

Q. Why did the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 tell the Gentile Christians to "abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication" and to listen to Moses read on the Sabbath day? Isn't this telling them to keep at least some of the law?

A. Absolutely not. But there is much confusion over what was decided by the elders who met in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:1 tells us, "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." This might sound like the matter was only about circumcision, but we will see that more was involved. Notice that the men were from Judea. Verse 2 reads, "When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question." This tells us that Paul and Barnabas did not agree with these men from Judea. So, whatever it was they were teaching, Paul and Barnabas disagreed. This verse also tells us that they decided to take the matter to Jerusalem. Why?

Many people assume that this matter being taken to Jerusalem shows us that Jerusalem was a "headquarters church," or the seat of central authority in the church. But, if we let the Bible speak for itself, it has just told us why the matter was taken to Jerusalem. It is because the people causing the trouble were from Jerusalem. If we jump ahead a bit for a moment, we see that the letter containing the decision says, "Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment" (verse 24). In other words, these men from Judea, either explicitly or implicitly gave the impression that they had been

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sent out from the church in Jerusalem with orders to get the Gentiles circumcised and get them keeping the law. This is why the matter was brought to Jerusalem. It was as if Paul and Barnabus said, Oh, you say that the Jerusalem assembly is telling you to tell the Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the law. Well, let's go back there and confront them on this matter and see. This is important to understand, because Acts 15 has been used to support hierarchical, episcopal church government. This view says that Paul and Barnabus were escalating the matter to a council of bishops, with Peter, perhaps, being the patriarch. But notice that while Peter gives his opinion, the final decision is made by James. Others say that this meeting supports Reformed/Presbyterian government, claiming that it was a general assembly or general synod. But the Bible tells us that Paul and Barnabus brought the matter to Jerusalem simply because that is where the trouble-makers were from. Thus, it is natural that James, being an elder in the Jerusalem assembly, made the final decision.

As we have already seen, Acts 15:5 tells us that the dispute that arose was not over circumcision only: "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). The Judaizers were saying not only that it was necessary to circumcise, but also to keep the law of Moses. Many overlook this and say that the dispute involved circumcision only.

And what was the response of Peter to this demand for circumcision and keeping the law of Moses? In verse 9, he says that God purified the hearts of the Gentiles by faith. Then he says, "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" (verses 10-11). What was the yoke? Circumcision and the law of Moses. Remember, the yoke was not just circumcision. It was also the law of Moses. Notice also that it was something that neither the living Jews nor their fathers were able to bear. Rather than teaching that Gentiles are to keep the law, or even any part of it, Acts 15 teaches that the law is something that even the Jews were not to try to bear.

Now notice the beginning of the letter that was sent out: "Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment" (verse 24). What did this letter say troubled them and subverted their souls? Teaching that they must be circumcised and

keep the law. And what did the elders who sent out this letter say they had not commanded? Being circumcised and keeping the law. Now, with this in mind, it would be absurd to think that the elders in Jerusalem, James included, then went on to teach the Gentiles to keep the dietary laws in Leviticus or anywhere else and to hear the law read each Sabbath.

The references in verses 20 and 29 all have to do with the idolatrous practices of non-Christian Gentiles who, in their temples, worshipped idols, and part of that worship included temple sex (the fornication referred to here) and the offering of blood and meat from animals that had been strangled. Thus, verses 20 and 29 are telling the Gentile believers to stop participating in pagan practices and to not do what might offend weaker brethren. Paul taught that eating meat that had been offered to idols really means nothing (see 1 Corinthians 8), but that if it offended the consciences of weaker brethren, then he would not eat it: "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Corinthians 8:13). And we see this again in Romans 14. Notice verses 14:14-23:

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

This does not mean that we should just let weak brethren stagnate in their weakness. They should be instructed in the Word so that they

"grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18).

Now, we must look at Acts 15:21: "For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day." Many assume this to be a command. It is not a command. It is merely a statement. It is as if James is saying, Okay, if someone wants to hear the law, this is easy enough. Moses has for many generations been preached in every city in the synagogues each Sabbath. If anyone wants to hear Moses, go there. But, from the context, it is obvious that he is also implying that the law is not something the church would preach, and that those who had tried to do this were troubling and subverting the souls of those they preached to.

But notice the preaching of Paul, who wrote, "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Galatians 3:10-13). (By the way, it should be obvious from the context that verse 12 is not saying that a man can live by keeping the law. Paul is quoting Leviticus 18:5 to point out that the law requires perfect obedience, something that is impossible. That is why he calls the law a curse.)

I want to point out one more thing. In Acts 15:13-18, we read the following: "And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world." From this, we see that James clearly understood that the calling of the Gentiles under the New Covenant was a fulfilling of a prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 concerning the building again of the tabernacle of David. I point this out for the edification of Dispensationalists who are looking for the fulfillment of Old Testament

prophecies in national Israel. It is not going to happen, folks. We Christians, the *ekklēsia*, the called-out assembly, are true Israel.

So, Acts 15 is in no way teaching that the Gentiles, or even the Jews, should keep the law or any part of it or listen to the law being read on the Sabbath. Instead, it teaches that the law was a burden that no one could keep, and that our hearts are purified by faith (verse 9).

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