

Unity of the Church: One Body or Two?

Acts 15:1–35

Background

In the early days, the church in Jerusalem had faced problems—hostility and persecution from the authorities (ch. 4; 5:17–42; 7:54–8:3); hypocrisy within the church (5:1–11); operational problems due to rapid growth (6:1–6). But God was in its midst, and nothing could prevent the establishment of his kingdom. The gospel continued to spread and churches were being planted everywhere, despite all obstacles.

The opening of “a door of faith unto the Gentiles” (14:27) was the occasion for a different kind of problem—a serious doctrinal issue that had the potential for destroying the unity of the church. The conversion of the first Gentiles at Caesarea (ch. 10–11:18) and the large scale evangelistic work carried on among the Gentiles by Paul and Barnabas (11:18–26; chs. 13–14) provide the background necessary to understanding the situation in which this issue arose. The special emphasis of the report made by Paul and Barnabas to the church at Antioch was “that God had opened a door of faith unto the Gentiles” (14:27).

In these circumstances the first and the most serious doctrinal issue faced by the early church was raised by “certain men from Judaea.” It was an issue that affected the fundamental nature of the gospel. When Paul dealt with the same teaching in Galatians he called it “a different gospel; which is not another gospel,” but a perversion of the gospel of Christ (1:6f) and warned that anyone teaching “any other gospel” would be accursed (1:8–9). It also affected the essential nature of the church.

Acts 15 shows how that issue was handled. We continue to be impressed with the evidence of God’s hand at work among the early disciples.

The Issue Raised (15:1–5)

“**Certain Men from Judaea**” (v. 1). During the time Paul and Barnabas remained at Antioch (14:28) “certain men came down from Judaea and

taught the brethren”—i. e., the non-Jewish disciples at Antioch—*“saying, Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”*

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant relationship between God and Israel (cf. Gen. 17). It was the mark of a Jew. Circumcision for a Gentile was the means by which he fully accepted Judaism and, in fact, became a Jew religiously. It obligated one to keep the entire law of Moses (cf. v. 5 & Gal. 5:3). So these men were saying that it was not enough for the Gentiles to obey the gospel of Christ. They would have to become Jews or they could not be saved.

This teaching was a serious challenge to the gospel of Christ. It implied that the gospel was not sufficient for salvation. It undermined the entire work that Paul and Barnabas had done among the Gentiles.

Up to Jerusalem (v. 2). After extensive debate in Antioch it was decided that Paul and Barnabas, with certain others, *“should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.”*

What “about this question”? Paul was an apostle in his own right. He had received his message *“through revelation of Jesus Christ.”* He was not dependent on any other man for what he taught (Gal. 1:11–24). So it was not necessary to consult the other apostles about what he should teach.

But the false teachers came from Judaea. They may even have claimed to represent the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. So the whole matter needed to be clarified. Were the apostles at Jerusalem teaching something different from Paul and Barnabas? The issue could have split the church. The unity of the church demanded that the apostles and elders at Jerusalem speak out on this question in unmistakable terms.

The Trip to Jerusalem (v. 3). On the way to Jerusalem, Paul and his company *“passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.”* These brethren on the way did not want to debate the Gentile question. They were just glad to learn about the conversion of the Gentiles. But at Jerusalem Paul’s group found a difference.

Arrival at Jerusalem (vv. 4–5). *“And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church and the apostles and the*

elders, and they rehearsed all things that God had done with them”—particularly including the conversion of the Gentiles (cf. v. 3 & 14:27). “But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, It is needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.”

Importance of the Issue. Not only was this teaching a challenge to the sufficiency of the gospel for salvation, it also raised serious questions about the nature of Christianity:

(1) These men were teaching that everyone must become a Jew in order to be saved. The effect would be to turn Christianity into a Jewish sect. There would be Pharisees, Sadducees and Christians—all of them Jews, but all with their own particular views. The Christians would be the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ (or Messiah).

(2) Paul and Barnabas, of course, would not accept that view (v. 2). But what about the other apostles? Was something different being taught in Jerusalem? Even the appearance of such a thing could have split the church in two—a Jewish church under the influence of Jerusalem and a Gentile church under the influence of Antioch (or Paul and Barnabas).

(3) If, finally, the apostles and elders at Jerusalem disowned these Judaizing teachers, then the church would be what God intended it to be from the beginning—a single body composed of both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11–18), with no distinctions being made between the two—Jews having no special privileges; Gentiles being “fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 2:19–3:7). Such an arrangement would be “according to the eternal purpose which God purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:8–12).

So a lot was at stake in this meeting at Jerusalem. As we shall see, the third view is the one taken by all the apostles and elders and the whole church at Jerusalem.

Discussion of the Question (15:6–21)

The decisive points fall into three parts: Peter speaks; then Barnabas and Paul; then James. Each makes his own arguments, but all agree on one point: God had settled this question a long time ago. The purpose of the meeting was, therefore, not to decide the question, but to

acknowledge the will of God; to disown the Judaizers; and to make a recommendation to Gentiles in the interest of unity.

Such a conference today could serve no purpose at all in the absence of inspired apostles and elders. Nothing remains to be decided. All we could do would be to read what God has already said in the scriptures.

Introductory (v. 6): “And the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider of this matter. And when there had been much questioning, Peter rose up, ...”

Peter: Remember the First Time! (vv. 7–11). Peter’s contribution is that God had settled the issue a long time ago at the house of Cornelius in Caesarea (cf. ch. 10:1–11:18). He bare witness to the acceptability of Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit; “and he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith”—with no reference to circumcision or keeping the law.

Earlier Peter had reasoned: “If then God gave unto them the like gift as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?” (11:17) ... exactly what the Judaizers were now doing. God had made his will known and they were standing up against him and thus making trial of God (v. 10; cf. 5:9). Could they get away with it? Would they not arouse God’s anger?

Worse yet. They were making trial of God by putting a yoke on the neck of Gentile disciples which even the Jews had never been able to bear (v. 10; cf. 13:39). Jews could be saved, but they would have to be saved the same way Gentiles were—“through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 11).

Paul and Barnabas: God’s Witness to the Word of his Grace (v. 12). The “questioning” (v. 7) was over. After Peter spoke the crowd “kept silence.” Then they listened as Barnabas and Paul told “what signs and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles through them.” Recall the work at Iconium where the Lord “bare witness unto the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands” (14:3). Such testimony left no doubt.

James: Testimony of the Prophets (vv. 13–18). James adds the testimony of the Old Testament prophets as agreeing with what Symeon

(= Peter) had said. He cites Amos 9:11f as an example. Again God is the one who speaks and acts. He spoke of what he would do. He promised to rebuild “the tabernacle of David”—in its then low state it could hardly be called a house—“which is fallen ... that the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called.” In Amos it says the tabernacle of David would be rebuilt “as in the days of old; that they may possess ... all the nations that are called by my name.” The word “possess” reminds us of the conquests of David, but when God speaks of “all the nations that are called by my name” we realize he is speaking of spiritual conquests; and that is just the application James is making. Amos 9:11f was having its fulfillment in the spiritual conquests being made through the preaching of the gospel.

James’ Proposal (vv. 19–21). James then concludes by proposing the action to which all the others agree. James’ “judgment” included two parts: First, “that we trouble not them that from among Gentiles turn to God.” That is a rejection of the position of the Judaizers, who had been troubling the Gentiles with their words (v. 24), calling their salvation in question. In effect, it rejects the position that circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses was necessary to salvation.

Second: James does propose, however, “that we write unto them, that they abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from what is strangled, and from blood” (v. 20). Is James saying, after all, that some parts of the law must be bound on Gentiles? No. Otherwise he would have had to list every moral principle of the law.

James knew the Lord had not left the Gentiles free to commit sin; that they were “under law to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). The points mentioned involved areas that were especially troublesome in the relation between Jews and Gentiles—areas of frequent conflict. Three of the four relate to eating habits. “Pollutions of idols” is explained in verse 29 as “things sacrificed to idols.” The subject is discussed in First Cor. 8 & 10:23–11:1. It was not wrong in itself to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols—after all, it was only meat—unless eating such meat gave offense to someone else.

“What is strangled” and “blood” both refer to such laws as Leviticus 17:10–16. An animal had to be killed so as to drain the blood. Blood was not to be eaten. Such points explain why Jews could not eat with Gentiles (11:3).

James explains why Gentiles should abstain from such things: “For Moses from generations of old has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath” (v. 21). Jewish believers would have a hard time getting used to Gentile ways, even though these may be harmless in themselves. So if the Gentiles wanted to have any kind of social relationship with Jewish believers they would need to be considerate of such matters.

Why is “fornication” listed? It is the only point that really involves a moral question. Why only this? Why not say also to abstain from murder, stealing, etc.? It is because of the typical Gentile attitude toward fornication. Unconverted Gentiles did not regard it as a moral issue (much like today, incidentally). In First Cor. 6:12–20 Paul has to teach them that fornication was not merely a bodily function like eating and digesting food. Because fornication was so lightly regarded among pagans it would be an area of frequent conflict with Jews. So James puts it in the same class as the food laws because that is the way Gentiles so often treated it. He knew that Gentiles would need to be especially careful in this area if unity with Jewish believers was to be possible.

To summarize: None of these points were bound because they were in the law of Moses. Rather, they were treated as “necessary things” (v. 28) in the interests of unity in one body with Jews. They were matters of brotherly consideration.

Letter to the Gentiles (15:22–29)

James’ proposal was accepted and “the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” decided to embody that proposal in a letter to the Gentile Christians. The main points are as follows:

Judaizers Disowned (v. 24). The apostles (not including Paul, v. 24) and elders disown the Judaizers: “to whom we gave no commandment.” In other words, we did not authorize them. They acted on their own. The apostles at Jerusalem did not teach a different gospel than that of Paul and Barnabas. All spoke as one.

Messengers Sent (vv. 22, 25–27). Judas and Silas, leading men among the brethren at Jerusalem, were sent back with Barnabas and Paul to remove all doubt about the view being taken by the apostles at Jerusalem.

High Regard for Barnabas and Paul (vv. 25–26). The apostles and elders at Jerusalem show high regard for these two by calling them “our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”—such is their devotion to him.

The Holy Spirit and Us (v. 28): “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, ...” This action was not merely a human decision. These men were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Their actions give no precedent for a conference of uninspired men.

“These Necessary Things” (v. 28–29). The four points set forth by James are embodied in the letter as “necessary things”—necessary to unity in view of long held custom and practice among the Jews (v. 21).

Return to Antioch (15:30–35)

Joy in Antioch (vv. 30–31). The letter caused joy among the Antioch Christians—“they rejoiced for the consolation”—and no wonder! All doubt about their salvation was taken away; and it was clear that the apostles and elders at Jerusalem taught no other gospel than that received from Barnabas and Paul.

Judas and Silas (vv. 32–33). These two leaders from Jerusalem stayed on in Antioch for awhile, exercising their function as prophets by exhorting and strengthening the brethren with their words.

Paul and Barnabas (v. 35). “But Paul and Barnabas tarried in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”