

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Part Seven in a Series of Ten



7. The Jerusalem Summit

UNITY OVER CULTURE AND TRADITION

'caring for **PEOPLE** for **PEOPLE** matter to God' Romans 5:8

THE LAW AND THE TRADITIONS HAD KEPT THE NATION TOGETHER

WHAT SPARKED IT OFF!

1. Antioch! A gentile city. A sinful city. There people were turning to Jesus in multitudes but their behaviour was often heathenish. They sought the blessings of the Messiah but they didn't keep the law of Moses, the Jewish customs, nor did they submit to circumcision. What kind of gospel about the Messiah would this city promote (13:1-3)? Not an ennobling one! So certain men came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, telling the disciples that they had to submit to Jewish laws and circumcision in order to have life in Jesus Christ (15:1, 5, 22 and see Galatians 2:11-13). Those who taught this were Christians with a Pharisaical background (Acts 15:5).

THROUGH THE EYES OF A PHARISEE

2. A Pharisee was steeped in the law of Moses from childhood. He held the Old Testament scriptures to be from God. That wasn't all, he held that Moses and the prophets passed on oral traditions and that these were binding on Jewish believers. (We find traditions like this in the Mishnah.) His background and training made him a staunch defender of the Law and the traditions of the fathers. The Law and the traditions had kept the nation together throughout their long and often painful history when foreigners tried to blot them out. He and his people paid dearly to maintain their uniqueness. Then along came Jesus Christ claiming to be the Messiah.

HE HAD BECOME A SON OF THE LAW AT HIS BAR MITZVAH

3. Ogilvie is right, the turmoil in the heart of the Pharisee must have been tremendous but finally, Jesus won out. The Pharisee may have ruptured family ties in order to submit to the Christ. It was no cheap believing and no easy choice; but he made it! The good news was that the Messiah was at least Jewish. He was born under Law, had been circumcised, had become a son of the Law at his bar mitzvah and had said he hadn't come to destroy the law or the prophets. In fact, he said that anyone who made light of the least of the Law's commandments would be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-19).

And what is more, in the Old Testament, he always read that the Gentiles would be blessed in connection with the Jews (see Isaiah 2:24; Zechariah 8:23 and John 4:22). Now there were those preaching that even pagans could receive the blessings of the Messiah and that they could receive them independent of the Jews! The lives of these former pagans (like those in Antioch) left a lot to be desired!

How could the Pharisee dismiss all his heritage, his standards, his environment, his Old Testament scriptures, the example of his Master? How could the practices of the Gentile Christians be ignored when they ate blood, ignored meat distinctions, married close kin, sniggered at loose living and hung around idol temples?

THE RESPONSE TO THIS AT THE SUMMIT

4. However well-intentioned this kind of believer was; he was in **basic** error! However understandable his reaction, his teaching was **fundamentally** untrue, it subverted souls (15:24) and Paul wouldn't give an inch to such doctrine (see Galatians 2:4-5).

THEY NEEDED NO YOKE OF JEWISHNESS TO KEEP THEM IN LINE

5. Peter spoke and reminded the conference that God had already made himself clear on the matter (15:7-9). God had judged the uncircumcised Gentile to be on a par with orthodox Jews because he gave the Spirit to them and had them baptised into Christ before and without circumcision (Acts 10:44-48; 11:2-3,15-18). They needed no circumcision before receiving the Spirit and they needed none afterward. God knew their hearts (15:8) and they needed no yoke of Jewishness to keep them in line.

6. Then Barnabas and Paul spoke (15:12). They told how God had been blessing their work among uncircumcised Gentiles. The miracles they wrought by God's power were proof enough that God was approving of their ministry. A ministry which called Gentiles to faith in Jesus and repentance toward God.

7. Then James spoke (15:21). James, the brother of the Lord, is very much a Jew. He speaks to the concern of the Jews who feel that the blessing of the Gentiles apart from Judaism, in some way shunts the Jew into the side-lines. He reminds them of the words of the prophet (Amos 9:11-12) which spoke of the conversion of the Gentile as being the fruit of, the glory of the Jew. 'Look at it this way,' he seems to say, 'the harvest of Gentiles is your glory because it is through you God has brought them to salvation in Christ.'

GENTILES MUST NOT NEEDLESSLY OFFEND DEVOUT JEWS

8. But James does recognise an element in the contention of the Pharisee which needs attending to so he recommends a letter. The letter will urge Christian Gentiles to avoid needlessly offending the Jews who live among them (15:19-21, 29). He urges them to avoid certain things because 'Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath' (15:21).

How could an unbelieving but devout Jew be drawn to Jesus as the Messiah if Gentiles who claimed Jesus as Messiah needlessly offended their sensibilities? Wouldn't the non-Christian Jew be inclined to think: 'If Jesus were really the Jewish Messiah he couldn't tolerate this loose behaviour and these pagan eating habits'? James insists that the Gentiles be allowed freedom but he also urges the Gentiles of Antioch and elsewhere not to use their freedom to needlessly keep Jews from faith in Christ.

9. The issues expressly mentioned are: Food which is part of a sacrifice to idols, sexual immorality, meat which has been strangled and not drained of blood and blood itself (15:20,29). Sexual immorality would never be acceptable but the other things would become an issue when sensitive Jews were involved. James makes it clear that his letter to the church at Antioch expressed the mind of the Holy Spirit (15:28).

It is more an appeal than a demand, its very tone is one of concession and appeal. James was making it clear to the Gentiles that they believed and taught salvation by grace (15:11) but he also didn't want the Gentiles to use their liberty to destroy Jews! (Later, in Acts 21:17-26, James and others will urge Paul to submit to Jewish customs so as to avoid offence to believing Jews. Paul was glad to do this.)

MEATS OFFERED TO IDOLS SEEM SO REMOVED FROM OUR WORLD TODAY

IS THERE A WIDER MESSAGE?

10. Circumcision, meats offered to idols and the like seem so removed from our world today. Is this section irrelevant now? Not at all! Every time somebody's culture or custom becomes more central than Christ, this section speaks with great force! It isn't easy for us to dismiss our heritage, traditions (written or unwritten). The Pharisee is alive in all of us. (And maybe he's never more alive than when we think we have no traditions or when we think our traditions are really commands of God!)

11. Everybody draws a line somewhere. Both sides in the dispute in **Acts 15** insisted there was no salvation or life without Jesus Christ. Lines must be drawn somewhere! If we don't stand for something, we fall for everything – *isn't that what they say?!* It's true! **But every time somebody draws a line at a place where God hasn't drawn it, saying that those on the other side of it aren't saved, this section insists on getting a hearing!** The Pharisee flourishes again. And Paul, James and the others oppose it again.

12. He who said **He** was the Truth has no love for error. It is part of our submission to him as Lord to seek biblical truth and gladly embrace it. Unity at any price breeds maggots but not every error is soul-destroying. And we don't have to understand **every** truth in order to have life in Christ. **Every time somebody draws up a list of essentials which cannot be clearly drawn from the Word of the Lord God, Acts 15 demands a new hearing!**

BUT NOT EVERY ERROR IS SOUL DESTROYING

13. We learn, in connection with all this, that **love surrenders rights and considers the feelings of others.** James, Paul and others opposed this heresy without flinching but when it came to removing stumbling blocks, they all adhered to the Jewish law so as not to offend Jews (*see Acts 21:17-26*). In **16:1-3** Paul urged young Timothy to be circumcised to make their work among Jews easier.

14. We learn something else: **It's easier to hold to theories of unity than it is to consistently practice unity.** Unity isn't just a matter of doctrinal agreement, it's a spirit, a pursuit. In **15:39** Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and **'parted asunder'**. It doesn't matter who was to blame. It doesn't matter that both of them may have made good points. It doesn't even matter that God used the split for good (**15:39,41**). *Could these two great men, who fought for 'grace' up at Jerusalem not have worked this out?* Paul's later words were needed (**Ephesians 4:1**): **'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace!'**

THE JERUSALEM SUMMIT

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED IN PART SEVEN

- A right relationship with God is not based on our moral performance but on grace which comes through faith in Jesus Christ.
- When culture or tradition becomes more central than Christ, when lists are drawn up as essential to fellowship with Christ that can't be clearly drawn from God's word, heresy is being born and shaped.
- Sometimes love will not allow us to exercise our rights. Love will sometimes lead us to forfeit our freedom for the sake of others.
 - Unity is more than doctrinal agreement.

EVALUATION SHEET

Please go ahead and fill in the evaluation sheet attached.

CONTACT DETAILS

Email: info@the-scriptures.co.uk

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EVALUATION SHEET

Acts LESSON 7

(Please type or write your answers within the lines provided)

Name:

Home Address or Email address:

TRUE OR FALSE? (If the statement is true write T, if false write F.)

- 1. If you're a lover you don't draw lines anywhere! _____
- 2. The Spirit commanded people to be baptised into Christ even though they were not circumcised! _____
- 3. If God loves me it means I must always be allowed to exercise my freedom! _____
- 4. Paul and Barnabas always settled their differences in a gracious manner! _____
- 5. Unity must be maintained between people no matter what the cost! _____
- 6. The way God worked miraculously in Paul and Barnabas as they worked with uncircumcised Gentiles showed he approved of that ministry! _____
- 7. The Pharisees' viewpoint in Acts 15 is difficult to appreciate! _____
- 8. The letter sent by Jerusalem to Antioch was just their own unsupported opinion! _____
- 9. Adding only one condition to salvation which God hasn't given is really not serious! _____
- 10. Paul acted inconsistently in circumcising Timothy! _____

COMPLETE THIS STATEMENT: (As found in the booklet.)

- 1. Unity at any price _____

- 2. The Law and the traditions had kept _____

- 3. How could the Pharisee dismiss _____

- 4. If we don't stand for something _____

- 5. Because he gave the Spirit to them _____

- 6. It was no cheap believing _____

NAME FOUR LEADING SPEAKERS AT THE SUMMIT

- 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____

PUT A TICK NEXT TO THE SCRIPTURES WHEN YOU'VE READ THEM:

1. Acts 15:1-29 _____ 2. Acts 15:36-41 _____ 3. Acts 16:1-3 _____

4. Acts 21:17-26 _____ 5. Galatians 2:11-13 _____ 6. Ephesians 4:1 _____

SENDING YOUR ANSWERS

Once we have received your evaluation sheet we will send you the next study in this series.

Please return your completed evaluation sheet as an email attachment to info@the-scriptures.co.uk