

Study 22: Acts chapter 15

Introduction

The Jews in Jerusalem have heard about the First Mission to the Gentiles. It is now time to solve once and for all the issue of whether it is necessary to be a Jew if you want to be a christian. Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to discuss the issues with the Apostles and Elders.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Who came to Antioch?

What was Paul and Barnabas reaction?

What was the reception like at Jerusalem?

What was the purpose of the meeting in Jerusalem?

What did the apostles and elders conclude concerning the Gentiles?

What happened when they got back to Antioch?

The beginning of the Second Journey

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How does the example that we have from Acts 15 give us a pattern for resolving issues in the church today? What should we do?*
- *There are several examples of conflict resolution in this passage. What are they, and how were they resolved?*

Read chapter 16 in preparation for next week

Notes for study 22: Acts chapter 15

Introduction

The Jews in Jerusalem had heard about the First Mission to the Gentiles. It was time to solve once and for all the issue of whether it is necessary to be a Jew if you want to be a christian. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss the issues with the Apostles and Elders.

This was a central and repetitive issue in the early church, and one that permeates most books of the New Testament. The continuing missionary efforts that were to take place in spreading the gospel to the rest of the Gentile world could hardly have continued effectively without having the issue resolved. More than just being “an issue”, it really set Paul against the other apostles. In this study we will see that it was an attempt to divide the church from the inside by Jews who had failed to stop it from the outside.

To continue the work of preaching the gospel without resolving the issue was inconceivable.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

The Jerusalem Conference is placed at 51 AD, fourteen years after Paul’s escape from Aretas (Gal 2:1). His escape occurred in AD 37 (Acts 9:23-25). The Second Missionary Journey is placed soon after this time – beginning in AD 51, or perhaps 52 AD.

Content: *What are the major events?*

The Judaisers come to Antioch, the conference at Jerusalem, the letter back to Antioch, the split between Paul and Barnabas, the beginning of the second journey.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Barnabas, Titus, Silas, Peter, James the Lord’s brother.

Body of the Study

Who came to Antioch?

The people that came down to Antioch from Jerusalem were Jews. Not surprisingly, they were Pharisees (15:5), and would have been eager to ensure that every last “*jot and tittle*” of the Law was being kept. They would also have been concerned to find that the new christians were associating with Gentiles, and “corrupting themselves”. Their solution to the problem was to ensure that the christians became Jews first – requiring them to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

These “Judaisers” had come down from Jerusalem, purporting to have come with the full authority of the Apostles, but (as we will see later in this study), that was not the case. This clearly put Paul and Barnabas at odds with these brethren, as they had not done this on their missionary journey.

What was Paul and Barnabas reaction?

As an apostle, Paul taught with God’s authority. However this appeared to put Paul in a position that was different than the rest of the apostles. Paul’s teaching should have accepted by the brethren because of his authority and position. The fact that it was not suggests two things:

- Firstly that those from Jerusalem were not backing down on claiming to be teaching what the 11 other apostles were teaching. This would put Paul clearly against the majority, and hence the difficulty to determine who (and more importantly, *what*) was right.
- Secondly, it reinforced that Paul was not one of the original apostles (he was not a *real* apostle, like the others – so “*if it’s Paul vs the others, then we’re with the others*”).

Paul and Barnabas “...had no small dissension and dispute with them...” (15:2 NKJV). The claims were clearly contrary to Paul and Barnabas’ teaching and practice. The way to resolve the issue was to go to Jerusalem – to the apostles and the elders – and resolve the problem.

On their way, “...they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles...” (15:3 NKJV). This was Paul’s third visit to Jerusalem since his conversion – the first in 9:26, and the second in 11:30. In the Galatian letter, Paul makes no mention of the second visit, but does refer to this one.

What was the reception like at Jerusalem?

Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the church, by the apostles, and by the elders. Paul tells us that Peter and John were there, as also was James the Lord’s brother (Gal 2:9). Why the elders had any jurisdiction over the issue is an interesting question. The apostles had authority over the things of the gospel. However it would seem that the Judaisers were making claims about not only what the apostles were teaching, but also about the practices of the Jerusalem church. The elders had jurisdiction and authority over that church, even in the presence of the apostles who had authority over the doctrine.

Some of the Jewish Christians who were members of the sect of the Pharisees reacted in a negative way towards Paul. He describes this event in the Galatian letter:

Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. ² I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. ³ Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴ This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. ⁵ We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (Gal 2:1-5 NIV)

Note how he describes the Judaisers as “*false brethren*” who had “*infiltrated the ranks*”. It would seem that they had first tried to destroy the church from the outside, and were not successful, so then they tried to destroy it from the inside – equally unsuccessfully.

After the first meeting concluded, “...the apostles and the elders came together to consider the matter...” (15:6NKJV)

What was the purpose of the meeting in Jerusalem?

The issue between the Jews and the Gentiles had arisen on several previous occasions. To put the issue succinctly, it is “*Christianity is OK, but it is really just another sect of the Jews. Therefore if you are going to become a Christian, you firstly have to keep the Law of Moses*” The particular and specific implications of this is whether or not circumcision should be practiced by those becoming Christians. Paul discusses the results of the meeting with the apostles and elders again in the Galatian letter:

As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance--those men added nothing to my message. ⁷ On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. ⁸ For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. ⁹ James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰ All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal 2:6-10 NIV)

The outcome of the meeting was clear, and the apostles agreed with Paul’s position. There should have been no doubt, as the Holy Spirit would not guide one apostle in one direction and the other apostles in the opposite direction! However the meeting was important, not for the sake of the apostles who knew that their teaching came from God, but for those who had contact with them – there was demonstrated absolute agreement and unity between them.

Peter finally concluded the meeting, after much discussion. He had been the first to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He proclaimed that the Gentiles were demonstrated to be acceptable to God (without circumcision) when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them.

Notice how Peter describes the Law of Moses as “...*a yoke around the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear...*” (15:10 NKJV). The fathers were unable to keep the Law – and consequently they were found to be sinners – and the apostles themselves were likewise unable to keep the Law. So why did people ever want to go back and encompass it again? They had been made free of the Law by the blood of Christ! What more could they want!

After Peter had spoken, Barnabas and Paul spoke concerning their work amongst the Gentiles, describing how God had demonstrated His approval to their work by working miracles amongst the Gentiles.

James then summarised the position. The Greek tense is emphatic. He was speaking as the chair or convenor of the meeting, (and this may be the reason that his name is listed first in Gal 2):

- The evidence is that God has declared His position through the conversion of the Gentiles with Peter.
- The Old Testament prophets prophesied that the Gentiles would be admitted to God’s family (Amos 9:11-12). [Some other prophets (not quoted by James) also speak of this: Is 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4. Paul also makes a list in Rom 15:9-11].
- This was part of the eternal wisdom of God.
- We should therefore accept and not trouble (harass) the Gentiles who are turning to God.

James urged that the apostles write to the Gentiles, so that there was no doubt about the outcome of the meeting, nor of the unity of position between the apostles. All of the apostles, the elders, and the whole church agreed with this. Further, they sent representatives from the church in Jerusalem back to Antioch, lest Paul and Barnabas had returned having falsely claimed a victory.

What did the apostles and elders conclude concerning the Gentiles?

The apostles and elders concluded that they should write to the Gentiles concerning the controversy over Jewish law. James concluded “...*that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood...*” (15:20 NKJV). This was a general letter written to the Gentile brethren everywhere (including us!!!), and to the brethren in Antioch in particular. The essence of the letter is:

- The Judaisers had said that they had authority from the brethren in Jerusalem. This was absolutely not the case.
- We are all absolutely united in our position regarding this.
- We have absolute faith in Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of teaching the gospel to the Gentiles.
- We have sent some of our own brethren with them, lest there be any uncertainty about what they and we are teaching.
- We want to lay no burden upon you (meaning the keeping of the Law of Moses), other than those things which are absolutely necessary.
- We do say that you must abstain from some things, as Moses outlined in the Law, those being:
 - The things offered to idols,
 - The blood of things that are strangled,
 - From sexual immorality.

What happened when they got back to Antioch?

Once again, the whole congregation was gathered together to hear the report of the meeting. The journey was around 500 km (300 miles) each way, and would have probably taken around a week each way. Allowing for probably around a week in Jerusalem (to make the most of the opportunity and not just come and then go straight after the meeting), it is likely that they had been away from Antioch for around three weeks.

The letter was delivered, and then Silas and Judas exhorted the brethren “...*because they were prophets...*” (15:32). They had miraculous gifts (given by the laying on of the apostle’s hands), and used them to speak by inspiration on this occasion.

Silas and Judas “...*stayed for a time...*” (15:33) and then Judas went back to Jerusalem. We are not told how long, but Luke describes it as the “*long time*” that he has expressed on several other occasions. Perhaps it was a few weeks that they were there, somewhat like the time that Paul, Barnabas, and Titus had spent in Jerusalem. Silas decided to stay in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

It is most likely that it was during this time in Antioch, that Peter came to visit, and was corrected by Paul for his inconsistency (Gal 2:11-14). This was the very thing that had just been resolved at the Jerusalem meeting. It is no wonder that Paul’s rebuke was so strong – not only was Peter wrong, but it followed so soon after the issue had been resolved, and was in direct contradiction of the decree.

The beginning of the Second Journey

Paul took the lead to begin of the second journey, and again we see the evangelist’s concern for the work that he had begun. Barnabas very strongly wanted to take John Mark with them, however Paul was absolutely against it, and “...*insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work...*” (15:38 NKJV).

Paul and Barnabas resolved this issue by agreeing to go in different directions. Barnabas went back to Cyprus with John Mark – Barnabas’ own country, and the part of the trip that Mark had undertaken with he and Paul. Paul headed off in a somewhat different direction – overland to his home Tarsus, and then through the Cilician Gates to pick up the former path at Derbe.

Regardless of the difference between them, and their inability to continue to work together, they did not allow the work of the Lord to suffer. Further, they all held the others in deep regard, and did not engage in separation or “name calling” over the issue.

Paul’s second missionary journey began as he commenced the overland journey through Syria and Cilicia. Churches had already been established there, but we are not told how that came about.

To go to next study, click here
[Acts Study 23 - Circumcision.doc](#)