

ACTS 15:1-35 THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM: THE LEAVEN OF LEGALISM VS. THE PURITY OF SALVATION BY GRACE

This chapter records the greatest crisis in the history of the early church. At issue was the truth of the gospel of salvation by grace. It ranks with the controversy of the person of Christ in the 4th century and the work of Christ in the 16th century. The question was not whether Gentiles could be saved. That was admitted by all. At issue was whether they could be saved apart from Mosaic Law; that is, without becoming Jewish or practicing Jewish ritual. Some Jewish believers thought Gentile believers to be nothing more than proselytes to Judaism; they had to be corrected.

v. 1 THE JUDAIZERS' CONFLICTING TEACHING

"They kept teaching (imperfect active indicative) the brethren (believers)"

"You cannot be saved unless (3rd class condition) you get circumcised."*

*μη/me δυναμαι/*dunamai* (present def. middle indicative)= "you absolutely cannot,"
"you are totally incapable"

- **The Issue:** How to be saved? Their answer, "Gentiles must be circumcised." Problem: The issue of justification by faith alone.
- **Implication #1:** One must become Jewish to be saved. If true, then Christianity was just another extended sect of perverted Judaism like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, etc. Added Problem: Salvation is not by grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone.
- **Implication #2:** One must enter the church through the door of the synagogue. Added Problem: the concept that Jewish believers were superior to Gentile believers.

NOTE JAMES' REPUDIATION OF THESE FALSE TEACHERS IN 15:24.

v. 2, 3 THE RESOLUTION SOUGHT IN JERUSALEM

The desire of the church in Antioch was that this dispute be settled amicably. Paul, Barnabas, plus others are sent to represent the gospel of grace and the Gentile viewpoint. Their journey partook somewhat of a triumphal demonstration in their favor. Outside Jerusalem, the Pauline point of view was ascendant.

v. 4, 5 THE GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

Paul and Barnabas relate the events of their first journey to evangelize the Gentiles telling "all things that God had done."

But certain believing* Pharisees counter, "Logical necessity (δει/dei) demands that Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the law of Moses"...apparently in order to keep saved or to prove they really were saved.

*"*Pharisees which believed*" = a perfect active participle of *pisteuo*; there can be no denying that these were believers! Thus there were two types of Judaistic-legalists involved:

- 1) unsaved legalists as in 15:1 and Gal. 2:4 ("pseudo-brethren").
- 2) saved legalists as in 15:5; saved, but then confused about the absolute righteousness imputed at the moment of salvation.

15:6-21 SPECIAL CHURCH MEETING: PETER, PAUL, JAMES SPEAK

v. 6-11 PETER SPEAKS: HE REAFFIRMS SALVATION BY GRACE

After much questioning ("disputing," KJV), Peter addresses the assembly:

- **v. 7** "*God chose me to first bring the gospel to the Gentiles*" (Cornelius);

(OVER)

- **v. 8,9** *"God who knows their hearts"* (belief in the gospel) did two things simultaneously:
 - 1) gave (aorist active participle) them the Holy Spirit just as He did us Jews (at Pentecost); and,
 - 2) purified (aorist active participle) their hearts by faith (not by circumcision nor law keeping)."
- **v. 10, 11 Peter's two-fold conclusion:**
 - 1) "**Be honest:** we Jews ourselves cannot bear or keep the Law of Moses; why yoke Gentiles to it?"
 - 2) "**Be consistent:** we Jews who are saved are believing (present active indicative) that we are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ just as these Gentiles. You were not saved by the Mosaic Law; neither are they!"

v. 12 **PAUL AND BARNABAS SPEAK: THEY AFFIRM SALVATION BY GRACE**

"We preached the gospel to Gentiles; God confirmed our message."

v. 13-21 **JAMES* SPEAKS: THE PROPHETS PREDICTED GENTILE SALVATION**

*James = 1/2 brother of Jesus, Chief Elder in Jesus' Church, 12:17, 21:18, Gal. 1:19. That James pronounces the final conclusion of this council is indicative of his prominence among the leaders there.

■ **v. 13-18** *"the prophets (plural) agree that Gentiles would be saved"*

James loosely quotes from Amos 9:11, 12 from the LXX Version. He could have quoted (and maybe did) Isa. 56:7, 60:2, 3; Zech. 8:20-22).

The Old Testament clearly predicted that Gentiles would be saved at various times in Earth history, but it did not predict what would be their relationship to saved Jews. That revelation came first through the Apostle Paul; i.e., body-truth. In the Body of Christ, the Church, there is no distinction between the Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female; all are one and equal in the Lord. It took a long time for early Jewish believers to learn this. See Gal. 3:26-29; Col. 3:11; Eph. 2:11-19.

■ **v. 19** *"my judgement is that we trouble not the Gentile believers"*

MOMENTOUS: James concludes that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace, hence Gentiles are not to be burdened with Mosaic Law and Jewish ritual.

■ **v. 20, 21** But Gentiles are to manifest grace to God-fearing Jews by abstaining from 4 things common to pagan idolatry:

- 1) "things (meats) sacrificed to idols," cmp. v.29;
- 2) "the" fornication," sexual uncleanness; pagan worship practices;
- 3) "things strangled," animals deprived of life without blood drained;
- 4) "blood," drinking blood, also associated with pagan idolatrous sacrifices.

NOTE: NO MENTION OF SABBATH KEEPING!

v. 22-29 **THE COUNCIL "SPEAKS" VIA A UNANIMOUS DECREE**

A letter to the churches affirms the decision of the council and is witnessed to by Paul, Barnabas, and two Jewish believers, Judas Barsabas and Silas.

v. 30-35 **THE DECREE IS READ AND WELL RECEIVED IN ANTIOCH (Syria)**

Summary: What Was Settled?

- 1) Salvation by grace meant that Jews and Gentiles were equal before God; race, ethnos, religion gave no one favor with Him. The Council agreed.
- 2) Gentile believers were not under Mosaic Law.
- 3) Gentile believers were to graciously respect their Jewish brethren's scruples by avoiding pagan standards and idolatrous practices.

This should have marked the end of legalism in the Church, but did it? Church history is replete with legalistic additions to the gospel of saving grace because the flesh in its religious bent always seeks a religious prop. **So then, so today!**

