

**Lesson 9**

**II. THE DISCUSSION OVER CIRCUMCISION AND THE LAW (Acts 15:1 - 36)**

**A. The Problem At Antioch (15:1 - 3)**

Churches in the New Testament were no different than churches today. There always was and always will be problems creeping up that must be dealt with. The problem at Antioch was not caused from within the church herself. There were men from Judea that came down and began teaching Gentile brethren that in order to be saved they had to be circumcised according to the law of Moses (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas disputed with them. It was decided that Paul, Barnabas and others make a trip to Jerusalem and confer with the apostles and elders of the church there about the problem. Some times when problems arise it is good to get help from others.

**B. Reception At Jerusalem (15:4 - 5)**

When they get to Jerusalem they are received by the apostles and elders and give a report about the work they have been able to accomplish for the Lord to this point. There were some of the Pharisees that had obeyed the gospel who began to say that the Gentiles must be circumcised and that they were to keep the law of Moses. Paul in Galatians refers to these Pharisees as “false brethren” (Galatians 2:4).

Some see this as the first creed being established. Some see this as the first Synod, while others look to this as divine approval of man-made boards to govern the affairs of the church in different locations. All this is, is one group of Christians asking another group for their thoughts and opinion about how a problem should be handled. Note at the church of Jerusalem the apostles were there. Today we have no apostles making up a group who would be called on for a decision, thus no authority can be found here for governing bodies over a group of churches. Each church is autonomous.

**C. The Question Debated and Resolved (15:6, 7)**

From Galatians 2:2-10 we learn that Paul put the details of the case before James, Peter and John in private. Upon reconvening an open forum as such commenced. The apostles wisely include the whole church. Apparently ample opportunity is afforded these former Pharisees the time to present their case.

**D. Peter's Presentation (15:7 - 11)**

It is appropriate that Peter be the one to speak first since he is the one that originally opened the door to the kingdom. At Caesarea Jesus gave him the keys to the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19). Peter uses these keys on the day of Pentecost to open the door of the kingdom to the Jews (Acts 2). Then once again the Holy Spirit instructed him to go to the house of the Roman, Cornelius and use the keys given him once again to open the door to the Gentiles (Acts 10, 11).

Peter argues that God: (1) knows the heart of men and he has chosen to save the Gentiles like he did the Jews. (2) He reminded them that God had the Holy Spirit fall on the Gentiles like he did the apostles from the beginning (Acts 10:45; 2:4). (3) Peter next points out that God has made no distinction between the Gentiles or the Jews (Acts 10:34,35) He further states that their hearts have been cleansed by “the faith” (1 Peter 1:22). (4) He then tells them that by putting a yoke on their necks that even the Jews couldn't bear was “testing God.” Their fathers had not been able to keep the law to its

fullness. How could they demand the same of the Gentiles? Paul in his Roman letter in chapter 3 verse 10 makes the same point by appealing to Psalm 53:1. In Galatians Paul compares the law to a yoke of bondage (Galatians 5:1). Jesus had similar problems with the Pharisees (Matthew 23:4). In contrast to this yoke, Christ's yoke is said to be easy and his burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Peter concludes his remarks by saying "*But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.*" (Acts 15:11).

#### **E. Barnabas' and Paul's Presentation (15:12)**

Paul and Barnabas next tell about the miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. These miracles confirmed that the Lord was working with them as he had promised to do with the 12 (Mark 16:19-20). The Hebrew writer states it this way. "For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?" (Hebrews 2:2-4).

#### **F. The Summary and Recommendation of James (15:13 - 19)**

James enjoyed a good reputation among the church at Jerusalem. He was the brother of the Lord. Christ had appeared to him after he had risen from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:6-7). James soon becomes one of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 21:17-25) and later wrote the book of James.

James knew the clincher for the Jews was to appeal to the Old Testament Scripture which he so ably does. He makes his appeal to Amos 9:11-12 which states "*On that day I will raise up The tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, And repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, And rebuild it as in the days of old; That they may possess the remnant of Edom, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,*" Says the LORD who does this thing." (Amos 9:11-12)

James' point is clear, when David's dynasty is reestablished and his descendant is set on David's throne, then a remnant of men, all the Gentiles will seek the Lord. Compare this to what Peter had said in Acts 2:30-36. James makes a recommendation not to trouble them with circumcision and keeping the law of Moses those Gentiles turning to the Lord.

#### **G. Four Restrictions (15:20 - 21)**

James makes the recommendation that four restrictions should be placed on the Gentiles. They should abstain from things offered to idols, from fornication, from things strangled and from blood. James shows by mentioning the fact that Moses is read in the synagogue every Sabbath that the Jews didn't need these same restrictions, they already knew to do.

#### **H. The Decision of the Whole the Letter Written: (15:22- 29)**

With James' speech concluded the brethren at Jerusalem seemed to have enough information to formulate a decision. They make a wise choice to send others along with Paul and Barnabas. They choose to send "Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas chief among the brethren" (Acts 15:22). This Judas is thought to be the brother of one Joseph Barsabbas who was one of the ones who had been a candidate to take Judas Iscariot's place (Acts 1:23). Silas is one who later joins Paul on his second Preaching Journey (Acts 15:40-41). In 2 Corinthians 1:19 Silas is referred to as Silvanus. These brethren would serve as unimpeachable witnesses to what had transpired in Jerusalem.

The letter written to the brethren in Antioch is thought to be the earliest of inspired literature of the New Covenant most of the time. The dating of this letter is set at 50-52 AD. Although the Gentile

brethren in Antioch had asked for this to be discussed by the apostles the letter is addressed to all of those who Paul and Barnabas had spoken to in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The letter first repudiates the teachings of the Judaizing teachers. They recognize the problem these men had caused in unsettling their souls and had literally turned them “upside down.” They commended Barnabas and Paul for the work they had done in risking their lives for the name of the Lord. They also introduced Judas and Silas who would vouch for the things reported to them by Barnabas and Paul. They next show that the things reported to them come from the Holy Spirit thus are inspired of God.

The letter calls for the Gentiles to observe four restrictions. They first of all wrote that they “abstain from things offered to idols.” In this culture when animals were offered to a pagan god, a small portion of the flesh was consumed in offering the sacrifice. The rest of the sacrifice was allowed to be eaten at the home of the worshipper or it could be sold in the meat market. Not only should Christians abstain from actual idol worship but they were also to stay away from eating meats that had been dedicated to such idols. In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 the Apostle Paul goes into great detail about such meat. He recognizes, as a knowledgeable Christian, idols were nothing. He also recognizes that not all men are at the same knowledge levels. Some being used to eating things sacrificed to idols would eat such meat and have their conscience weakened or defiled. Notice his warning in 1 Corinthians 8:9-10. Paul then draws his own conclusion to this in 1 Corinthians 8:13. In chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians verses 27-28 he deals with a specific case.

The next prohibition the letter stated was to abstain from blood. Some have thought that this meant bloodshed or homicide. The Gentiles had already acknowledged this as being wrong. The Gentiles, however, had no inhibitions about using blood of animals for food or drink. Often a part of an idolatrous ritual was the drinking of the blood as a part of a communion with a pagan god. Also most pagan people ate their meat without it being well drained, bled. Many today eat blood pudding, blood sausage, or even in ritual drink fresh blood. To the Jewish converts this was a barbaric practice they abhorred. Jewish law had taught them plainly on this subject. (Leviticus 7:27; 17:11-16). This restriction had also been given to Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:4). The Jehovah's Witnesses have tried to restrict their members from the taking of blood transfusions when undergoing surgery. Their official books equate the eating of blood and transfusions as being the same. Notice this quote from the book *Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse* written by David A. Reed, who himself was once a Jehovah's Witnesses elder. His comments related to Acts 15:28-29 “Jehovah's Witnesses use this verse, along with Old Testament dietary regulations, to support their organization's ban on blood transfusions. They see the above passage as a law from God, extending the Jewish dietary prohibition on blood to the Christian congregation for all time to come. ... But, even if it did, the Scripture is still talking about diet, not blood transfusions. To take a dietary regulation and stretch it to the point of denying a lifesaving medical procedure to a dying man is reminiscent of the Jewish Pharisees who were furious when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11). A letter published in the December 8, 1984 issue of The Concord Monitor (New Hampshire) tells of Jehovah's Witness elders interrogating a terminal cancer patient in a hospital and then disfellowshipping him on his deathbed because he accepted a blood transfusion.” Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse by David A. Reed, pgs. 88-89.

The last prohibition was concerning fornication. To our culture, it is an abominable practice. In that day it was an innocent pleasure and past time. Sexual purity was then the exception. Vice was considered a virtue. Seneca wrote, “Ritual fornication was a fundamental feature of numerous pagan cults, a notable example being that of the Temple of Aphrodite at Corinth with its 1,000 prostitutes.” *The Daily Study Bible Series The Acts of the Apostles* by William Barclay pp. 24-28. Notice what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 3:4-5.

**The Discussion Over Circumcision and the Law**  
**Lesson 9**

**I. ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS GIVING SCRIPTURE REFERENCES**

1. What was the thrust of the conflict in Acts 15? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. What would be involved in being “circumcised after the custom of the Jews?” \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. Where else is circumcision dealt with in the New Testament? \_\_\_\_\_  
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4. Why would the Pharisees be apt to oppose the apostles as stated in verse 5? \_\_\_\_\_  
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5. Since Peter spoke, why didn't those present let what Peter said stand since he was given the Keys to the Kingdom? \_\_\_\_\_  
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6. How many spoke in the settlement of the controversy? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Would all that was said in verse 20 apply today? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Where did the law for abstaining from blood originate? \_\_\_\_\_  
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9. Had Antioch been thoroughly evangelized before the controversy in this chapter? \_\_\_\_\_  
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10. How was the dispute settled between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark? \_\_\_\_\_

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**II. TRUE OR FALSE**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The four things the Gentiles were to abstain from were first made unlawful by the Mosaic Law.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Some of the Pharisees were in the church.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. God made a distinction Between the Jew and the Gentile.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Barnabas and Silas confirmed the brethren at Antioch.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Paul and Barnabas were in perfect agreement on all questions.

**III. RESEARCH**

Find the origin of the circumcision of the Jews. What were the laws governing it? \_\_\_\_

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**IV. THOUGHT QUESTION**

How is one Spiritually circumcised today? \_\_\_\_\_

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