

A SURVEY OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

10. TO CONSIDER THE MATTER

Acts 15:6

Adult Sunday School
Gethsemane Baptist Church
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Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey was completed. They returned to the church in Antioch to report on all the good things that God had done. "*And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples.*" (Acts 14:27-28) It was an exciting time when many gentiles had believed on the Lord Jesus and were saved. In this group of converts there were devout Jews, Jewish proselytes and gentiles who had no prior contact with Judaism but had responded to the good news of the Gospel. There were leaders in the church in Jerusalem who had some reservations about this news. "*There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them [the new believers], and to command them to keep the law of Moses.*" (Acts 15:5) Having spent their lives following the Law as the direct command of God, it concerned the Pharisees that these gentiles were being saved and worshipping God but were not following the commands God had given to His people, the Jews. They were not being circumcised. They were not following the dietary laws nor were they being obedient to the clean and

unclean rituals of the temple. It occurred to these Pharisees that the gentiles could not truly follow God if they did not follow its laws. *“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”* (15:1) Paul and Barnabas responded very quickly to counter this teaching. It is interesting to see this same kind of thinking in our New Testament churches today. “There is a strange proneness in us to make our opinion and practice a rule and a law to every body else, to judge of all of about us by our standard, and to conclude that because we do well all do wrong that do not do just as we do.” (Matthew Henry) It is easy to try to take over the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of other Christians and accuse them of wrong doing when they do not have the same convictions that we have.

The leaders in the church at Antioch decided to settle the matter by appealing to the more mature believers in the church in Jerusalem. *“They determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.”* (vs. 2) They decided that these apostles and elders should settle the matter.

When the question was put to the Apostles and elders there was *“much disputing”*. To help resolve the problem they listened to three witnesses who

gave testimony as to the workings of God in the conversions of the gentiles.

Peter was the first to testify. He had been the first to reach out to the gentiles. He related his experiences in Cornelius' house and how God had saved them and filled them with the Holy Ghost. God had not made them comply with the requirements of the Law. (Acts 10:24-48) His conclusion was, "*Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear. But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.*" (Vs. 10-11) His conclusion was that salvation was by faith without the keeping of the Law. The reaction of the church was to keep silent. They then gave attention to the testimony of Paul and Barnabas. They spoke of the great "miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them." (vs. 12)

Finally, James spoke. He recognized how God had reached out to the gentiles. He quoted the prophet Amos to teach that God "*doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.*" (Vs. 17b-18) God is accomplishing His perfect plan. We do not always understand but must submit to His perfect workings. James then suggests three things that they ask the gentile believers to do as new believers. They asked them, "*That they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.*" (vs. 20) This

would help insure the fidelity of their testimony for God (no idols); protect them from the dissipations of immorality (no fornication); it would protect them from the diseases associated with an improper diet. (not eating blood or improperly killed animals.) They sent word to the Antioch church with these instructions assured in their hearts that they had been directed by the Holy Spirit. They said to them, “*For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things*” (vs. 28) It was not their purpose to lay a heavy burden on them but to encourage them in godly living. They did not lay a list of do’s and don’ts on them but simple instructions designed to encourage holy living. They were confident that they would then “do well”.

The early church had a dissension in the membership. They took it to more mature believers for a solution. They took consolation from this advice and grew in the Lord because of it.

One lesson to gain from this episode is that the Christian life is not a Pharisaic list of rules to be followed. It is a quest toward holiness. Salvation comes only by faith and not by keeping rules. Secondly, it is the Lord that accomplishes His purpose for our lives. He will challenge one of us to live for Him in one way and another to a different way. “*Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.*” (Romans 14:4)

This decision by the church was important because it established that salvation came by faith in the Lord Jesus and not by works. *“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.”* (Titus 3:5)

Ideas to consider:

1. Do you think that the Pharisees were wrong when they questioned if the newly converted gentiles should follow the commandments of Moses?
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2. Why do we, in our churches, insist that everyone keep the same convictions? Is this biblical?
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3. Did they do well to take the dispute to older believers in the church?
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4. Is it wrong to have a list of rules to follow as a church?
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