
Acts 15:1-11

Peter at Jerusalem -- Galatians 2 -- The No-Difference Gospel

Ministry Reading -- January 9, 2008

Opening Reading -- Acts 15:1-11

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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... And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. 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. 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. 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.

Galatians 2: Going Up by Revelation

Galatians 2:1-5

After a lapse of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus also with me. And I went up according to revelation, and I laid before them the glad tidings which I preach among

the nations, but privately to those of repute among them, lest in any way I run, or had run, in vain. But neither was Titus who was with me, being a Greek, compelled to be circumcised: and that on account of the false brethren brought in surreptitiously, who came in privately to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom not even for an hour did we yield in subjection, that the truth of the glad tidings might remain with you.

Galatians 2 illuminates what is not stated explicitly in Acts 15 -- why the matter had to go to Jerusalem rather than being settled at Antioch. Paul went up by revelation: the Lord communicated directly to him that this was where the question was to be resolved. The reason was profound. If such a question about the Gentile believers were to be settled locally at Antioch, the practical result might have been an Antioch church and a Jerusalem church -- a split in the body at the very beginning of its history. The question needed to be taken to the capital seat of circumcision, where the Christian Jews who were most firmly attached to the Mosaic system would be brought under the guidance of the Spirit through the apostles, the elders, and the whole assembly to declare that the Gentiles were free from the law.

Titus: A Living Test Case

Among those who went up to Jerusalem was Titus -- an uncircumcised Greek believer, saved under Paul's ministry. His presence was deliberate. Paul was not taking a theoretical question to Jerusalem. He was bringing with him a living test case. When the question arose about Gentile converts, Titus was there in the room. What were they going to say to him? What were they going to do about him? The question could not be handled in the abstract.

Galatians 2:5 adds the resolution: not even for an hour did they yield in subjection -- that is, Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. The truth of the

gospel was maintained. To have yielded even temporarily would have been to imply that the gospel was not complete in itself, that something needed to be added to it. And Paul would not allow that.

The Two Verses 4 and 12: Subtle Distinctions in Verse 1 and Verse 5

There is a subtle but real distinction between the two groups pressing the Judaizing argument. Those in verse 1 who came down from Judea said: 'Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.' They were making circumcision a condition of salvation itself. The group in verse 5 -- certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, acknowledged Christians -- said rather that the Gentiles ought to be circumcised and enjoined to keep the law. The force is somewhat different: not that they cannot be saved without it, but that this is the proper thing for them to do as converts. Darby's rendering brings this out. The first group may well answer to the 'false brethren' Paul mentions in Galatians 2:4 -- those who had come in surreptitiously to spy out the liberty of the Gentile believers. The second group were genuine believers, though gravely mistaken.

Room for All to Speak -- Then Silence

When the assembly came together at Jerusalem, there was much disputing. The situation was conducted such that everything was allowed to come out. Wrong notions, misguided arguments, all the confused thinking that had been building up -- it had room to come into the open. Nothing was quickly suppressed to give an appearance of unity that had not really been reached. The whole matter was fully aired. And then the Spirit of God used Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James in turn to address the matter and bring it to a settled conclusion. It is instructive for any assembly dealing with a difficult question: allow the exercises to come out. Anyone who believes he has a godly exercise before the Lord is free to state it.

The Lord can use that process to surface the various thoughts and bring the peace of a sound resolution.

And then came the silence: 'Then all the multitude kept silence.' That is the mark of a convincing work of the Spirit of God. When the testimony was given by Peter, and then confirmed by Barnabas and Paul, the discussion did not simply continue. The consciences recognized the truth, and the room fell quiet. Then James could summarize and state the conclusion.

Peter and Cornelius: From the Earliest Days

Peter's opening words anchor his testimony in history: '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.' He is going back to the case of Cornelius -- the event recorded in Acts 10 when God prepared Peter through the vision of the sheet let down from heaven, told him not to call unclean what God had cleansed, and then led him to the house of Cornelius. That was the very first time the free gospel had been preached to Gentiles, by Peter himself, before Paul had begun his missionary journeys.

It was subsequent to that, at some point, that the arrangement was made that Peter would be the apostle to the circumcision and Paul to the uncircumcision (Galatians 2:7-8). The keys of the kingdom had been committed to Peter, and in using those keys he had opened the door first to the Jews at Pentecost, then to the Samaritans, then to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house. It was fitting, therefore, that Peter should be the one to give this foundational testimony at Jerusalem -- as an eyewitness of the first sovereign act of God in bringing the gospel to Gentiles.

The Four Special Cases of Tongues in Acts

Peter's testimony includes the giving of the Holy Ghost to the Gentiles at Cornelius's house, speaking with tongues, 'even as he did unto us.' This was one of four distinctive occasions in Acts where tongues accompanied the reception of the Holy Spirit: Pentecost (Jews), Samaria (the laying on of apostolic hands), Cornelius's house (Gentiles), and Acts 19 (the disciples of John, who had not yet received the Holy Spirit in the gospel sense).

Each of these four cases had very specific and distinctive characteristics and purposes. They are not meant to establish a normative pattern for all Christian experience. Those who claim that tongues are the invariable sign of receiving the Holy Spirit are taking four exceptional and purposeful events and making them into a universal rule -- which they were never intended to be. The purpose in each case was to demonstrate, in an unmistakable way, that the same Spirit had been received: that Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, and the disciples of John were all united in one body by the one Spirit.

The No-Difference Gospel: Romans 3 and Acts 15

Peter's statement in verse 9 -- 'put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith' -- is the heart of it. This is the no-difference gospel. Romans 3:22-23 says the same: 'there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' The word 'all' embraces Jew and Gentile alike. There is no difference in the condition: all are sinners. There is no difference in the remedy: righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no difference in the gift: the Holy Spirit is given to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

Peter, the apostle to the circumcision, really understood this. His failure at Antioch -- when he dissembled under pressure from those who came from James, drawing back from eating with the Gentiles and compelling Paul to rebuke him to the face -- was a failure of consistency, not a failure of principle. He knew the truth. His behavior had been inconsistent with it. There is a great difference

between a man who has a principle and fails to maintain it and a man who has no principle at all. Here at Jerusalem, speaking from personal experience and under the guidance of the Spirit, Peter states the principle with perfect clarity.

A Yoke Neither Our Fathers Nor We Could Bear

The challenge in verse 10 is the sharpest rebuke to the Judaizing position: 'Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?' This was strong language directed at the Pharisees who believed. Their own history bore witness against their demand. If the law could not save Israel -- and the whole history of Israel was the demonstration that it could not -- then to impose it upon Gentile converts as a condition was to tempt God by acting as though His law could accomplish what it had never accomplished.

A Gracious Way of Expressing the Truth: Verse 11

Verse 11 shows how the same truth can be expressed in more than one way, and that one way can be considerably better than another. Peter could have said: 'we Jews are saved just like the Gentiles -- by grace, not by the law.' The truth would have been the same. But what he actually said was: 'We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.' He made the Jews the point of comparison, not the Gentiles. They were saved even as the Gentiles were saved -- not the Gentiles saved in the same way as the Jews. The gracious way of saying a hard truth is sometimes the more powerful way of saying it. Peter's phrasing is a lesson in how to address a sensitive point with both honesty and tact.

The Gap: Undefined in the Prophets, Occupied by the Mystery

A final thread worth drawing out is the relationship between the present age and the prophetic program for Israel. James, in his subsequent remarks (vv.15-17), quotes Amos about the tabernacle of David being rebuilt and the Gentiles seeking the Lord. That is millennial. But the prophets also foretold a period of Israel's setting aside -- the Lo-Ammi period of Hosea, the undefined interval between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel, the 'sitting at God's right hand until His enemies become His footstool' of Psalm 110.

The gap was foreseen, but its length was not specified. The Lord read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth and stopped in the middle of a sentence -- 'the acceptable year of the Lord' -- not reading the next clause about the day of vengeance. A gap was there, but its length was not revealed. What was not foreseen -- what is the mystery -- is what fills that gap: the church, a heavenly people gathered to Christ, united to the glorified head in heaven by the indwelling Holy Spirit. That occupies the undefined interval from the cross to the rapture. Then God will take up with Jacob again for the final week of years, bringing in the full blessing of Israel and the nations under the Messiah's reign.

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Lord willing.