

A Study in Acts 15:20–31

The Jerusalem Council: No Greater Burden

We are reading from Acts chapter 15, beginning at verse 20.

"But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day."

"And it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabbas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren. And they wrote letters by them after this manner: The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia. Forasmuch as we have heard that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law, to whom we gave no such commandment."

"For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 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."

"So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle. Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed them."

No Compromise — The Basis of Relationship Unchanged

The question before the Jerusalem council was one that had been presented to Gentile believers as bearing directly upon their ability to have a relationship with God — as though circumcision and the keeping of the law were necessary steps in their salvation. The outcome of the council is perfectly clear: they were not to be burdened with the law. And yet the four things mentioned in verse 20 were given as guidelines of behavior.

There is an amazing number of otherwise intelligent people who read this chapter and come away citing it as an example of wise compromise in Christian things — as though peace was made here by

the prudent use of the art of compromise. That is entirely mistaken. These four things are not peculiar to the law of Moses. They go back further. And they were not given as a new set of commandments in place of the old. Their relationship with God, their very salvation, would not hinge upon obedience to these things but upon the precious blood of Christ. James was not offering a lighter version of the law. He was pointing to what are fundamental moral realities that transcend the law of Moses entirely.

Four Things That Predate the Law

The four things — abstaining from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood — all go back further than Sinai. When God put government into the hands of Noah, He said: whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed. Life belongs to God. The prohibition of blood in food is rooted in that same principle: the blood is the life, and the life belongs to God. God never gave the blood as a gift to man for food. It belongs to Him.

Idolatry — the setting aside of God and the worship of what is created rather than the Creator — was in practice before the law of Moses, as Romans 1 traces. Fornication, in the broad sense of departures from the purity God intended for mankind, violates what God established in the garden when He instituted marriage. These are not Mosaic distinctions. They are fundamental to God's ordering of the first creation, and they must be honored by Christians not because the law commands them, but because they assert the rights of God Himself.

These things had immediate practical force for Gentile believers moving into a world saturated with idolatry, as Paul describes in Athens and as Romans 1 portrays. Every marketplace, every meal, every civic occasion could involve meat offered to idols. Abstaining from pollutions of idols could touch everything from what was sold in the market to the stamps on a letter in some societies. These were not no-cost options. Submission to these things involved real cost — sometimes the full upending of a family's traditional way of life.

We Write Unto Them

There is a lovely and easily overlooked point in the phrase: we write unto them. Why bother to write? They were in Antioch; the council was in Jerusalem. One might reason that those believers were autonomous and the Jerusalem church had no standing to tell them what to do. But that position was not taken. Instead, they wrote — which is entirely consistent with the truth that there is one Head in heaven and one body on earth. The one body has connections.

Writing, rather than sending by word of mouth, meant that what was intended to be said was there in black and white — exact, unalterable, not subject to being passed from mouth to mouth and altered in

the transmission. The Spirit of God, in fact, sent two men — Judas and Silas — both as bearers of the letter and as spoken confirmation of it. The written word and the living voice together. When they had read it, they rejoiced for the consolation.

And the opening phrase of verse 28 states the principle: For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us. That is the ground on which a decision may rightly be made in the assembly of God — not majority vote, not human wisdom, not compromise between parties, but what seems good to the Holy Spirit. What a different thing that is.

Christians and Government — A Digression Worth Noting

The discussion of the blood prohibition naturally raised a broader question: if the prohibition of murder and the authority to execute murderers predate the law and were given to Noah as a governing principle, what is a Christian's place in the various pieces of that process in a modern democratic state — as policeman, prosecutor, juror, judge, or executioner?

Several principles bear on the question. The powers that be are ordained of God — even a government formed in circumstances far from ideal stands under God's sovereignty, and we submit to it as such. The rendering of tribute to whom tribute is due, and custom to whom custom, is part of the Christian's duty in this world. At the same time, if I have the mind of Christ, I have a heavenly perspective — and that heavenly perspective may not always translate neatly into the roles that earthly government assigns.

Acts 6:4 offers a suggestive principle: the apostles said, We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. That was said in the context of something good — the care of widows — being set aside for something better. The better part lifted them above even that good work. The principle carries: a heavenly man walking through a contrary world may often find that the better thing is to give himself to prayer and the ministry of the Word rather than to occupy the structures of earthly government, however just those structures may be in some respects.

The Lord's own word is pointed: If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight. Many brethren in the 1800s gave up military commissions on that principle. The simplicity that is in Christ sometimes makes complex questions straightforward, once the flesh stops complicating them. Matthew 17 adds one further thought: the Lord told Peter to pay the tax, notwithstanding, lest we should offend them. The heavenly man walks through this contrary world seeking not to leave offended souls behind — adorning the gospel, not drawing unnecessary attention away from Christ.

Submission to God and His Word

In a final word, the four things listed here call fundamentally for submission — to God and to His Word. The attitude of submission to God and to His Word will carry the soul a long way. It does not always give an exact answer to every case. But in these four specific matters, it ought to bring us right to the heart of the whole issue and direct our feet and our hands.

The world around us displays the effects of the Fall in increasingly devious ways — the strands of Satan's lies interwoven with the systems and arrangements that men are so proud of. For a believer to be found occupied in prayer and the ministry of the Word is a delightful thing. It lifts him above the mess, not by escaping responsibility, but by being occupied with what is highest. The gospel has brought light to these things. Where that light is refused, there is no remedy except the judgment of God, which will come.

May we walk in submission to God and to His Word in all things, giving ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.