

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
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DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 16 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 15

INTRODUCTION

Misunderstandings in the Bible are common. They exist in our time and they existed in the time of the early church. There is a big difference between being sincerely wrong because of ignorance and having been taught the truth but stubbornly holding on to lies and errors. The latter stubbornly refuses to be corrected and accept the truth. The former realises his mistake immediately when the truth is taught to him.

What we have in Acts 15 is the former. There were sincere Jews who really did not know how to reconcile the position of the Gentile believers in the early church, which was initially made up of Jews only. In the past, OT period, a proselyte of Israel must be circumcised in order to be visibly identified with the nation of Israel. Now the Gentiles seemed to be full fledged members of Christ's body without having to do anything external and visible like circumcision.

The controversy was a theological one. A Council headed by James was convened to resolve this theological dilemma. It was the first such council. It is also a pattern and basis for the Presbyterian system of church government. The outcome would affect

the gospel message of salvation to all people and have influenced greatly the missionary work of the Church worldwide. This event, which was held in Jerusalem, was of utmost significance. It serves as a model for Christians today on how theological differences ought to be settled.

This must be dealt with expeditiously and biblically for the well being of all churches throughout the age. If it is not handled correctly i.e. biblically, the repercussions on missions and Christians all over the world would be devastating. It could very well be the start of the propagation of another gospel that was condemned by the apostle Paul in Galatians 1.

In addition to this doctrinal issue, Luke also recorded another kind of controversy, which was non-doctrinal between Paul and Barnabas. The apostles had a disagreement concerning the suitability of John Mark as a member of the second missionary team. Here again some lessons could be learned about disagreements among brethren on matters of relationships.

The division of the chapter falls naturally into four sections: (1) The nature of the controversy (vv.1-5); (2) The resolution of the controversy in Jerusalem (vv.6-29); (3) The declaration to the churches (vv.30-35); (4) The personal differences between Paul and Barnabas (vv. 36-41).

COMMENTARY

The Nature of the Controversy

Paul and Barnabas, on returning to Antioch after their first successful missionary trip, had shared with the brethren that God had opened the door

of faith unto the Gentiles and that many believers had been saved by the grace of Christ. Then, "certain men" who came from Jerusalem insisted that a person could not be saved unless he was circumcised according to Mosaic Law. These "certain men" were not sent by the mother church in Jerusalem. They had no official deputation from the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem. But they assumed the position of delegates and spoke as though they had the authority of The Twelve in Jerusalem.

Paul and Barnabas immediately opposed them. This teaching could not be tolerated even for a moment. Therefore, there was a sharp and heated argument between Paul and Barnabas on the one side and these Jewish believers on the other. The gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone was at stake. For Paul and Barnabas to keep silent would have meant being disloyal to God's truth. These were believers who used to belong to the sect of the Pharisees who strictly adhered to the laws of Moses. Obviously they had brought their pharisaism with them into Christianity. Their coming to Antioch brought about the beginning of conflict in the Christian Church. If this matter was not dealt with judiciously in accordance to God's Word, this could really bring about insurrection and schism in the Church. The stakes were high and it had to be dealt with immediately.

The dispute was so intense that the matter had to be referred to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Consequently, Paul and Barnabas and some Antiochians departed for Jerusalem. They journeyed by land and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria where they spoke about the conversion

of Gentiles. In these places, the brethren that heard of the grace of God and the gospel of salvation in Christ were greatly overjoyed.

The Resolution of the Controversy in Jerusalem

When Paul and Barnabas together with some of Antiochian leaders reached Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed by the church, apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas shared with them all the things that God had done through them. But some of the "sect of the Pharisees which believed" (ex-Jewish leader Christians) insisted that all Gentiles must be circumcised before they can be accepted as Christians, and that they must observe the Mosaic Law as well.

Peter's Speech

The first Church Council (synod) was convened. The apostles and elders gathered together to consider the issue in question. There was much debate and discussion. Apparently many speeches were made on both sides. Then Peter stood up and addressed the assembly. He reminded his audience of the incident when he was pulled up for associating with Cornelius, a Gentile. He reminded them that it was all of God's doing. God had called him to preach the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles (referring to Cornelius and his household) so that they might hear and believe. God knew the hearts of all men and He showed by giving the Holy Spirit to them (Gentiles) exactly as they were given to us (Jews). God made no distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles, "purifying their hearts by faith" (v.9). The Gentiles had the full presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling them just as the Jewish Christians had at the time of the Pentecost (Acts 2).

This was BEFORE there was any circumcision. If this is true, and it is, then circumcision is not necessary. Their salvation was complete by simply believing in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:8-10 says, "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" Peter continued that their insistence on keeping the law in order to be saved was tantamount to tempting or testing God. They were wrong to imply that God's purification of the Gentiles on the basis of faith in Christ was not good enough, and could not bring complete salvation and acceptance with God. To insist that these Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses would definitely be another gospel! Peter further argued that he and his fellow Jews could not even satisfy the requirements of the Law, and they should not impose it upon the Gentiles. Peter was very clear about the issue at stake. He declared that salvation is by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for both Jews and Gentiles. Peter's speech had silenced the opposition. The "whole multitude" implies that the whole church were part of the audience. They now turned their attention to Paul and Barnabas, who testified of the miracles and wonders, which God had done among the Gentiles through them.

James' Speech

After the people had been silenced, James stood up to speak. He was the step-brother of the Lord Jesus

Christ. He became a believer when Christ specially appeared to him after His resurrection.¹ His position as an elder of the church at Jerusalem was remarkable. His speech was based on the facts, which were related by Peter, whom he called by his native Hebrew name, Simeon, and the facts mentioned by Paul and Barnabas. He was in full agreement with Peter, Paul and Barnabas. He substantiated with the words of an Old Testament prophet (Amos 9:11-12): *After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: 17 That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things* (vv. 16, 17).

James was saying that the inclusion of the Gentiles was not a new idea but was God's plan as foretold by His prophet Amos. In other words, Scripture confirmed the facts of the missionaries' experience. What Peter, Paul and Barnabas had done and witnessed were in total agreement with what God had planned and purposed before. God not only promised to restore the house of David, which had fallen, and to rebuild the ruins (a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ being of the seed of David, now resurrected and exalted), but also a Gentile remnant would seek the Lord. James then pointed out that this agreement between the Word of God and the experience of the apostles was conclusive. There should be no more argument about it (v.19).

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

² 2 Corinthians 11:28 Beside those things

However, James proposed that the Gentiles should abstain from four practices common among the Gentiles: (1) food offered to idols; (2) sexual immorality; (3) meat of strangled animals; and (4) blood. These four Gentile habits were abhorrent to the Jews. One of the purposes of these prohibitions was to preserve peace, unity and harmony between the Jews and Gentiles. The other is that these were sins. These four prohibitions were imposed on the Gentile Christians that they should respect the conscience of their fellow Christian Jews and not to look into their own affairs but also that of others. This recommendation was in total agreement with the apostles, elders and even the whole church. It was unanimous. So they proposed that representatives be chosen from among the Jerusalem church to be sent to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The apostles and elders chose Silas to be the chief of the delegation.

The Letter

The letter was an official document from the apostles, elders and brethren at Jerusalem to the Gentile brethren in Antioch, Syria and Cicilia. The letter shows the great pastoral wisdom of the apostles and elders. Expressing their solidarity with Paul and Barnabas, whom they praised for risking their lives for the cause of Christ, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem sent their representatives, Judas and Silas, to speak to them personally of the decision of the council. The deliberation of the issue was not merely human verdict, but it pleased the Holy Spirit that they should separate themselves from four necessary things (v.29): *That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled,*

and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well.

The Declaration of the Decision to the Churches

The delegation from Jerusalem was ready to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with the letter. They arrived in Antioch and they gathered the whole church together. Naturally, Silas the chief delegate read the letter to the Antiochians. The people after having heard the letter being read were so comforted and overjoyed. Judas and Silas, being prophets, evidently men who were filled with the Holy Spirit with gifts of instruction, encouraged and strengthened the brethren there. The brethren from Jerusalem stayed in Antioch for some time, after which they returned in peace to Jerusalem. But Silas was happy to remain in Antioch.

The Contention between Paul & Barnabas

Some days later, Paul suggested to Barnabas to revisit the brethren in the cities, which they had preached the Word of the Lord, and planted churches in their first missionary trip. Paul yearned to meet the brethren from these churches. His heart was filled with the care of all the churches.²

A sharp disagreement arose between Paul and Barnabas. The latter wanted to bring John Mark, who was his cousin, with them. But Paul thought it was not good to take Mark with them because he left the work in their first missionary trip in Pamphylia. Apparently, Paul's opinion was that Mark who had put his hand on the plough and then turned back was not fit

² 2 Corinthians 11:28 Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

for the work. Mark's cowardly behaviour will inevitably affect the morale of other believers who may genuinely wish to leave mother church and be missionaries. Nevertheless, Barnabas was insistent on taking Mark, probably to give him another chance. They had a heated argument and as a result, they went their separate way. Barnabas took his cousin Mark to his native Cyprus. Paul took Silas on this second missionary trip. The church in Antioch seemed to side Paul and Silas, and they went through Syria and Cilicia, encouraging and strengthening the churches.

It was sad that there was a heated disagreement but God has a purpose for allowing it. Luke shows how God advances His kingdom through his flawed servants by doubling the work force for His purpose.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The most important lesson of this chapter is the doctrinal controversy regarding the necessity of keeping the Mosaic law in order to make our salvation complete. The Jerusalem council carefully deliberated and concluded that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ Jesus only for both Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul later wrote to the Ephesian Christians (Eph. 2:8, 9): *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.* Salvation is not a consequence of keeping the Law of Moses. That is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. When a sinner repents of his sins, believes and accepts Jesus Christ as his Saviour and Lord, he is instantly saved; eternally justified and secured! The giving of the Holy Spirit is not

dependent on baptism or having to complete catechism classes, although these are important but not essential in obtaining the cleansing of our sins and salvation. Our sins are cleansed by the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and salvation is a gift from God.

We also learn that such doctrinal debates and deliberation must be done in the light of Holy Scriptures. Only the Word of God gives validity and authority to the truth. Experiences witnessed by Peter, Paul and Barnabas were supported by the Word of God. Experiences alone without the authentication of the Word of God are no proof of God's work or truth. Even as early as the days of the Apostles, the solution to the controversy did not come through a new word of revelation, for example, someone claims that the Holy Spirit speaks to him. But the controversy was settled by much discussion and deliberation and more importantly by rightly dividing the Word of God and interpreting it. Pastors and elders today must apply this principle in dealing with such matters.

The imposition of the four prohibitions on the Gentiles is still applicable today. Examining carefully the four things that displease God – they are connected with food offered to idols; sexual immorality; eating of strangled animals when the blood of the animal is not properly drained out, and the consumption of blood, either fresh or cooked. Christians should abstain from all these prohibitions. This is pleasing to the Lord. On other matters, Christians should practise tolerance and respect for the conscience of their fellow brethren. Refrain from hurting the conscience of a weak brother. All things may be lawful, but they may not be expedient. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 15:1-4; Galatians 1:6-7.

Tuesday: Acts 15:5-11; Galatians 3:1-14.

Wednesday: Acts 15:12-29; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; 1 Corinthians 10:7-8.

Thursday: Acts 15:30-35; Galatians 6:7-10.

Friday: Acts 15:36-41; Galatians 6:1-6; 2 Timothy 4:9-11.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the question that arose in the church in Antioch? How did the church resolve the issue?

2. What reasons did Peter give in support of the position held by the brethren from Antioch?

3. How would you reply a Jewish Christian who asks you if it is still alright for him to circumcise his son today? Give reasons for your answer.

4. What evidence do you find of the Holy Spirit's guidance in the discussion and decision on the whole matter?

5. How did Paul and Barnabas deal with the sharp disagreement between them? Who was right? What positive result came out of the disagreement?

6. Why is it wrong to eat food offered to idols and blood?
