

## Acts 15 - Gentiles: Circumcision and the Law of Moses

Soon after their return, the first major error and false doctrine began to be preached in Antioch. Although the doctrine originated in Jerusalem, it was brought to Antioch and was already being preached there when Paul and Barnabas became aware of it and began to refute it. Some had concluded that Gentiles could not be allowed to enter the church without circumcision, and even further that until they were circumcised they could not be saved. They were so strong in their conviction that even after “*no small dissension and dispute*” the problem still remained.

While Luke left who made the decision to go to Jerusalem vague with “*they determined*,” Paul made it very clear that the main reason they went was that the Spirit revealed to them that they should go.

*Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me. 2 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. Gal 2:1-3*

This problem was not going to go away. It remained a major problem in the church until the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Jewish nation made it a much less important issue. Galatians is the strongest refutation but it is also seen in Ephesians, Colossians, and Romans. God wanted this issue dealt with by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem along with the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. This was going to be a divisive issue and it needed to be dealt with decisively.

*they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. Acts 15:2*

On the way to Jerusalem, the wonderful news of the Gentile conversions from the first missionary journey by Paul and Barnabas brings great joy the brethren in the various congregations where they stopped. Luke gives an example of what they were doing when they arrived at Jerusalem.

*And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. Acts 15:4-5*

It was in the midst of this joyful news that “*some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed*” began to teach the same thing that had brought them to Jerusalem. The nature of the conflict centered on two points.

*“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Acts 15:1*

*“It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.” Acts 15:5*

*some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law” — to whom we gave no such commandment — Acts 15:24*

Thus the teaching encompassed the thought that the Gentiles must also become Jews. They must be circumcised as all proselytes had to be circumcised and they had to keep the Law as the Jews kept the Law.

### How Many Meetings?

After this initial discussion, a second meeting followed. It is difficult to harmonize Paul’s words in Galatians 2 with those of Luke here and likely reveals that there was a meeting that Luke did not record. Paul spoke of a meeting “*privately to those who were of reputation*,” But Luke recorded in verse 12 that “*all the multitude*” were present to hear it. In this meeting, it was determined that Paul was the apostle to the uncircumcision and Peter was the apostle for the circumcised. It was also determined that Paul would go the Gentiles and they would go to circumcised.

*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. Gal 2:2-3*

*But from those who seemed to be something — whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man — for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. 7 But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as the gospel for the circumcised was to Peter 8 (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), 9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do. Gal 2:6-10*

After this meeting the whole church came together for the meeting Luke records:

*Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. ... 22... Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, Acts 15:12, 22*

Luke makes it clear that the meeting began with conflict and disagreement: “*Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute.*” (Acts 15:6-7), but ended “*it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord*” Acts 15:25

At this point the Holy Spirit intervened *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us,” Acts 15:28*  
The letter makes it clear that the Holy Spirit approved of and thus was directing these events.

## **Peter**

Since Peter used his own experiences and Luke only gives an abbreviated account, it is important to remember all that God did to bring the Gentiles into the church. This is what everyone already knew and what Peter was building upon when he began his discussion.

### **Peter and the conversion of Cornelius - Acts 10-11**

- 1 An angel sent to Cornelius commanded him to send for Peter, and promised Peter would speak words which would save both himself and all his house (Acts 10:1-4, 30-33; 11:13-14).
- 2 As Cornelius' men approached the home, Peter given a vision where God revealed all animals had been cleansed and there were no more clean and unclean {Law removed} (Acts 10:9-16).
- 3 When the men arrived, the Spirit told Peter he had sent them and Peter was to go with them. (Acts 10:17-20).
- 4 When Peter arrived he told them his conclusions. First, *“God showed that I should not call any man common or unclean”* and second, *“God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable”* (Acts 10:28, 34-35).
- 5 As Peter preached God sent the Holy Spirit upon these Gentiles in the same way He had on the apostles at the beginning. (Acts 10:44-46; 11:15-16)
- 6 After Peter saw all this, he drew the only possible conclusion. *“If God gave unto them the like gift as also unto us...when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?”* these things he understood that God wanted Gentiles to be baptized. Acts 11:17-18
- 7 At the conclusion of this event, there was a consensus among the Jewish Christians the Peter had done exactly what God wanted him to do and that the issue was closed.

*When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” Acts 11:18*

Peter affirmed that when God used him to bring in the Gentiles, that example should stand for all time. He used the keys for Israel in Acts 2 and for the Gentiles in Acts 10. The manner in which God carried this out(see above) proved conclusively that *“God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.” Acts 15:8-9*

Would they test/tempt God as their father had done in the wilderness? Would they provoke God by adding to his clear example and pleased outcome with Peter. Would they subject the Gentiles to a burden Israel had never been able to bear? His final conclusion: *“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*

## **Barnabas and Paul**

*Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. Acts 15:12*

Note that here in Jerusalem, Luke again reversed their names. Here in Jerusalem Barnabas still had great respect and prominence. They simply recorded all the miracles and signs God had allowed them to perform.

The classic use logical(syllogistic) inferential deductive reasoning.

- A When God allowed them to perform miracles what they taught was confirmed (**Heb 2:3-4; Acts 14:3**).
- B They were teaching salvation to the Gentiles was by faith in Jesus Christ and performing miracles.
- C Therefore God was confirming the word they were preaching about Gentiles.

It is important to note that Luke expected us to understand how powerful this was for those present. They knew that miracles proved God's approval and God was allowing them to perform miracles while preaching Gentile salvation based only on obedience to the gospel.

## James

There was nothing in the words of Peter, or the miracles of Barnabas and Paul that in any way contradicted the prophets. The truth that God “*visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name*” was a subject that after a careful study of the Old Testament Scriptures proved “*the words of the prophets agree.*”

This passage confirms something Peter stated many years in his letter. The messianic prophecies of the prophets were not written for those living at that time. They were written for the gospel age. They are not OT doctrine, but confirm and explain NT teaching. Thus the Gentiles becoming a part of the church without losing their status as Gentiles was not written for the Mosaic age, but for Christians. Thus these prophecies help us understand NT doctrine.

*Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, 11 searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. 12 To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things which angels desire to look into. 1 Peter 1:10-12*

James cited Amos 9:11-12, while Paul had already quoted Isa 49:6, and in Romans 15:9-12 gave four others (Ps. 18:49; Deut. 32:43; Ps. 117:1; Isa. 11:10) to prove conclusively that even before Jesus died on the cross and the gospel was preached it was God’s intention that Gentiles as Gentiles would worship and serve God under the New Covenant.

*Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'" Isa 49:6*

*"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; For He will avenge the blood of His servants, And render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people." Deut 32:43*

*Therefore I will give thanks to You, O Lord, among the Gentiles, And sing praises to Your name. Ps 18:49*

*Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples! Ps 117:1*

*"And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious." Isa 11:10*

In an additional proof that these prophecies were to be used for us today, James reminds us that “*Known to God from eternity are all His works.*” God already knew from eternity what He was going to do and that His plans for the Gentiles had been fixed then, revealed through the prophets and now confirmed through Peter and the work of Paul and Barnabas.

## Abstain from these Necessary Things

*but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. Acts 15:20*

*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Acts 15:28-29*

As far as the Law of Moses and the Gentiles who are obeying the gospel, the Spirit listed these four things as being necessary. The rest of the Law had been for the Jews and was not for the Gentiles even under the gospel.

## The Letter with the Decrees

The inspired words of Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and James left the church with no doubt about this conclusion. The controversy was settled and the truth revealed. The decision to send a letter is the first time the inspiration of the apostles and prophets is written and even in the letter itself, the Holy Spirit’s wisdom and oversight is affirmed. “*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us.*” Acts 15:28

It is called a letter

*So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the **letter**. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. Acts 15:30-32*

*And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the **decrees** to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. Acts 16:4-5*

Thus they saw the letters written by the apostles and other inspired writers as decrees (ordinances; laws) from God. This letter was written to the Gentiles who had been troubled by the false teachings of those who had come to them. The credibility of these teachers is removed by affirming they had no divine authority or inspiration to back up their words. While the writers of this letter were those

selected by the Lord and given the inspiration to reveal God's will. Along with the letter several witnesses are sent to validate the truth. This letter brought great relief and consolation to those who had feared they would have to become much more than Christians in their service to God.

### **The Work in Antioch**

After the letter was read and the controversy laid to rest, one of the prophets sent from Jerusalem returned, but Silas determined to stay and work with the brethren in Antioch. After some days, Paul began to discuss with Barnabas a return to work with the churches they had established. Barnabas was a good man and an exhorter. He saw in John Mark the potential to overcome his faults, but Paul for some reason did not agree with this assessment and was so strong in this determination that the decision was made to divide up the work and go in different directions. The word "contention" refers to irritation and being provoked.

*paroxuno, paroxusmos* In the NT the verb occurs at Acts 17:16; it is said of Paul that when he saw pagan Athens "his spirit was provoked or incensed in him." The expression seeks to emphasize the honest anger of the apostle, ... 1 Cor 13:5 says of love: "it does not let itself be provoked." ... The noun is found in the usual sense of "irritation" at Acts 15:39, which tells of the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas. An unusual occurrence is at Heb 10:24: ... where, ... in keeping with the first meaning of the verb, can only have the sense of "incitement," "stimulation." Perhaps the author is intentionally suggesting the idea of spurring on or stimulation to give special force to his summons to love and good works. (Kittel TDWNT; NT:3948)

This paroxysm led to an irritation and contention so sharp that the two separated. Barnabas took Mark and went to the island of Cypress while Paul went by land to see the brethren they had worked with in Syrian and Cilicia. It is interesting to note that their primary mission in these regions was the "*strengthening the churches.*"