

TWENTY-SIX LESSONS ON ACTS (VOL II)

25. Is faith often changed (cf. v. 22)?

26. How could men who were of recent conversion be qualified for eldership? (We don't know that any were Jewish before becoming Christian. However being a former Jew would not necessarily make one a candidate for an elder by any means).

LESSON TWO (15: 1-35)

The Trouble Over Circumcision The Jerusalem Council

Without any controversy, this chapter is one of the most challenging in the whole New Testament. The reason the issue in question came up is one reason the chapter is important; and the decision of the council (both as to its significance for Paul and those who were adherents to one position or the other) and the stipulations which were laid upon Gentile believers are likewise important, since the understanding of the basic nature of the church was in question. That these issues are yet relevant is hardly in need of assertion. The matter of law versus grace is always in need of understanding and clarification. The specific items enjoined upon Gentiles are likewise timeless in importance. So we have a great chapter at hand.

The text of Galatians 2:1ff probably is the same event from Paul's perspective. It gives much important information about the meeting, such as the fact that God instructed him to go the meeting in Jerusalem. It is doubtful if Paul would have gone otherwise since his apostolic authority was in question. God evidently considered that the most appropriate place to settle the issue once and for all

was at the source of the trouble. Hence, the directions for Paul to go.

False Teachers Trouble the Believers, **15:1**

15 *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."*

V. 1 - The divergent doctrines finally caused a sharp clash, which resulted in a "face-down" between the two groups. We will note that the Jerusalem group disclaims any responsibility for the Judaizers' teachings. We need to see that the issue was not a matter of fleshly circumcision. It was rather what that act meant: keeping of the law to be saved. It is significant that some from Jerusalem yet taught lawkeeping despite the experience of Peter in Acts 10 and his explanation thereof in the Jerusalem church. Evidently not everyone was willing to believe what Peter taught. Some years had intervened between the event in Acts 10 and Acts 15; perhaps the memory of some had failed, or new converts who did not understand the true nature of Christianity may have been responsible for the problem.

Paul and Barnabas Sent to Jerusalem, **15:2,3**

2 And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about the question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren.

V. 2 - **Dissension** - The disagreement over circumcision caused discussions that were serious and extensive. The term for questionings is the ordinary word for seeking. All arguments among Christians should be seeking for truth and its

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application. See Matt. 13:45; Mark 13:7; 11:18; Rom. 2:7; I Cor. 13:5; I Tim. 6:4; II Tim. 2:23.

Certain others - Titus, a Greek, was among them. We again remark that if apostolic authority had been observed, no such trip would have been necessary. Note here Gal. 2:2. Paul did not oppose people who kept the law as a manner of life as long as they did not keep it for the purpose of claiming salvation in the keeping of it.

Their Reception in Jerusalem, 15:4,5

4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

V. 4 - Church - Apostles - Elders We again are reminded of the place the elders had in the early churches, even with apostles present. Gal. 2 has Paul meeting privately with the apostles and elders to compare notes. We can understand why this took place when we consider that revelation and understanding of revelation were two different things, as was true in Peter's case. Paul had to consider this point.

V. 5 - This verse shows us how wrong one can be and still have believed. The people of the Pharisees' sect, were insisting that one must keep Moses' law in every way to be saved. For them, Christianity was simply a "leaf" added to Judaism's book rather than a distinctly new relationship to God in Jesus. Paul described them in Gal. 2:4 as false brethren, who were attempting to take away the freedom in Christ. See here Gal. 5:1ff. It seems so clear, perhaps, from our point of view, but it was not to them. It is yet to many a real problem as how one is saved and remains saved. The problem is commonly discussed in the terms "faith and works".

The Elders and Apostles Meet to Settle the Dispute, 15:6-29

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we shall be saved through grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

12 And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written.

16 'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up. 17 that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, 18 says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.'

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. 21 For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the leaders with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among brethren, 23 with the following letter: "The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia,

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greeting. 24 Since we have heard that some persons form us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, 25 it has seemed good to us in assembly to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

V. 6 - **Matter** - The Greek term means here a way of thinking.

V. 7 - Apparently despite the presence of apostles, the matter was given full discussion. It was not a matter of whether the apostles understood all they preached, so much as it was that the revelation through them, if accepted, would have made the matter clear. It may well be that the case of Cornelius was considered unique, not normative. Hence, Peter repeats (v. 8) the matter, showing the total application.

V. 9 - The principle common to all for redemption: Faith. See especially Rom. 2:25-29; 9:27 - 10:4; and 11:32 on this point. Since this was so, what the Judaizers were arguing for was a test of God's judgment and expressed desire.

V. 10 - **Why tempt** - The same idea as in Exodus 17:7 or Numbers 13. God was not to be so treated, Matthew 4:7. Do not contest the words of God.

Neither we nor our fathers - A clearer picture of how impossible it was to actually "keep" the law. If such was so, then it was foolhardy to argue that salvation could be had by keeping the law. Jesus' yoke, Matt. 11:28-30, was the only yoke that could be borne with any success.

V. 11 - It would have been better if Peter had practiced as well as he preached - but at least he taught correctly. Grace and faith had always provided for a people of God, Rom. 11:1-6, and still would do so, since the Gospel was God's power unto salvation for both Jews and Gentiles alike. As God looked at people, the differences were only outward, because all were the same inside.

V. 13 - This James was probably the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19) and author of the epistle of James. He was in the Jerusalem church for many years, suffering stoning, according to tradition, about A.D. 64. He would have been influential with the Jewish Christians (note 21:18ff), and his agreement with and elaboration of the experience of Peter added weight to the argument for release from the law, etc.

V. 15 - Additionally, James showed that such as had happened was prophesied by God. Doubtless, the full meaning of the prophecy was only clearly realized after Pentecost, as God revealed through the apostles exactly what had been prophesied, and various things unfolded that had been foretold.

V. 16 - The prophecy was probably viewed prior to Pentecost in a literal sense: i.e., the rebuilding of a kingdom, etc. However, it was rather to be understood in a spiritual sense; i.e., in reference to a body made up of people characterized by faith, which faith transcended party lines and made people in every culture one flesh.

We may note with some interest that James quoted from the Greek version (LXX) of the prophet Amos rather than from the Hebrew which reads slightly different. As noted in other places, the New Testament has the only authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament. Sometimes the speaker or writer used the Old Testament to illustrate a point, sometimes to prove a point.

V. 17 - **Gentiles** - The Jews very likely understood this reference to mean that Gentiles would have to come under the law as proselytes.

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As this incident shows, they had a hard time accepting the fact that Gentiles by their faith, and apart from observance of any of the Mosaic law, were acceptable to God, and considered as equals in the sight of God.

V. 19 - Those who have turned to the Lord (as Amos had predicted) have done all that is essential - hence the circumcision party has not won a point, and Paul has been vindicated.

judgment - There is nothing scripturally wrong with judging people, unless one does so unjustly or as sitting in God's seat.

V. 20 - The four prohibitions were of themselves, a negative decision against the Judaizer's, since the keeping of the whole law was in question. These things were wrong without the Law given to Israel through Moses, See Gen. 9:4.

pollution of idols - explained in v. 29

unchastity - The Greek word means what we generally view as unlawful sex, of whatever nature.

strangled things and blood - from the context in Leviticus 17:10-16; Deuteronomy 12:15-16; 20-27, these things come. Little of the O.T., per se, was retained under the direction of the Holy Spirit. God's will was not that voiced by the Judaizers.

V. 21 - This verse seems to argue that since Jews would be omnipresent, abstention of the Gentile converts from these items would give less offense, and thus permit the Jews with scruples to associate with the Gentiles who had no such scruples until such time as the Jews could change. Others differ from this, holding that James meant that Moses (i.e., the law) was still read (obeyed) in many places (thus placating the Jews) and there would be those who accordingly followed the law.

V. 23 - As this decree would be of major importance everywhere, it was put into writing

under the auspices of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles, etc. Silas and Judas were added strength for Paul and Barnabas as they returned to Antioch. It surely would have been nice if the action had ended the controversy, but it didn't then, and hasn't yet. The nation of Jews still exists, and there are still people who cannot distinguish between grace and legalism.

V. 24 - The men in v. 1 had apparently claimed what was not true, i.e., that the Jerusalem church had sanctioned their view. The issue was clearly resolved from every point.

Unsettling your minds - subverting your souls would be a good translation. The Judaizers had wrought great problems in Antioch, and continued that in other places.

V. 25 - **In assembly** - The Greek word means "together" or "in agreement," "united," as in 1:14; 2:46; 4:24. Gal. 2:9 shows that the action of acceptance and agreement was done in a personal way as well as publicly.

V. 29 - The word translated "abstain" means "to hold oneself back from," as in I Thess. 4:3; I Tim. 4:3; I Peter 2:11. The necessity was apparently only for the association /fellowship of Gentiles and Jews, both of whom were Christians. The points of idolatry and unchastity were elsewhere forbidden for everyone for all time.

Farewell - The Greek word means "to be strong," "keep well," and was common at the close of letters.

The Work in Antioch, 15:30-35

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. 32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. 33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in

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peace by the brethren to those who had sent them.”
35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

V. 30 - The mission was over, and the truth of the gospel message was upheld - no wonder many rejoiced (v. 31).

V. 32 - **Judas and Silas** - Silas was to accompany Paul on the next missionary journey, and suffer many things from Jews because of his faith in Jesus.

prophets - The scriptures do not at any time equate the word “prophet” with the word “preacher.” The prophets did preach as a part of their function, but the prophets were called such because God revealed His words through them.

V. 33 - As seen in v. 40, either Judas returned to Jerusalem, while Silas remained Antioch, or Silas went to Jerusalem but returned to Antioch.

V. 35 - The point made in 11:26 is again pertinent; Paul did not always “evangelize” in the narrow sense of that term as often used today.

Peter’s Visit to Antioch, **Galatians 2:11-21**

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party 13 And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” 15 We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, 16 yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law, but

through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. 17 But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! 18 But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. 19 For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

QUESTIONS

28. What importance is there about ch. 15?

29. According to Galatians 2, why did Paul go to Jerusalem?

30. Who went with Paul?

31. Were the men who came from Jerusalem sent by the church there?

32. Was it merely a matter of circumcising the men that was the issue?

33. Could one be wrong about the relationship of Christianity to the Mosaic law and still be called a believer?

34. What position did Peter and James take in regard to the issue?

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35. By whose authority was the letter (epistle) written?

36. Were the prohibitions placed upon the Gentiles temporary or permanent in nature?

37. Can we “make trial” of God today as the men did in ch. 15?

LESSON THREE

(15:36 - 18:22)

The Second Missionary Journey

15:36 - 18:22

In Antioch, 15:36-40

36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” 37 And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.

V. 36 - Paul is just as interested in the upbuilding of Christians, their faith-progress, as he is in “disciplining” people, since each is equally important. Neither is to be neglected for Christian

growth is a must on the list of items for consideration by any church group. Paul felt the need for “daily care of the churches” (II Cor. 11:32), whether in Antioch or elsewhere. He now felt that it was wise to return to the converts in the Galatian area, since they were to suffer many things that could disturb their faith, 14:22.

V. 37 - John Mark was a relative (a cousin) of Barnabas, and probably was being considered by Barnabas in this light.

V. 38 - Each man was unchanging in his attitude about the matter, Barnabas insisting, Paul refusing.

V. 39 - It is ever the part of God to “tell it like it is.” So, we are treated to the occasion of two good men, each indebted to the other, who yet disagreed over another and, unable to resolve the matter, agreed to disagree. Doubtless God had this written down for “our admonition and our learning.” Often times it will be this way in regard to where one worships, or what methods one uses, where one labors, etc. We need to carefully consider the difference between likes and dislikes and doctrine, and keep them separated. One may even differ in matters of conscience (which often is equated in Scripture) with another, and yet both remain Christian.

V. 40 - Whether the brethren gave Barnabas and Mark the send-off they gave to Paul is not stated. We will see that Paul’s group returns to Antioch. No historical mention is made of Barnabas again, though Paul mentions him in I Cor. 15, and several references to Mark are in Paul’s letters. Silas probably the Silvanus of II Cor. 1:19; I Thess. 1; I Peter 5:12.

Through to Provinces of Syria and Cilicia, 15:41

41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.