



SERMON NOTES

US N^o. 113

Date: August 25th, 2013

Title: When there's division in the Church

#21 in the Series on the Acts of the Apostles

1. The Church in Antioch

a. Back story

i. Paul, Barnabas et al

ii. Timeline

1. The 1st missionary voyage 41-45 AD;
2. Time in Antioch 45-51 AD;
3. The letter to the Galatians 46 AD;
4. The 2nd missionary voyage 51-54 AD

b. Judaizers come from Jerusalem. Acts 15 serves as a vital interlude in the story. This is the reflex question that must come, once the Jews & Gentiles are in the same group, how does it all fit together? The “*new perspective*” of Paul of justification by faith is also about bringing the Jews and Gentiles together; to join the human race together in a new way. Caesar would have loved to unite the world the way Jesus has.

i. The issue: Jews in Christianity did not see themselves as converts, whereas the Gentiles did, but not a conversion to Judaism. How do you become a convert to the Jewish Messiah without becoming Jewish? Jews were consequently offended because there were now Gentiles converts showing up at the synagogues and wanting to participate, but they knew nothing about the Sabbath, ceremonial cleansing, or any of the other traditions (613 commandments + commentary) – it was messy. Therefore, the logical conclusion was for the Gentiles to become Jews represented by circumcision (Acts 15:1).

1. “*Modern*” move to legalism and a church for the church, rather than the unchurched.
2. “*It was one thing to accept the occasional God-fearer into the church, someone already in sympathy with Jewish ways; it was quite another to welcome large numbers of Gentiles who had no regard for the law and no intention of keeping it.*” (Williams)

ii. These men felt compelled to persuade other Christians to their beliefs, but they taught outside of the church’s leadership authority. By their teaching, these certain men from Judea made a negative judgment on all of Paul and Barnabas’ missionary endeavors; essentially saying that Paul and Barnabas were all wrong in doing this. They taught openly causing dissension; divided the Church into factions.

1. They were not content to discuss with current leaders and come to an understanding, rather their teaching caused dissension.
2. Paul preached in Antioch in Pisidia, “*And by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.*” (cf. Acts 13:39). Paul taught a man could only be right with God on the basis of what Jesus had done.

iii. Paul wrote about these events in his letter to the Galatians.

1. Gal. 2:1-5, *"Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. And this occurred because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."*

c. Paul and Barnabas earnestly contend with them.

- i. How to address to conflict; this was an issue that went to the core of Christianity, and it had to be resolved. They showed the hearts of true shepherds: to confront and dispute with those who insist on promoting false doctrines in the church.
- ii. These two who saw God work so powerfully through the Gentiles would not abandon that work easily.

d. It appears that the church as a whole sends Paul & Barnabas because this had to be resolved.

- i. Satan took as much advantage in this situation:
 1. Either a false doctrine of righteousness by works would succeed or,
 2. a costly, bitter doctrinal war could completely split and sour the church.

2. The Jerusalem Council

a. The church in Jerusalem welcomes Paul & Barnabas

b. The apostles and elders meet to discuss this immense issue: Are Christians made right with God by faith alone, or is it a *combination* of faith and obedience of the Law of Moses?

i. The debate.

1. Many of those of the opposition were Christians who had been Pharisees, who were well known for their high regard for the law, and their desire to obey the law in the smallest details. For a Pharisee to truly convert would take more than a mere acknowledgment that Jesus was Messiah; he would have to forsake his attempts to justify himself by the keeping of the law and accept the work of Jesus as the sole basis of his justification.

a. In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas did not allow the pagans to merely add Jesus to their pantheon of Roman gods. They commanded that they had to turn from their vain gods to the true God (*cf. Acts 14:14-15*). These Pharisees had to do the same thing: turn from *their* efforts to earn their way before God by keeping the law, and look to Jesus. You can't just add Jesus to your belief system.

2. These former Pharisees taught two things, that Gentile converts must:

- a. be *initiated* into Judaism through circumcision.
- b. *live under* the law of Moses if they were to be right with God.

ii. Peter speaks of his experience with Cornelius; Peter began this work among the Gentiles.

1. Peter makes an important observation, “...by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith...” (cf. Acts 15:8-9) The heart is purified by faith alone.
2. Peter answers another objection by observing that the law was a yoke which neither their fathers nor we are to bear.
 - a. The Judaizers were making a critical mistake; they looked at Israel’s history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they had carefully and truthfully considered Israel’s failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to also put Gentiles under the law.
3. Peter also insisted there is only one way of salvation and that the Jews would be saved in the same manner as the Gentiles: through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. “*Peter, the Jew, would normally have said it the other way around. He would have said, ‘We believe that they can be saved by grace through faith, just like us.’ That is, they can be like us.*” (Boice)
- iii. Paul & Barnabas report of their experiences, confirming Peter’s point. Essentially they said, “God has accepted the Gentiles, should not we as well?”
- iv. James the Just, the brother of Jesus, speaks to the issue, supporting what Peter and Paul had said.
 1. “*Interestingly enough, James was the chairman of the council, not Peter.*” (Boice)
 2. James insists that God had a people among the Gentiles which would amaze most religious Jews of that time. “*Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.*” (cf. Acts 15:14) The Greek word for Gentiles, it could also be translated *nations*, is “*ethne*,” while the Greek word for people in this passage is “*laos*.” The Jews considered themselves a “*laos*” of God, and never among the “*ethne*.” For them “*ethne*” and “*laos*” were two contrasting words, so it was a challenge for them to hear that God at the first visited the Gentiles (*ethne*) to take out of them a people (*laos*). “*The paradox inherent in the contrast between Gentiles (or nations) and people is striking, since the latter term was often used of the Jews as the people of God in contrast to the Gentiles. Now it is being urged that God’s people includes the Gentiles.*” (Marshall)
 3. James judged this new work of God by the way any work of God should be judged, by the Word of God. In the Amos 9:11-12 passage, it says that salvation will come to the Gentiles demonstrating that what God did among the Gentiles had a Biblical foundation.
 - a. Amos is saying that God is calling for judgment because Israel is just like the Ethiopians. I am re-building the dwelling of David so that everyone, even the Gentile, will call on My name. Deep in the heart of Old Testament prophecy is that when God does for Israel what He will do for Israel, the Gentiles will come in on the act.
- v. An old-time truth and a plausible doctrine, “*had not Jehovah Himself had imposed it on the fathers?*” However, it was a dangerous error and a direct challenge to the sufficiency of

Christ's sacrifice and grace. It that was exploded as a heresy but continues on in the doctrines of

1. Baptismal regeneration (baptism essential to regeneration)
2. Sacramental grace (Eucharist essential to salvation and sanctification)

- c. The decision voiced by James.
 - i. If the decision was that one did not have to be Jewish to be a Christian, it must also be said clearly that one did not need to forsake the Law of Moses to be a Christian.
 - ii. The Christians Pharisees say that God made promises to Abraham, God gave laws to Moses so that the people of Abraham could be kept in line, thus if you want to be part of Abraham's family, you must keep Moses' laws. The Church could have said that, "*no, it's not about Abraham, Moses or anything Jewish, Jesus won it for us by His death, let's move on.*" But they don't, they keep the traditions.
- d. The council drafts a letter; tell the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't.
 - i. *"To the brethren who are Gentiles..."*
 - ii. The abstentions.
 1. Three of the abstentions had to do with the eating habits of Gentile Christians. And though they were not bound under the Law of Moses, they were bound under the Law of Love which told them, *"Don't unnecessarily antagonize your Jewish neighbors, both in and out of the church."* *"All four of the requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17 and 18, and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals."* (Stott)
 - a. from things offered to idols,
 - b. from blood,
 - c. from things strangled
 2. From sexual immorality; sex goes right to heart of human personality and to the heart of the nature of humanity as God's image bearers. Resurrection and faithfulness to one partner were shocking to the ancient world. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. There is no such thing as casual sex.
 - iii. Much credit goes to the opposition who allowed themselves to be convinced by the evidence from the Scriptures and by the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. They all agreed. A teachable spirit is a precious thing.
 - iv. The letter gives the express decision of the Jerusalem council, that Gentiles should consider themselves under no obligation to the rituals of Judaism, except the sensitivity which love demands, so as to preserve the fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers. The issue is settled here in the infancy of Christianity and for all time: we are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, not by any conformity to the law, and such obedience comes as a result of true faith, after the issue of salvation has been settled.
- e. The delegation of Judas and Silas go to Antioch to put a personal face on the letter.

- f. Antioch rejoices over the encouragement.
- 3. The dispute over John Mark intensifies an already shaken trust from when Barnabas was led astray by the people led by James. Gal. 2:11-14, *"Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?'"*
 - a. Paul proposes to revisit and encourage the churches they planted.
 - i. Paul had the heart of both an obstetrician (bringing people into the body of Christ) and a pediatrician (growing people up in the body of Christ).
 - b. Barnabas proposes John Mark, Paul hotly disagrees
 - c. Paul and Barnabas split.
 - i. Barnabas goes to Cyprus with John Mark
 - 1. Since Barnabas was John Mark's cousin (*cf. Col. 4:10*), and because Barnabas had such an encouraging, accepting character (*cf. Acts 4:36, 9:26-27*), it is easy to see why he would be more understanding towards John Mark.
 - ii. Paul goes with Silas.
 - 1. Silas (also Silvanus) became an important part of Paul's team in doing the work of the ministry. Silas was recognized as one of the *"leading men among the brethren..."* (*cf. Acts 15:22*)
 - iii. There is no doubt God used this division, but this can never be used as an excuse for fleshly division. Certainly God can redeem good out of evil, yet we are all held accountable for the evil we do, even if God ends up bringing good out of the evil. Wherever there is sharp contention, *someone* is wrong, and usually there is wrong on both sides.
 - d. Later, Paul came to minister with John Mark and to value his contributions to the work of God. (*cf. Col. 4:10; Philemon 4:24; 2 Tim. 4:11*) We don't know who changed but God probably had a work to do in both of them.
- 4. Take aways
 - a. We must deal directly with heretics and heresies:
 - i. convince by reasoning (*cf. Titus 3:10*),
 - ii. bring it before the Church (*cf. Mt. 28:17*),
 - iii. eventually to be separated from them (*cf. 1 Tim. 6:5, 2 Jn. 10*)
 - b. Saved and sanctified by faith in Christ alone; beware of legalism.
 - c. A church for the unchurched.
 - d. Live by the law of love.
 - e. The division of between Paul and Barnabas cannot be used as an excuse.