

MORE SEED & BREAD, ISSUE NO. 328

The Acts 15 Council

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Acts 13 and 14 record the Apostle Paul's first apostolic journey to the area known as Galatia, which included the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. Paul follows-up his visit with an epistle to reiterate what he had taught. By the time Paul writes the epistle of Galatians, he needs to correct the converts concerning a very serious issue. False teachers had crept in and convinced many of them that if they were to be in right relationship with the God of Israel, they would need to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. This is clearly addressed in the epistle of Galatians, but is also vaguely referred to in Acts 14:19: **Then the Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there, and having persuaded the multitude, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. (NKJV used throughout.)**

At almost the same time the epistle of Galatians was written, the subject of circumcision surfaces in Acts 15. Here again we have some who are demanding that the believers in Christ be circumcised. The narrative begins in Acts 15:1 with some men from Judea claiming, **Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.** While the Jews in Galatia who were insisting on circumcision were no doubt unbelievers, these men are described as the church (Gk.-*ekklesia*), apostles (Gk.-*apostolos*), and elders (Gk.-*presbuteros*) in verse 4. In possession of our present Dispensation of Grace truth, it is easy for us to question why these prominent men held such a view. But based on the truth that these Law-keeping Jews had at this point, they were demanding something that had always been true. The problem was not one of stubbornness, arrogance, or difference of opinion over a doctrinal issue; it was an issue of whether or not they had the latest revelation from God concerning this matter. However, they can be faulted for exercising their authority outside of their jurisdiction since this issue concerned Paul's converts.

While there were a few exceptions, up to this point in Israel a right relationship with God apart from circumcision and the Law of Moses had never been possible. Throughout Israel's history, someone from among the nations, an outsider and not counted as the seed of Abraham, could become joined to Israel **only** through proselytism. This necessitated becoming a convert to Judaism, requiring them to become obligated to the Law of Moses, which meant that all males would become circumcised. This had always been the only way to enter into and maintain a relationship with the one and only true God, the God of Israel: Genesis 17:12-14, Exodus 12:43-49, Numbers 15:13-16.

During the Acts period, the Apostle Paul's commission included non-Israelites, but his primary objective was to reach the ancestral Israelites who had been separated from Israel, the temple, and Judaism. Acts 11:19 and Romans 1:16, 10:1. As Paul reached the nations (Gk.-*ethnos*) with the gospel of salvation and the kingdom of God, a new issue was surfacing: what to do with those from among the nations concerning the Law of Moses and circumcision? Without any new revelation from God, the logical first step would be to insist that anyone coming into relationship with the God of Israel become circumcised and begin keeping the Law. But there **had** been a new revelation, and it was logically given to Paul, the apostle to the nations.

After those of the nations were coming to faith in Christ, by revelation from God, the apostle Paul taught them **not** to become circumcised and that they were **not** obligated to keep the Law. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 explains that there were two separate companies of believers during the Acts Period. If you were called while circumcised, you were to stay circumcised (continue keeping the Law), if you were called while uncircumcised, you were to remain uncircumcised (don't begin keeping the Law). The problem in Galatia was that they didn't submit to the apostleship of Paul and his current revelation from God; they allowed bringers of "old news" to subvert them. It became necessary for Paul to focus most of the narrative of the epistle of Galatians on re-confirming this truth and correcting what is now false teaching concerning circumcision.

The situation was different in Acts 15; it was the Jerusalem *ekklesia* that were spreading this false teaching. So how was this issue resolved, how did God disseminate this new information that had been given to Paul but not yet to the Jerusalem *ekklesia*, apostles and elders? They meet to settle the matter. Acts 15:1-31. Since God commissioned Paul to be the apostle to the nations, this is his jurisdiction, so he and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem. It is stated in verse 2 that they **had no small dissension and dispute with them**. Verse 4 says, **They were received by the church (Gk.-*ekklesia*) and the apostles and the elders**. Once Paul and Barnabas are present, the discussion begins with some believing Pharisees, who restate their position in verse 5 that **it is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses**. Again, this is right in line with what had always been expected; Judaism had always been the conduit to the God of Israel. After the apostles and elders consider the matter, and after much disputing, Peter rises up to speak in verse 7 and recounts an event from Acts 10 when, **by my mouth the Gentiles (Gk.-*ethnos*, nations) should hear the word of the gospel and believe**. He goes on in verses 8-11 to explain how these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit and were saved by the grace of God just as they were. (Acts 10:44-46).

All the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles." (Acts 15:12). Then the apostle James, who is respected for his judgments concerning the Law, has the last word on this matter. He validates Peter's testimony by quoting from Amos 9: **Rebuild the tabernacle of David . . . I will set it up . . . So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name**. Acts 15:13-21. This prophecy is about rebuilding David's tabernacle (Gk.-*skene*) or center of activity, and concerns the work of God to replace the unfaithful ruling class in Israel with His *ekklesia*. Amos declares the reason for this: so that the rest of mankind, the nations, may seek the Lord. This is exactly what was beginning to happen in the Acts period.

Based on all that has been said, James declares in verse 19, **Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles (Gk.-*ethnos*, nations) who are turning to God**. In verse 20, James sets forth four elements of a decree that will go out to these believers. As a result of this council, they will be required to, **Abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood**. This might seem like a compromise, but it was necessary to create unity. All believers in the Acts period were now considered to be clean as far as the Law of Moses is concerned. Law-keeping believers could now have close fellowship and share meals with non Law-keeping believers.

Something very important has happened at this Jerusalem council that is often overlooked. Verse 22 says, **It pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church to send chosen men of their own**

company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. We might tend to think that a discussion like this would have included contentiousness and stubbornness, that it would have resulted in dissention or further dispute, but just the opposite occurs. The *ekklesia* and the elders defer to the judgment of the apostles. Furthermore, it pleased them to send some of their own to go with Paul and Barnabas to help spread the word. God resolves the issue of circumcision soon after “Gentiles” begin believing in the book of Acts. He corrects His leadership by enlightening them to the current truth concerning circumcision and the Law as it applies to the believers of the nations. He did this through His top men, the apostles.