

# A NEW WAY FOR A NEW DAY / Sunday, November 8, 2015

## Unifying Topic: GOD'S MAKES NO DISTINCTION

### I. Controversy Arises (Acts 15:1-5)

### II. The Council Meets (Acts 15:6-12)

**The Main Thought:** 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 (Acts 15:8-9, KJV).

**Unifying Principle:** Because law is an integral part of civilized society, some laws must change as society changes. When can laws be revised or even eliminated? Luke claimed that the governing authority, the Jerusalem council had power to change the Law of Moses in order to make it congruent to God's actions.

**Lesson Aim:** To acquaint students with the early Church's deliberation about whether or not all believers should be required to be circumcised.

**Life Aim:** To understand why problems are often difficult to judge and why the Church requires time to find the right answer.

### HISTORY:

**Acts 14** <sup>1</sup>Luke continues his narration of events during Paul's first missionary journey. Upon arriving in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas again visited the local synagogue. Response to their message was positive among both Jews and Greeks, but soon opposition again came from unbelieving Jews. Even so, Paul and Barnabas stayed "a long time" in Iconium, speaking boldly and performing signs and wonders. Eventually the opposition became violent, forcing Paul and Barnabas to flee to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, for there was an attempt to attack and stone them (**vv.1-6**).

While in Lystra, Paul preached the Good News. A man in the crowd who had never walked heard intently the Good News. Coming upon this crippled man from birth, Paul saw he had faith and healed him. "With a loud voice he said Stand upright on thy feet. And he leaped and walked." The people assumed and shouted that Paul and Barnabas must be gods, and so named (Barnabas) "Zeus or Jupiter", and named (Paul) "Hermes or Mercury" because he was the chief speaker. Then the local priest of the Temple of "Zeus or Jupiter" prepared to offer sacrifices, but, the apostles tore their own clothes and cried out that they themselves were also men having like passions that preached the gospel and appealing that they turn from those vain things and turn to the living God who made the heaven and earth, the sea and all things therein, etc. Responding to the crowd, Paul and Barnabas reminded them that God did not leave Himself without a witness. Paul and Barnabas had difficulty in restraining the crowds in the giving of the sacrificial offerings to them. But, not long after, Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra persuading the crowds to stone Paul, for he was the chief speaker, and dragged him outside the city. They assumed he was dead when they stoned him, but the disciples surrounded him, and he rose up and re-entered the city. The next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe where they preached the gospel and made many disciples. They then returned again to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch helping believers grow to love God and each other; establishing, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God (**vv.7-22**).

To organize the churches, they needed Spirit-led leaders. They appointed and ordained elders in every church, had prayer and fasting, and commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. Just because church leaders are in place, they still need prayer; much prayer! Passing through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia where they

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preached the gospel in Perga. From there they went down to Attalia and finally sailed to Antioch (Syria) from which their journey had begun, thereby ending their first missionary journey. Remember, the church had sent them on this mission; they had recommended them, and because of the grace of God, their work had been accomplished; is now completed. They called together all the believers and reported on their trip, telling how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles too. There they stayed for "a long time" (vv.23-28).

## LESSON:

### Acts 15:1-5 Controversy Arises

**15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.** Here we go again. There was a problem. Certain men came down from Judaea teaching the brethren that Gentiles who had become Christians must adhere to the old Jewish customs. A person's eternal fate was at stake. The dissenters did not say you should undergo the ritual... • to be obedient to Scripture • to please God • to please the church • to demonstrate your love • to identify with believers. No, the dissenters were saying *'a believer must undergo the ritual and be circumcised to be saved. They were saying that it was the ritual, the circumcision that saved them; a believer was just not saved unless he was ritualized.'* This claimed: • God's grace plus a ritual • God's grace plus man's own work; a spiritual thing (God) plus a physical thing (circumcision). The real problem for the Jewish Christians was whether a ritual was necessary to be saved. The test of following these laws was circumcision. The answer was critical, which would affect all generation of believers. What they failed to understand was that the law could not save. Only faith in Jesus Christ is what's needed to be saved.

**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.** Paul and Barnabas had no small disagreement; no small debate with these certain men from Judea, so it must have been a great disagreement at great length. After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in this serious debate, the church arranged to send Paul and Barnabas up to Jerusalem along with certain other men where they would meet with the apostles and elders about this question. Jerusalem was the ritual center; the home base of those preaching the error. It was the source from which the heretical teaching concerning circumcision came. In order to solve the problem and uproot the trouble, they needed to go to the source. If the Jerusalem church would issue a strong verdict denying the necessity of ritual for salvation, the position of salvation by grace alone would be greatly strengthened. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas fought furiously for the truth, and against this wedge being driven.

**15:3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.** Since no solution transpired to resolve the matter, Paul and Barnabas were being sent by the church to Jerusalem, meaning they traveled at the church's expense, where they passed through Phenice and Samaria along the way, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles to whom they brought great joy. The Phenician churches were founded by laymen. The Samaritans churches had been founded by Philip, Peter, and John.

**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.** As Paul and Barnabas come into Jerusalem, they were received and welcomed by the Jerusalem church and the church leaders, the apostles and elders, <http://www.pitwm.net/pitwm-sunday-school.html>

and declared with great detail, reporting all things that God was accomplishing through their efforts. No doubt they provided sufficient evidence to verify the genuineness of the Gentiles' salvation.

**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.** A large number of Pharisees rose up, but rose up against the message of salvation by faith alone. The question in Jerusalem became much larger than mere circumcision. In Antioch the question had been, "*Does a man have to be circumcised to be saved?*" In Jerusalem the enlarged question was, "*Does a man have to keep the whole law to be saved and accepted into the church?*" "Does he have to accept the law as well as accept Christ?"

## **Acts 15:6-12 The Council Meets**

**15:6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.** In Jerusalem a unique assembly of the apostles of the universal church and the elders of the local church was held. These two groups were the leading ones in the Lord's New Testament move on the earth. The conference had no chairman as they disputed the matter. No one was ignored or silenced. Everyone had the freedom to speak on this matter.

**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, in the midst of their disputing got up first speaking on the issue of the Gentiles. It defends Paul's Gentile mission and it gives him a chance to give his original position on the Gentile mission he had concerning Cornelius. He reminded them that God had accepted the Gentiles by faith alone and not on Jewish terms. Peter emphasized that it was God's choice to give the gospel to the Gentiles. It was by his mouth that they heard the gospel and believed.

- Cornelius and his house had believed the Word while Peter was in the process of preaching the Word. They believed while they were listening and hearing the Word.

**15:8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;**— Man may look at the outside, but God knows the heart (the inside) of a man. He bore witness, giving them the Holy Ghost as He did to the Jewish believers. It was His choice. He who directed this mission had given them the Holy Ghost.

- God had given the Holy Spirit while they were believing the Word.
  - God knew their hearts.
  - God bore witness to the belief of their hearts.
  - God bore witness by giving the Holy Spirit to them.
  - God gave the Holy Spirit by His act alone (*not by baptism nor by laying on of men's hands*).
  - God gave the Holy Spirit just as He did to the Jews.

**15:9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.** Therefore, there exists no difference between Jew and Gentile believers, for both have their hearts are purified by faith.

- God cleansed their hearts by faith, not upon ritual or ceremony.

**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?**— Now, here comes the pertinent question: "*Why tempt God...putting a yoke*

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upon the neck of the disciples in which neither the fathers nor we were able to bear?" The matter was made clear and unmistakably in the experience of Cornelius. If a person declares that a man is saved by God's grace plus a ritual or the law, he tempts God, which is very dangerous. The law is a "yoke", a burden. This is a description of the Law and legalism of the scribes and Pharisees. Paul wrote that the law was a teacher and guide that pointed out their sins, so they could repent and return to God and right living. It was, and still is, impossible to obey the law completely. The legalist expected the Gentiles to carry a load they themselves were unwilling to bear. That's why, if we insist that man undergo a ritual and accept the law in order to be saved, it is to put a yoke upon a man, a yoke that no man can bear.

**15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.** Peter goes on to remind the church of their basic belief: all men are saved by the grace (not law-keeping) of the Lord Jesus Christ! This is a resounding affirmation of salvation by grace through faith alone.

**15:12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.** There was silence in the atmosphere. No one could dispute any longer, and the floor was given over to Barnabas and Paul. It was Paul's time where he declared the miracles and wonders God had brought forth, through them among the Gentiles. This was their first completed missionary journey among the Gentiles. God's miracles show clearly that He approved the preaching of Barnabas and Paul.

#### **SUMMARY:**

<sup>2</sup>Men from Judea came to Antioch teaching the necessity of circumcision and keeping the Law. Paul and Barnabas disputed this, and the decision was made to send them to Jerusalem to talk with the apostles and elders. Along the way, Paul and Barnabas described the conversion of the Gentiles which caused great joy (**vv.1-3**). Upon coming to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the apostles and elders as they declared all things God had done through them. Certain men of the Pharisees believed that circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses were necessary (**vv.4-5**).

The apostles and elders met to discuss the issue further. After much dispute, Peter spoke of how God chose him to be the first to preach, by his mouth, the gospel to the Gentiles (*speaking of his Gentile mission concerning Cornelius*); how God acknowledged them by giving the Gentiles the Holy Spirit, and how God made no distinction, purifying their hearts through faith. Peter thus questioned why they should put a yoke on the Gentiles that even they themselves were unable to bear. Rather, it was Peter's belief to the apostles and elders that it was by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that both Jews and Gentiles shall be saved in the same manner as the Jews. Then, Barnabas and Paul report the miracles and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles (**vv.6-12**).

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