



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Acts of the Apostles

Chapter 15

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Introduction

In This Chapter We Will Study:

- How the early church dealt with the issue of circumcision and the Law of Moses
- The Jerusalem Council & The Jerusalem Decree
- The conflict between St. Paul and St. Barnabas and how it did not keep them from serving the Lord

Conflict over Circumcision (15:1-5)



- Individuals from Judea who appear to have been converts to Christianity; but, supposing that the Christian religion was intended to perfect the Mosaic, and not to supersede it, they taught and insisted on the necessity of circumcision
- These men were opposed by St. Paul and St. Barnabas, but the fact that they were from Jerusalem, and probably contended that they had the authority of the apostles, gave them an influence

Conflict over Circumcision (15:1-5)



- The matter should be referred to the apostles at Jerusalem
- The reason for this may have been:
 - (1) That Jerusalem would be regarded by them as the source of authority in the Christian church
 - (2) Those who came from Judea would not be likely to acknowledge the authority of St. Paul as an apostle
 - (3) They might have had a very confident expectation that the decision there would be in their favor

Conflict over Circumcision (15:1-5)



- A special escort of church members attended them on their journey
- It was mark of honor. See Acts 20:38; 21:5
- They went by the land route, visiting the churches of Phoenicia and Samaria, causing great joy by their account of so great success among the Gentiles, Acts 11:19; 27:12
- They had a cordial reception and a warm greeting by the apostles
- St. Paul and St. Barnabas report what God had done with them
- Pharisees who, like St. Paul had become Christians, but unlike him had retained their Jewish bigotry demanded circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- A meeting of the apostles and the elders of Jerusalem was called
- This was the first council ever held in the Christian Church
- One side insisted that the Gentiles must keep the law of Moses, the other that they were not under the Mosaic covenant at all
- St. Peter arose to rehearse his own experiences which had given him new light and took place nine or ten years before
- He reminds them how God chose him to preach the gospel to Gentiles
- God himself, in the calling of the Gentiles who are uncircumcised, taught that our salvation consists in faith, without the worship appointed by the Law

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- God acknowledged the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit
- He made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, purifying their hearts by faith
- God bore a testimony, and showed His delight in the whole of this affair, by bestowing upon them not only the regenerating and sanctifying grace of the Spirit; but his extraordinary gifts, such as speaking with divers tongues, even in like manner as these were bestowed on the apostles themselves, on the day of Pentecost, though they were uncircumcised persons
- St. Peter's goal is to show, that circumcision was not necessary to salvation

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- The Jews held that Gentiles were unclean, but Peter declared that faith, the true circumcision, that of the heart, not of the body, purified them into fitness for the ordinances of Christ
- Observe St. Peter's doctrine: not circumcision of the flesh, but the faith that leads to obedience cleanses from uncleanness
- He offers his conclusion: Why test God by demanding that Gentiles do what Jews could not?
- The law of Moses was a yoke that neither our fathers nor we were able to bear
- So strict in its requirements that none could keep it perfectly

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- Through the grace of the Lord Jesus both will be saved in the same way
- This is the hope of both Jew and Gentile, not obedience to the ceremonials of Moses
- After St. Peter's reminder of his work among the Gentiles, St. Paul and St. Barnabas were probably called on to show whether their work, like St. Peter's, showed that God was with them
- They therefore gave some account of the miracles that God had wrought by their hands, thereby attesting the Divine favor
- The multitude remain silent and listen

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- St. James was the acknowledged head of the church at Jerusalem, and here, as president of the assembly, speaks last, winding up the debate
- He confirms the calling of the Gentiles out of the word of God, in this agreeing with Peter, providing OT prophecy (Amos 9:11-12)
- It was a very material point with them, as Jews, to inquire whether this was in accordance with the predictions of the Scriptures

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- These two verses, 16th and 17th, are quoted from Amos 9:11-12
- The point of the passage lies in the predicted purpose of God, under the new economy, that "the heathen" or "Gentiles" should be "called by His name," or have "His name called upon them." By the "building again of the fallen tabernacle of David," or restoring its decayed splendor, is meant that only and glorious recovery which it was to experience under David's "son and Lord

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- This calling of the Gentiles is a part of the Divine plan known to God from the beginning
- Offering his judgment, St. James suggested that Gentiles who turn to God not be troubled
- There is an authority here that does not appear in the speech of St. Peter; and this authority was felt and bowed to by all the council; and the decree proposed by St. James adopted
- Suggesting that a letter be written
- Four items are mentioned, which are all embraced in the apostolic letter as things forbidden

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- They were four common customs of the Gentile world, and matters on which there should be a clear understanding
- To abstain from things polluted by idols
- The heathen were accustomed to give away or sell portions of such animals
- From such food St. James would enjoin the Gentile converts to abstain, lest it should seem to the Jews that they were not entirely weaned from idolatry
- Sexual immorality: Chastity was the exception instead of the rule among Gentiles at this period

The Jerusalem Council (15:6-21)



- From things strangled: Because in strangling the blood was retained in the flesh
- From blood: The use of blood was prohibited by the Mosaic law (Lev 17:14; Deut 12:16,23), and for wise reasons this prohibition was extended to Gentiles
- Seeing that Moses has been read every Sabbath in the synagogues for generations
- St. James thought that a letter to the converted Gentiles would be sufficient, as the converted Jews had already ample instruction on these points

The Jerusalem Decree (15:22-29)



- All agreed in the judgment of St. James
- The church is not before mentioned as taking part
- They decided to send Judas and Silas to Antioch along with St. Paul and St. Barnabas
- Judas surnamed Barsabas: Little is known of him
- Silas: Well known after this as the companion of St. Paul, Acts 16:19,25,29; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Cor 1:19
- A letter was to be sent to Gentile Christians
- There was no occasion to send such a letter to the brethren which were of the Jews, because that law which had been so long read in their synagogues taught them all those things; and therefore the epistle is sent exclusively to the Gentiles

The Jerusalem Decree (15:22-29)



- That the troublemakers had not been sent by them
- They went without authority
- By thus saying that they had not given them a command to teach these things, they practically assured the Gentile converts that they did not approve of the course which those who went from Judea had taken
- It seemed good to them to send men
- St. Barnabas and St. Paul are beloved
- The high praise is given to St. Paul and St. Barnabas
- It is the tribute of the church at Jerusalem to the two men sent from the church at Antioch

The Jerusalem Decree (15:22-29)



- Judas and Silas will offer confirmation by word of mouth
- These were proofs that the testimony of St. Paul and St. Barnabas was true; and that the letter was not forged, as they could witness the same things which the letter contained
- They made mention of the Holy Spirit, so that it may not seem to be any man's work
- They were necessary, howsoever burthensome they might appear; and necessary, not only for the time, place, or occasion; but for all times, all places, and all occasions
- The Gentile brethren will do well if they keep themselves from these things

Continuing Ministry in Syria (15:30-35)



- St. Paul and St. Barnabas return to Antioch, the multitude gather together
- The letter is read, the people rejoice over its encouragement
- Judas and Silas being teachers in the Church
- Exhorted the brethren - To abide steadily attached to God, and to each other, in peace, love, and unity
- And confirmed them in the blessed truth they had already received

Continuing Ministry in Syria (15:30-35)



- After a while, Judas is sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles
- It seems good for Silas to remain in Antioch
- St. Paul and St. Barnabas remain also, teaching and preaching, assisted by many other laborers who either came along with them from Jerusalem, when they brought the letter from thence, or were here before; who came hither upon the persecution raised at the death of Stephen, Acts 11:19
- How long St. Paul and St. Barnabas stayed is unknown

Division over John Mark (15:36-41)



- After teaching and preaching in Antioch for some days, St. Paul wants to visit the brethren where they preached during the first missionary journey
- This heavenly man projected a journey to Cyprus, Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lycaonia, Salamis, Paphos, Perga, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Antioch in Pisidia, and elsewhere; for in all these places he had preached and founded Churches in the preceding year
- He saw it was necessary to water the seed he had planted; for these were young converts, surrounded with impiety, opposition, and superstition, and had few advantages among themselves.

Division over John Mark (15:36-41)



- St. Barnabas is determined to take with them John Mark
- John Mark was his sister's son; and natural affection might have led him to the partiality here mentioned
- St. Paul is insistent that John should not go since he left them in Pamphylia
- The contention became so sharp they parted from one another
- They determined to work separately
- God uses the faults of his servants to the profit and building of the Church

Division over John Mark (15:36-41)



- St. Barnabas takes Mark and sails to Cyprus
- St. Paul chooses Silas, commended by the brethren to the grace of God,
- Evidently a meeting of the church was held to commend them to God
- They passed through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches
- These were countries lying near to each other, which St. Paul, in company with Barnabas, had before visited



Conclusion

- Why was circumcision an issue?
- Where did the council meet to determine whether circumcision was necessary?
- What practical steps were taken by the church to sort out the disagreements over circumcision?
- How did James support his view?



Conclusion

- Who spoke these words during the Council in Jerusalem in Acts chapter fifteen: “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood?”
 - a. St. James
 - b. St. Paul
 - c. St. Peter
- What was the reaction to St. James' suggestions?



Conclusion

- The council in Jerusalem sent two leading men along with St. Paul and St. Barnabas back to Antioch with their decision on circumcision. Name one of the two
- What are key points in that letter?
- Why does St. Paul disagree with St. Barnabas?
- When the contention became strong between them what did they do?
- What made the biggest impact on you?