

Acts 15:21–28 — Moses Hath in Every City Them That Preach Him

The Synagogues, the Dispersion, Apostolic Authority, Law Not for Sanctification, and God Is Not Looking for Volunteers

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:21–28

“For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.

“Then 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.

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

Moses in Every City: What the Reading of the Law Accomplished

Verse 21 supplies what might otherwise seem a puzzling closing remark to the whole discussion: Moses of old time has in every city those who preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. What is James’s point? The law of Moses had been read systematically and continuously, in every city of the dispersion, for generations. The question therefore asks itself: what had all that reading produced by way of deliverance from sin, purifying of hearts, or freedom from bondage? The answer was plain to every person in the room. The law condemns; it does not set free. It is a great weight which no man can bear. Generations of faithful reading had not changed that. If Moses read in the synagogues every Sabbath could not do what needed to be done, there was no

case for putting Gentile believers under it.

The word every Sabbath is also notable. James uses the term Sabbath naturally for the seventh day — Saturday. The Lord's Day is not the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given to Israel, not to the Gentiles. The idea that the first day of the week is a Christian Sabbath arises from the notion that the Ten Commandments are the rule of life for the Christian, and since one of the ten says to keep the Sabbath, those who hold this view must somehow transfer the Sabbath to Sunday. This is what has been called spiritual alchemy: lead in, gold out. But the scripture never makes that transfer. The Lord rose on the first day of the week; the Spirit formed the church on the first day of the week at Pentecost. The Lord's Day has its own character, entirely distinct from the Sabbath given to Israel.

The Synagogue: Gathering Together, and What the Dispersion Signifies

The word synagogue is made up of two Greek parts: the first meaning together, the second meaning gathered. Every time the word synagogue appears it is a reference to being gathered together. What James describes in verse 21 is not a settled, established national worship but a scattered, dispersed gathering — in every city, not in Jerusalem alone. The dispersion of Israel was itself a testimony. It was the witness of failure. If Israel had walked with God and kept his covenant, there would have been no dispersion. The very existence of synagogues in every city of the Roman world was a monument to Israel's unfaithfulness.

There is also a notable absence in verse 21. There is no hint of a sanctuary, no reference to a presiding officer or appointed minister. The reading took place; the preaching took place. There was perhaps a rostrum from which someone could read or speak. But the verse does not describe anything corresponding to a clerical system. It is simply the reading and preaching of Moses in the gathered place. The contrast with what Christendom made of things is pointed.

Apostolic Authority: What Gave the Decision Its Weight

Verse 22 records that it pleased the apostles and elders with the whole church to send chosen men. Four things are mentioned: apostles, elders, the whole assembly, and the chosen men. These must be kept in their proper order. The elders cannot rise above the apostles; the whole assembly cannot rise above the apostles. The decision had apostolic authority behind it, and that is what made it binding. It was not an ecumenical council — there were representatives from exactly two assemblies, Jerusalem and Antioch. It was not a democratic vote — this was not a meeting where every man's judgment carried equal weight. The apostolic authority and the agreement of the Holy Spirit gave the decision its character.

The elders mentioned in Jerusalem were of a different character from the elders Paul appointed in Gentile cities. Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 describe men appointed by apostolic delegates in each city among Gentile assemblies. The Jerusalem eldership was a Jewish eldership, something that was already there — not men ordained by the apostles in the way of Paul's practice. The two should not be conflated. J.N. Darby notes manuscript variation in verse 23 between the elders and the brethren and the elder brethren; William Kelly's commentary touches on this.

Two witnesses were sent: Judas and Silas. They carried the written letter and they were themselves the living voice. Written word and spoken word together, two witnesses confirming the same thing — a pattern consistent with the principle of two or three witnesses throughout scripture. The letter was signed; those who wrote it were forever linked with what it said. It cannot be undone. And the letter had both the apostles' authority and the endorsement of the whole assembly — not because the assembly's vote gave it authority, but because the blessed unity of the Spirit had brought the whole company to one mind.

The Law Not for Justification Nor for Sanctification

What is absent from Acts 15 is as significant as what is present. The distinction so common in Christendom — that the Christian is not under the law for justification but is under it as the rule of life for sanctification — does not appear. The question before the assembly was simply: are the Gentile believers to be put under the law of Moses? The answer was no. Not no for justification but yes for sanctification. Simply no. A comprehensive no.

This would have been the most natural place to introduce the distinction, if it existed. Here was a full discussion of the relationship of Gentile believers to the law of Moses. If there was a sense in which they were under it, that was the time to say so. The text says nothing of the kind. Galatians, which deals with precisely this question at length, says nothing of the kind either. The law is not written in the heart of the Christian. Christ is written there. The rule for the Christian is the rule of the new creation and the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2, 16) — not the ten commandments.

Those who say we are under the law as the rule of life charge the opposite position with antinomianism — being without law, lawless. The charge is without validity. We are not without law; we are under law to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21). Galatians 6 gives us the rule of the new creation and the blessing upon those who walk by it. The Christian who is genuinely subject to Christ does not go about murdering and stealing — the accusation proves too much and explains too little. The basis, however, is entirely different from law-keeping: it is the indwelling of Christ, the constraint of love, and the walking by the Spirit.

God Is Not Looking for Volunteers

Verse 24 says that those who had gone down to Antioch teaching circumcision and the law had gone to whom we gave no commandment. This phrase opens a

window onto how the Lord's work is to be carried out. The apostles and elders at Jerusalem had given no commandment for anyone to go and trouble the Gentile believers. They had not authorized it. But the implication is also wider: neither is the Lord's work in general a matter of human volunteering.

God is not looking for volunteers. The phrase is striking and worth sitting with. In Acts 13 the Spirit said: separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. It was the Spirit who called and the Spirit who sent. The assembly at Antioch laid hands on them and let them go — in recognition of what the Spirit had already done, not in commission of their own authority. The initiative was divine. Isaiah's here am I, send me came after the seraph had touched his lips with a live coal — after he had been prepared and cleansed, not before. The spirit of the volunteer who enthuses about a far country while his near field is untested is a different thing from the one the Lord sends.

The Lord said no prophet is without honour except in his own country. He was not advising prophets to seek distant audiences to avoid the difficulty of home. He was describing what happens to those who speak faithfully for God where they are known. The testing ground of whether a man is truly sent is often close at hand, not far away. God does send some to distant places — Paul's whole career is evidence of that. But the character of the sending is divine, not voluntary; and the faithfulness of service near at hand is usually the proving ground before the Lord sends further.

It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us. To whom we gave no commandment.