

The Acts of the Apostles, Part 31:

Division Among Believers

Key Scripture: Acts 15:1-21

“But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ 2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. 3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. 5 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’

6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. 13 After they finished

speaking, James replied, 'Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

16 'After this I will return,

and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;

I will rebuild its ruins,

and I will restore it,

17 that the remnant[b] of mankind may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,

says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.'

19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, 20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. 21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.'"

❖ Division over the Law

➤ Verse 15:2

- *"No small dissension and debate with them."*

❖ God's Covenant with Abraham

➤ **The Sign of the Covenant**

■ Genesis 17:9-14

- 9 And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their

generations. 10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, 13 both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. 14 Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

❖ The “Sign” is Codified in the Law

➤ Leviticus 12:1-5

- “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 2 ‘Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. 3 **And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.** 4 Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. 5 But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.’”

❖ Circumcise Your Hearts

➤ Deuteronomy 10:12-22

- “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? 14 Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. 15 Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. 16 **Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.** 17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. 18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. 19 Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. 21 He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. 22 Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

➤ Deuteronomy 30:6

- “And the Lord your **God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring,** so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, **that you may live.**”

➤ Romans 2:28-29

- “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”

❖ Core Issue

- **What must one do in order to be saved?**

❖ Getting Uncomfortable

- “Once saved, what life changes **should** new believing Gentiles make to be distinct from pagan Gentiles?”

- Or

- “Once saved, what should a new believer do differently?”

❖ Cultural Norms, Jews & Gentiles

- Acts 15:20

- “but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.”

❖ Redemption and Reconciliation

- Ephesians 5:21 says, “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

❖ Challenge

- Think critically about things that other Christians have done that have offended you.

- Is it something worth dividing over, or can we find Unity in Christ?