

Council Meets at Jerusalem

Acts 15

Lesson 24 in a Series about the 1st Century Church

We continue our journey through the history of the church as recorded in Acts. It is important that we understand the precedents being established for doctrinal instruction in the church today. With the record of this important meeting of the apostles and elders in Acts 15, we see God's plan for closing the chapter on the dispensation (period) of Law and the beginning of the Christian age.

Is this historical meeting really helpful to believers of the 21st century? YES! There is confusion by many in the religious world when it comes to the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament. This record can clear that up.

The world, which includes many of our family members, co-workers and friends, has little or no understanding of the difference between the Old and the New. This becomes a source of confusion when some say we must worship on the Sabbath because the Bible says remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Recently, a young woman proposed that since the thief on the cross was saved without baptism, she did not need to be baptized. When I pointed out that the thief was under the Old Testament law and was not directed by God to be baptized, she gave me a blank look that revealed a lack of understanding. That lack of understanding will lead her to accept the most credible or persuasive teacher/minister rather than the teaching from God's Word.

That is why this lesson is so important!

The Problem

We need to identify the doctrinal challenge facing the church in Acts 15.

Acts 15

1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Keep in mind that the believers (Pharisees) were not necessarily leading others into error intentionally. Their sincerity is not being brought into question. The church had not had to deal with this relationship between Jew and Gentile before this. The Pharisee believers had a history and tradition of strict adherence to the law, and without direction and further teaching, they continued to teach what they had been taught.

We should be careful to approach doctrinal differences in the same way today. Many who have been taught incorrectly are very sincere (without wax) and their desire is to please God. How will we be able to approach and teach if we assume they are insincere and teaching error on purpose?

So what should be our approach to doctrinal differences? Go to the Word. Let's consider the discussion recorded in Acts 15 as a source of understanding this issue.

The Discussion

Acts 15

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a

choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. (Remember Cornelius in Acts 10-11?) 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

After much discussion, Peter takes a stand! How can they make decisions like this? Is this whole doctrinal issue being decided by men? Let me remind you of Jesus' direction to Peter and the other apostles before His arrest and crucifixion.

John 16:12-13

12 "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. 13 But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

I take confidence in the discussion and subsequent decision that day in Jerusalem because Jesus said they would be guided by His Spirit. The "keys to the kingdom" were given to the apostles and this is one more example of unlocking the door and revealing the mystery to the believers.

The Solution

As they continued their discussion and sought counsel from the prophecies recorded in the Old Testament, James spoke up to conclude their discussion with a solution that would guide the church for generations to come. This solution was written in a letter and sent to the church in Antioch.

Acts 15

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. 23 With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

The Solution Today

The solution still stands in the church today. We are not to bind the law on believers. Rather, we are to teach the Gospel (grace through faith) because the Spirit tells us through the words of Peter:

"We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved..."