
- Did not like his designated role as servant or helper (wanted more preaching).

Who was right between Paul and Barnabas? Paul had a good argument. There work was too important to take a chance on someone who had let them down to dramatically.

Barnabas had a good argument. As the “son of consolation” Barnabas had always rooted for the underdog. He had done it for Saul and now he was doing it for John Mark. Barnabas was a man of mercy who knew that people sometimes need a second chance. If we are going to raise up ministries we have to be able to go the second mile.

Good came out of a potential negative situation. There were two teams now instead of one.

- Barnabas and John Mark

Note that Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus. That is the leg of the first journey that Mark was present.

- Paul and Silas

Note that Paul and Silas bypassed Cyprus and went the land route through Syria.

There was another opportunity for another young apprentice—Timothy (Acts 16:1). John Mark proved himself to be a worthy minister of the Gospel.

- He ended up valuable to Paul (Phm. 24; II Tim. 4:11)
Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. II Timothy 4:11
- He ended up writing one of the Gospels.
The two main things that most likely contributed to his maturity was the consolation of Barnabas and the consternation or seriousness of Paul.