

Acts Chapter 15

Verses 1-30

Throughout its history, the church's leaders have met too settle doctrinal issues.

Historians point to 7 ecumenical councils in the church's early history, especially the Councils of Nicea (A.D. 325), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451).

Yet the most important council was the first one, the Jerusalem Council, because it established the answer to the most vital doctrinal question of all: "What must a person do to be saved?"

The apostles and elders defied efforts to impost legalism and ritualism as necessary prerequisites for salvation.

They forever affirmed that salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone.

Acts 15:1 "And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, [and said], Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."

"Certain men":

Judaizers, false teachers who were self-appointed guardians of legalism, teaching a doctrine of salvation by works.

"From Judaea":

See note on 1:8.

"Except ye be circumcised ... ye cannot be saved" (see verse 24).

The heresy propagated by the Judaizers (see notes on Gen. 17:9-14).

During the early decades of the church, there were some professing Jews who had lived under Judaism disrupted the church by saying that no one could be saved apart from the Law and especially circumcision.

These Judaizers came from Jerusalem proclaiming their message.

The message of salvation involving works is as old as the need of salvation itself.

Jesus and the apostles clearly teach that salvation is by God's grace through faith alone (2:21; 16:31; John 3:3, 36; 5:24; Rom. 3:24; 4:4-5, 21-24; 5:1; 10:9-10, 13; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; 1 John 5:11-13; Rev. 1:5; 5:9).

The book of Galatians extensively deals with this problem.

Now we see a dissension in the church.

You remember that the apostles and most of the disciples at the beginning were of the physical house of Abraham, and had practiced circumcision of all males at eight days old.

These teachers had themselves been involved with the Old Testament teaching of Moses' law.

They did not understand grace.

They were trying to put all the new Gentile converts under the Mosaic Law.

Nowhere, in Jesus' teaching while He was on the earth, did He teach circumcision of the flesh.

Jesus taught circumcision of the heart.

These people (in verse 1), are like many of the people of our day, who add obligations to be done, to be saved.

Salvation is simple.

(Romans 10:9-10), explains it perfectly.

(John 3:15-17), tells it so well in Jesus' own words.

Read both and you will get the exact picture of what it takes to be saved.

Acts 15:2 "When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question."

“Up to Jerusalem”:

See note on 18:22.

“Elders”:

Leaders of the Jerusalem church (see note on 11:30).

We can see from this that Paul and Barnabas, as well as these ministers here are not the last word in these matters.

Peter and James, the half-brother of Jesus, are the leaders of the church.

We must not confuse this James with James the brother of John who had already been martyred.

The church was in the early stages here, and all of the doctrines had not been settled to everyone's knowledge.

Many of the Christian converts had come from Judaism and they tried to bring their practices with them.

They were caught up in the law and did not understand grace.

This was very smart of Paul and Barnabas to call in someone not directly involved to straighten this out.

Acts 15:3 "And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren."

It seemed they went by all the home churches that had been established on their way through Phoenicia and Samaria.

The good news was that God had offered salvation to the Gentiles, as well.

Just as all Christians should feel today, when anyone is added to the kingdom of God, they felt great joy.

Brethren, here means all who are of like persuasion (Christians).

Acts 15:4 "And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and [of] the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them."

Paul and Barnabas and others went into great detail to report the many works God was accomplishing through their efforts.

No doubt they provided sufficient evidence to verify the genuineness of the Gentiles' salvation (10:44-48; 11:17-18).

The church at Jerusalem seemed to be like a hub that the other churches were branches of.

You might even say that the original apostles ministered out from this church.

This really was a natural setting for the church to be, since Jerusalem was where the temple of the Jews was.

Acts 15:5 "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command [them] to keep the law of Moses."

You see, the Pharisees had been caught up in the law from the very beginning.

Now they are trying to combine the law and grace, and it won't work.

There are even today, groups who claim to be following Christ who burden their people down with the law.

If the law had been sufficient, there would have been no need for the Savior or the gift of grace.

Moses' law was for a specific time and for specific people, but it was obvious no one could live up to this law and God sent us a Savior.

In (Galatians 3), we read about the law and grace.

Galatians 3:24-26 "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster [to bring us] unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." "But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster." "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus."

You see, to require anything except faith in Jesus Christ and baptism would be against the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus did not do away with the law, but He fulfilled the law for us.

Acts 15:6 "And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter."

It appears, all the apostles and elders in this area came together to have a meeting similar to a board meeting in our churches today, to determine what the doctrine of the followers of Christ should be.

Verses 7-11

The primary speakers at this conference, often called the Jerusalem council, were "Peter," Paul, Barnabas, and James.

Peter begins by relating how "God" had clearly saved Cornelius and the other "Gentiles" with him apart from any works of the Law (verse 7-9).

In fact, Peter acknowledges that not only do the Gentiles not need to become like Jews to be saved, but conversely "we shall be saved, even as they", the Gentiles (verse 11).

The works of the Law for salvation will not even aid a Jew.

Acts 15:7 "And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men [and] brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe."

"Peter rose up":

Peter gave the first of 3 speeches at the Council that amount to one of the strongest defenses of salvation by grace through faith alone contained in Scripture.

Peter began his defense by reviewing how God saved Gentiles in the early days of the church without a requirement of circumcision, law keeping, or ritual, referring to the salvation of Cornelius and his household (10:44-48; 11:17-18).

If God did not require any additional qualifications for salvation, neither should the legalists.

"By my mouth":

See 10:1-48.

We see that Peter listened to the discussion by both sides of this question.

In fact, it appears that he allowed it to go on for a good little while, until everyone had stated their case.

Then Peter takes charge.

He arises and gives them the final word on the matter.

Not boastfully, but with authority Peter reminds them that God chose him out to minister to the Gentiles.

This is under his jurisdiction.

Acts 15:8 "And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as [he did] unto us;"

“Giving them the Holy Ghost”:

The Judaizers could have argued that Cornelius and the others could not have been saved because they did not meet the legalistic requirements.

To thwart that potential argument, Peter reiterates that God gave them the Holy Spirit, thus proving the genuineness of their salvation (see note on 2:4).

You see, Peter reminds them here, that God approved these Gentiles, because of the condition of their hearts, and not because they had been circumcised.

He poured out the Holy Ghost on these Gentiles before they had even participated in water baptism, let alone been circumcised.

If God puts His seal of approval on them, who are these Pharisees to object?

That would be going against God.

Acts 15:9 "And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."

The heart is really what determines whether we are saved or not.

God, who looks on the heart, sees either a heart desperately wicked or a heart stayed upon God.

Romans 2:29 says, "But he [is] a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision [is that] of the heart, in the spirit, [and] not in the letter; whose praise [is] not of men, but of God."

This purifying their heart is the washing of the heart with the shed blood of Jesus Christ taking all the fleshly part away.

Acts 15:10 "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?"

“A yoke”:

A description of the law and the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46).

The legalists expected the Gentiles to carry a load they themselves were unwilling to bear.

Peter is saying here, if God accepted them the way they were, why can't you?

Peter reminds them that keeping of the letter of the law, including circumcision was too hard for even the Jews to do.

Now they are trying to burden down people that God had already accepted with all of these impossible rules.

Acts 15:11 "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."

“Through the grace of the Lord Jesus”:

A resounding affirmation of salvation by grace through faith alone (see notes on Rom. 3:24-25).

Peter reminds them that Salvation is the same for Jew and Gentile.

Ephesians 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."

Acts Chapter 15 Questions

1. What were men who came down from Judea teaching the brethren?
2. Why were they teaching circumcision?
3. Where in Romans, do we read the requirements for salvation?
4. Who had a dispute with these men from Judea?
5. Where would Paul go to get the matter settled?
6. Who were the leaders of the church at this time?
7. Where had many of these Christian converts come from?
8. By what places did they go on their way to Jerusalem?

9. What was the wonderful news they brought to these churches?
10. Who received them at the church in Jerusalem?
11. In verse 5, we find that what group insisted on all the Gentile males being circumcised?
12. What other requirement were they demanding?
13. Why was there a need for grace?
14. What one word was the law called in Galatians 3:24?
15. In verse 26 of Galatians 3, we are children of God by what?
16. Who came together to consider the matter?
17. When did Peter speak up?
18. By whose mouth were the Gentiles to receive the gospel?
19. Peter takes charge and settles the matter, not boastfully, but with much _____.
20. In verse 8, who knows the heart of man?
21. How did God bear witness that He had accepted these Gentiles?
22. If _____ approved them, who were these _____ object?
23. How did they purify their hearts?
24. Peter says, why put a yoke on these Gentiles that who had not been able to bear?
25. In verse 11, Peter says that we believe what?
26. In Ephesians 2:8, what saves us?
27. Not of works, lest any man should _____.