A Study in Acts 15:1–31

The Jerusalem Council — Circumcision — Freedom from the Law — One Body on Earth

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We are reading Acts chapter 15, beginning at verse 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. 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."*
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> *"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."*
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> *"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... 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? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."*
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> *"And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying... Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name... Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God."*

> *"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."*

Why This Chapter Was Suggested — Assembly Action in Detail

Acts 15 is one of the few places in Scripture where we are given detailed inside information about what actually happened when an assembly of God, gathered together in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, faced a major question and reached a decision. The assembly at Corinth acted on the matter of the mischievous man, but Scripture gives us only Paul's letter before and his second letter after — not what was said or done in the meeting itself. Here in Acts 15 we hear the words of Peter, the words of James, we learn what was decided, what was written, and what was sent. There is no set formula to be applied in every case. But this is the case that Scripture sets before us in the greatest detail, and there must be things here for our learning.

Titus — A Practical Test Case

Galatians 2:3 tells us that Titus, a Greek, went up with Paul to Jerusalem and was not compelled to be circumcised. He is not named in Acts 15, but he is the living test case in the room. When these men from the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, they had an uncircumcised Greek standing right there. What were they going to say to him? This was not a theoretical discussion about hypothetical future converts. Titus was present. The matter had immediate and personal application, and God had seen to it that a concrete case would force the issue to a head.

Paul went up by revelation — the Lord directed him to go, because this matter was to be settled at Jerusalem, not at Antioch. God was superintending the whole process, as He had previously prevented an independent Samaritan church from arising by withholding the Spirit from the Samaritans until the apostles came down and laid hands on them. There was not to be a Gentile church independent of the Jewish center, any more than there had been to be a Samaritan church independent of Jerusalem. God was preserving the practical unity of the one body He was forming.

Passing Through Phenice and Samaria — Great Joy

And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles. Phenice is Phoenicia — the territory of the Philistines. For years and years the people of God had been at war with the Philistines. Now in that very land, the declaration of the conversion of Gentiles produced great joy among all the brethren. What a triumph of the grace of God. Samaria too, whose inhabitants were Gentiles settled in Palestine by the king of Assyria when he took the ten tribes captive — intrinsically Gentiles, however much they read the Old Testament — they heard the same message, the conversion of the Gentiles. And they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

The phrase brought on their way by the church says something about the fellowship of the assembly at Antioch with this mission. It was a sending-forth in sympathy and fellowship. 3 John 6 illuminates it: if thou bring forward brethren on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well. There is a godly sort of setting someone forward, and there is another sort. The assembly at Antioch did it in the right spirit. They were members of one body passing through places where other members of the same body lived, and they caused joy — not anxiety about the unresolved question — but joy over what God had wrought among the Gentiles.

Peter's Speech — God Bore Witness; No Difference

Peter reminded the assembly that God Himself had chosen him as the instrument through which Gentiles first heard the gospel and believed — referring to the household of Cornelius. 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. The proof of God's acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles was not human opinion or apostolic decision — it was God's own direct action in giving them the Holy Spirit. Why then would man presume to add conditions that God had not added?

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? The law was a yoke. Israel had never been able to bear it. Not a single Israelite had ever kept it. To impose on Gentile believers a standard that the entire nation of Israel had demonstrably failed was to put the Gentiles in a worse position than they had been in as pagans — they would now be under an obligation they could not fulfill, with no basis for confidence before God. But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. That was Peter's conclusion. The Jewish believers would be saved exactly the same way the Gentile believers were saved — by grace, not by law.

James's Sentence — and the Tabernacle of David

James drew on Amos 9:11–12 — After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down — to show that the Old Testament itself had anticipated a great Gentile ingathering. This was not a novelty that contradicted the prophets; the prophets themselves had spoken of it. The assembly should not trouble those Gentiles who had turned to God from the nations.

James's sentence was the practical guidance: we write unto them that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. These four things are not Mosaic innovations — they predate the law. The prohibition of blood goes back to Noah (Genesis 9:4). The condemnation of idolatry and fornication belong to fundamental obligations that all mankind owes to God, preceding the giving of the law by centuries. They were not laid on Gentile believers as a lighter version of the law. They were the basic moral obligations that any person who has turned to God must honor, rooted in creation and in the covenant with Noah.

It Seemed Good to the Holy Ghost and to Us

The letter that was sent uses a phrase of remarkable authority: for it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us. That is not the language of a committee reaching a compromise. It is the language of an assembly acting in the power of the Spirit and confident that the Spirit has led. This is what genuine assembly action looks like: not a negotiated settlement between parties, not a concession to pressure, but the common mind of a people who are gathered to the name of the Lord Jesus and led by His Spirit to a conclusion they can honestly attribute to the Holy Ghost.

The letter was carried by Paul and Barnabas together with Judas (Barsabas) and Silas, chief men among the brethren. Both the written word and the oral testimony went together — they shall also tell you the same things by mouth. And when the letter was read at Antioch, they rejoiced for the consolation. The question had been tormenting them, their souls had been subverted by those who had brought the false teaching, and now there was clarity, and with clarity came joy.

Messianic Congregations Today — the Same Question Revisited

Verse 5 mentions that certain from the sect of the Pharisees which believed rose up to insist on circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses. This kind of pressure did not end in the first century. In our own day, what are called Messianic congregations have been growing and spreading. They maintain Jewish practices, observe the feasts, and, while not requiring Gentile converts to be circumcised for salvation, do impose Jewish ordinances on their assemblies and invite Gentile believers to join them in these practices. The implication is that to be fully aligned with God's purposes, Gentile believers ought to enter into these things.

This fails to understand the great change that the cross has brought in. Galatians 6:15 states it plainly: neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And Philippians 3:3 says: we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. For a Christian to take up circumcision in the flesh is not to honor his Jewish heritage — it is to treat as meaningful what the cross has set aside. That is the point Paul makes in Galatians so forcefully. He was willing to withstand Peter to the face over this very issue at Antioch, because Peter's behavior there was not consistent with the truth of the gospel.

It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us — and when they had read it, they rejoiced for the consolation.