

Acts 15:1-21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 15 verses 1 to 21 But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.

And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

So being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and brought great joy to all the brothers.

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter, And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

[1 : 0 8] And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith.

Now therefore, why are you putting God to the test, by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples, that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.

And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, Brothers, listen to me.

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen.

I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

[2 : 1 5] Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he has read every Sabbath in the synagogues. Acts chapter 15 is at the heart of the book of Acts.

The Gentile mission is underway. Peter has brought the gospel to Cornelius. Paul and Barnabas have recently returned from the first missionary journey in Asia Minor. Now the question of the character of the new body of the church is an issue to be decided.

What status should the Gentiles have within the church? Do they need to be circumcised and come under the Jewish purity requirements, and take on the covenant sign of circumcision? Most of the Gentile converts to this point had been God-fearers, associated with synagogue communities.

It probably wouldn't have been seen as a big thing for them to be circumcised, and become full members of Christian synagogues. The Christian movement at this point was largely a Jewish one, and it might have seemed natural to most at this point that becoming part of such a movement would require becoming a Jew.

[3 : 29] The question of circumcision would become a much keener question, as the gospel went out to Gentiles with a pagan background, without any prior association with the Jews. The controversy that leads to the Jerusalem council is first provoked by men coming from Judea to Antioch, teaching that Gentile converts need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

This was the cause of great dispute with Paul and Barnabas. Paul had already had the Gentile mission especially committed to him, and had just returned from his first missionary journey with Barnabas.

Paul is naturally especially concerned that this question be settled adequately. The issues at stake in the Jerusalem council, and other related matters, are at the very heart of Paul's message in a number of his epistles, especially Romans and Galatians.

The visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem at the end of Acts chapter 11 is the visit that seems to be mentioned in the first part of Galatians chapter 2. It's a private visit, it's by revelation, by the prophecy of the coming famine, and it's bringing aid to the needy saints in Jerusalem.

This might help to explain why the leaders in Jerusalem are concerned that Paul take continued interest in the needs of the poor, the poor being the Judean Christians that need to support from those outside of the region.

[4 : 44] The conflict in Antioch that provokes this visit to Jerusalem is the conflict with Peter described in Galatians chapter 2 verses 11 to 21. But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?

We ourselves are Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners. Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law.

Because by works of the law, no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?

[5 : 57] Certainly not. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. This, I believe, fits the description of the events in this chapter.

The conflict occurs in Antioch. The teachers come from Jerusalem, from the churches associated with James. The false teachers here believe that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved.

As there had long been uncircumcised God-fearers, we might wonder what this belief exactly was. My suggestion is that they believed that something had changed with the coming of Christ. God had formerly overlooked the situation of the Gentiles.

[6 : 57] They had formerly been able to be God-fearers. Not part of the covenant, but relating to God from outside of it. But now, in their understanding, God wanted all people everywhere to repent, to turn, to become part of his people, and to be circumcised.

At stake in such a form of apocalyptic Judaism, then, would be the question of what happens in the shift of the old age to the new age in the coming of the new covenant. It's a question of eschatology.

Are Gentiles to be saved as Gentiles, or do they need to become Jews to become part of this new age of the Messiah? In response to the coming of people of the circumcision party to Antioch, Peter acted hypocritically.

He acted out of fear of the circumcision party, rather than out of his true convictions. To have a clearer idea of what is at stake here, it's instructive to consider Paul's arguments in the book of Galatians.

There, Paul argues that one of the reasons why the Judaizers want circumcision is to make a good showing in the flesh. The Judaizers can present Christianity as a sort of respectable Jewish sect, observant and conformist.

[8 : 01] They are making good proselytes of all of these Gentile converts, emphasizing the fact that they are converting them to Judaism, not necessarily the fact that they are converting them to Christ.

In such a manner, they can avoid persecution. The problem, however, as Paul makes clear, is that such an approach carefully masks the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. It downplays the cross for something that is distinctively secondary.

Indeed, it latches onto that secondary and unnecessary thing, precisely in order to soft-pedal the cross, the way in which Christ is out of step with, and at odds with, the rulers of this present age, and the ways in which he fulfills the law.

At such points, becoming all things to all men can be a dangerous thing. And the circumcision party seem to be concerned for more than just getting the Gentiles circumcised. The Gentiles also need to observe the other requirements of the Mosaic Covenant in their minds.

There are Jews who are members of the Pharisees who are Christians. These groups are not mutually exclusive, as we might commonly think. Some of the early Christians were both Pharisees and Christians.

[9 : 07] And while there were clear tensions between these things, one did not necessarily rule out the other. Elsewhere, Paul will speak of himself as a Pharisee, although it is clear that he thinks of that identity very differently after his conversion.

The apostles and the elders assemble to consider the matter, and they have an extensive debate. Peter stands up to speak about the gospel going to Cornelius through him. The council needs to reckon with the way that God has welcomed the Gentiles, without making a distinction between them and the Jews.

One of the more surprising things here is the way that Peter describes the law, as a yoke to be put on the neck of disciples, that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear. It is not just a statement about the law at this present juncture in history, it is a more general statement about the law that applies to their fathers also.

Why would Peter seemingly present the law so negatively? It seems that he regarded the law as an incredibly onerous thing. And when we think about it, that is not surprising. It involves all these sacrifices, pilgrimages, these different forms of cleanness that need to be maintained.

To be truly and fully observant was incredibly difficult and costly. In many respects, it would be a very frustrating way to live, one that would constantly remind you of your sinfulness and your fleshly nature.

[10 : 23] And this frustrating character seems to be more intrinsic to the character of law-keeping. If God had truly cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith, why would they need to go through all of this rigmarole, just to keep some Jews happy?

God had clearly accepted them as Gentiles, so why would they need to become Jews in order to be accepted? The law is not necessary for such converts. The law is being insisted upon purely out of fear of the Jews, rather than out of any true conviction.

It is the grace of the Lord Jesus that gives salvation, the cross of Christ, rather than the law. The contrast between the law and Christ is also present in Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch at the end of chapter 13, verses 38 to 39.

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

This is Peter's last appearance in the book of Acts. James, from whose orbit the teachers who insisted on the circumcision of the Gentiles had come, makes the decisive statement, and is against those teachers.

[11 : 32] Peter, here called Simeon by James, has given personal testimony of the gospel going to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas have given further confirming witness. Now James references scripture, establishing the point more decisively.

He quotes Amos chapter 9, verses 11 to 12. In that day I will raise up the booth of David that has fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the Lord who does this.

The booth of David likely has in mind the dynasty and the house of David. Jesus is the son of David, and the church is being set up as a new Davidic house. It might also be a reference, not to the tabernacle, but to the tent that David set up for the Ark of the Covenant.

This was not the place of regular sacrifice, but it was a place of song and of prayer. The Ark of the Covenant had also been associated with Gentiles like Obed-Edom, the Gittite, foreigners dwelling in the land of Israel.

Jesus of Nazareth, the new Messianic king, is forming a new house of prayer for all nations, in which Jews and Gentiles are brought together in song and praise around the presence of the Lord.

[12 : 48] In verse 18 there is a likely reference to Isaiah chapter 45 verse 21. Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together. Who told this long ago?

Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour. There is none besides me. The inclusion of the Gentiles then was always part of God's purpose.

God had declared this beforehand. While this might have taken them by surprise, God had foretold this beforehand, and when they look back in the scripture, they find confirming evidence. They lay four requirements upon the Gentiles.

They must abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things that have been strangled, and from blood. These issues also come up in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, and they seem to have different rationales.

His condemnation of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians is far more categorical in chapters 5 to 7. However, idol meat is treated very differently by Paul in his argument.

[13 : 50] The arguments on that front seem to involve giving up rights for the sake of others. The explanation that James gives here for the judgment seems to be driven in part by sensitivity to the Jews.

As there are faithful, observant Jews in every city, it is important not to cause needless scandal or offence. So it is important that Gentiles act in a way that, without adopting all the practices of the Torah, that they act in a way that is sensitive and mindful of the scruples of their Jewish neighbours.

This is one of the ways that they would express their love for each other in the body of Christ. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which we might be in danger of downplaying, distorting or disguising key elements of the Christian message in order to blend in with our neighbours and avoid persecution?

