

9/2/07

**The Gentiles And Circumcision**  
**Acts 15:1-31**

The most exciting things to watch is the joy that people manifest as they come to Christ but there are always those who desire to put people under some sort of bondage of legalism quenching what God is doing!

It is innate in people, to want to control people, so we want to look at the problem that arose at Antioch over circumcision for the Gentiles to be saved. Acts 15:1-31

There are three progressive movements that develop the account of the First Church Council over circumcision.

- I. The conflict over circumcision. vs. 1-5
- II. The council over circumcision. vs. 6-18
- III. The conclusion over circumcision. vs. 19-31

**I. The conflict over circumcision. vs. 1-5**

- A. The conflict was introduced at Antioch. vs. 1
  - 1. The instigators were Jews from Judea who were teaching the Christians at Antioch. vs. 1a

- a. Antioch had become the missionary outreach center to the world through the teaching of Paul and Barnabas. Acts 11:19-26
  - b. Paul and Barnabas had been called out for the first missionary journey by the Holy Spirit. Acts 13:2
  - c. They are not named but simply identified as Jewish Christians by the word brethren “adelphos”, born of the same womb.
2. They were teaching that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. vs. 1b-c
- a. The covenant of circumcision was given to Abraham as the seal of the promise, it was not the promise. Gen. 17
    - 1) Abraham received the promise while being uncircumcised.
    - 2) Circumcision was an outward ritual for the Jew and proselytes.
    - 3) Paul told the Galatians, these Judaizers wanted them to be circumcised to boast in their flesh. Gal. 6:13
  - b. The event is described for us by Paul in chapter two of Galatians. Gal. 2:1-10
    - 1) Some say Galatians refers to the famine but the time line does not bear out. Acts 11:28-30

- 2) The account of Paul rebuked Peter publicly regarding food not circumcision, being after the council not before. Gal. 2:11-14
  - 3) Paul and Barnabas were confirming their work among the Gentiles after the First Missionary journey, not before and the topic was circumcision. Gal. 1:1-10
  - 4) Therefore the account of Acts 15 is the same one as in Galatians. Gal. 2:1-10
  - c. Paul gives supplementary information in his epistle to the Galatians.
    - 1) He indicated these men came in secretly to spy out the liberty they had in Christ attempting to compel Titus to be circumcised. Gal. 2:3-5
    - 2) But Paul and Barnabas would not yield.
- B.** The conflict was with Paul and Barnabas. vs. 2
- 1. The disagreement with these men was a very serious matter. vs. 2a-b
    - a. Luke describes it as, “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them”.
      - 1) Dissension “stasis” means sedition or insurrection.

- \* The idea is of rebellion against the present authority, the gospel.
  - 2) Dispute “suzetesis” means disputing and questioning.
    - \* This became a big crisis, the expression “no small” is what is called a litotes, a negative indicating the opposite, “big”.
  - b. Paul and Barnabas were the pastors and missionaries to the Gentiles.
    - 1) They had been at Antioch from the inception. Acts 11:19-26
    - 2) They had been sent by the Holy Spirit to the mission field. Acts 13:1-3
  - 2. The disagreement was to be taken to Jerusalem. vs. 2c-e
    - a. The decision was that Paul, Barnabas and others from Antioch should go up to Jerusalem.
    - b. The disagreement was to be taken up with the apostles and elders. vs. 2c-e
- C.** The conflict led the church to send a delegation to Jerusalem. vs. 3-4
- 1. They ministered on the way to Jerusalem. vs. 3
    - a. Being sent by the church does not contradict Paul, when he says he went up by revelation. vs. 3a, Gal. 2:2a

- \* Yet how often we see the divine and human working together like Peter at Joppa and Cornelius servants sent, Paul on the road to Damascus and Ananias sent to Paul.
- b. From Antioch, through Phoenicia, the area of Beirut, Tyre and Sidon, down the coast to Caesarea, to Samaria, nearly 300 miles. vs. 3b-c
  - \* The went describing “ekdiegeomai”, which means to narrate in full, with all the details of God’s work among the Gentiles conversions.
- c. The response was great joy among the brethren, the Christians. vs. 3d
- 2. They finally arrived at Jerusalem. vs. 4
  - a. They were received on there arrival by the Jerusalem church, the apostles and the elders. vs. 4a-b
    - 1) The apostles, the eleven, James has been killed.
    - 2) The elders “presbuteros”, identifies the aged men , who officiated the office of overseeing the care if the church.
  - b. They then reported all the things God had done with them. vs. 4c
    - 1) The gospel alone, apart from circumcision, had saved the Gentiles on the first missionary journey.

- 2) Paul places the event at fourteen years after he had gone to Jerusalem, not including his conversion and three years in Arabia. Gal. 2:1
  - 3) He was saved on the Damascus Road in 35 A.D.
  - 4) He went to Jerusalem in 38 A.D.
  - 5) If we add 14 and 38, it gives us 52 A.D. for the First church council, some put it at A.D. 49.
- D. The conflict was joined by the Pharisees. vs. 5
- 1. The Pharisees were Christians. vs. 5a
    - a. The Pharisees were the religious legalist in the days of Jesus.
    - b. The perfect participle indicates they were believers but they were hanging on to some of their past legalism.
    - c. The Pharisees had added 613 commandments by their traditions.
  - 2. The Pharisees were the opposition from within the church. vs. 5b-d
    - a. They declared “It is necessary to circumcise them”. vs. 5b-c
      - \* They understood Christianity to be an extension of Judaism, a great error.

- b. They declared they needed “to command them to keep the law of Moses.” vs. 5d
- 1) They failed to recognize that the law condemn man, not save them.
  - 2) The Law was added to the promise, not the reverse. Gal. 3:19, Rom. 3-4

### **Illustration**

In many South American countries, if the Pastor does not wear a tie and a suit, they believer, he can not be anointed of God.

### **Application**

The conflict of circumcision can take on different forms today.

1. There are usually three type of Christians that come into Calvary Chapel Pasadena with the purpose of proselytizing Christians to their denominational doctrinal stands.
  - a. Calvinist who are always attempting to covert Christians to be “Calvinist”, one saved always saved, rather than going out to the world to saved the unbeliever.
    - \* They do their fishing in aquariums, rather than lake or the ocean.
  - b. There are those who come to straighten us on baptism, that it is needed for salvation.
  - c. Then you have Pentecostals that attempt to convince Christians everyone is to speak in

tongues, hyper-Pentecostals say that if you do not speak in tongues you are not saved. Yet the Bible is clear that it is the least of the gifts and not all have it! 1Cor. 12:30

2. There are Catholics that tell me they are Christians yet Catholics trust in the seven sacraments, salvation through the Roman Catholic Church alone, the primacy of Peter, the infallibility of the Pope, and the intercession of Mary as co-redemptress.
3. There are Mormons who say they are Christians yet profess to have a restored gospel, living apostles, saying that God’s word is not sufficient apart from the revelation of the angel Moroni.
4. The J. W’s say they are Christians but deny that Christ is the only way to the Father and teach that works are needed for salvation.
5. The 7th day Adventist emphasize keeping the Sabbath and dietary laws for salvation.
  - \* If one tries to be justified by Law he or she falls from grace, the new creation is all that God looks at. Gal. 5:4, 6:14-15

***The conflict over circumcision was apposed to Grace!***

### **II. The council over circumcision. vs. 6-18**

- A. The council involved the apostles and elders. vs. 6

1. The apostles and elders alone considered the matter.
    - a. The church welcomed them in the initial reception. vs. 4
    - b. The focus of Acts is the elders and apostles.
      - 1) Peter spoke first. vs. 7
      - 2) Barnabas and Paul spoke second. vs. 12
      - 3) James spoke third. vs. 13
  2. Some see a contradiction with Paul's account in Galatians, "to meet privately with those of reputation", the seeming pillars of the church. Gal. 2:2c, 9
    - a. Again is supplementary, having met privately, then the public declaration was given. Acts 15:4, 6, 12
    - b. The phrase "of reputation" in Galatians identifies chosen leaders of the Jerusalem church, James, Peter and John, four times in chapter.
- B.** The council heard Peter's proclamation after there had been much dispute. vs. 7-11
1. Peter arose and declared how God had chosen him to preach the Gospel to the house of Cornelius. vs. 7
    - a. He said by his own mouth, that the Gentiles should hear the word of God and believe, more than ten years prior.

- b. Through the vision at Joppa and the Holy Spirit directing him. Acts 10
2. Peter then gave to them two proofs of the genuine salvation of the Gentiles. vs. 8-9
  - a. He declared God who knows the heart of every man gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as to the Jews. vs. 8
  - b. He declared that God made no distinction between Jew or Gentiles, purified "kharharisas" their hearts by faith. vs. 9
    - \* Jesus told Peter that whatever God had cleansed, he was not to call common. Acts 10:15
3. Peter brought his argument to a conclusion, based on what he had stated. vs. 10-11
  - a. Why were they tempting God. vs. 10a-b
    - 1) The word test "peirazo" means to try whether a thing can be done, the context determines if it is good or bad.
    - 2) The context in our text is bad, they were challenging God on what He required alone for salvation.
  - b. The manner in which they were testing God was a very clear and vivid picture, by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither their

fathers nor they were able to bear.

Why? vs. 10b

- 1) The Jewish Christians by wanting to impose the yoke of circumcision on the Gentiles rather than the yoke Jesus, were fighting against God. Matt. 11:29
  - 2) Paul would have to remind Peter once again about this double standard, as he rebuked him for walking both sides of the street at Antioch, regarding food, stumbling even Barnabas after this council. Gal. 2:11-19
  - 3) Some want to place this incident before the council but the most natural order in Galatians is after the council but even if it is placed before the council, Peter is still is greatly at fault, having received the vision to go to the house of Cornelius.
- c. The Jews were saved by the same grace. vs. 11
- 1) “But we”, in contrast to the Judaizers.
  - 2) The Jew would be saved by grace, not law.

C. The council heard the confirmation of Paul and Barnabas next. vs. 12

1. The multitude kept silent, implying conviction and comprehension, that to require circumcision for salvation is a great error.
  2. The multitude then listened to the testimony of Barnabas and Paul regarding the miracles and wonders God worked through them among the Gentiles as they preached the gospel and were saved. Heb. 2:4  
\* At Cypress and the churches of Galatia. Acts 13-14
  3. This is the shortest record, confirming they had met privately, this being the public declaration for the decree.
- D. The council heard the application of James last. vs. 13-18
1. James declared how Peter had stated that God visited the Gentiles first to take out a people for His name. vs. 13-14
    - a. They became silent by the evidence of God’s work among the Gentiles. vs. 13
    - b. The phrase “a people for His name” was unique of Israel till now, the Gentile were also the people of God. vs. 14  
\* Ex. 19:5, 1Pet. 2:10
  - c. James was the Lord’s half brother and did not believe in Him before the

resurrection and later Jesus appeared to him. Jn. 7:5, 1Cor. 15:7

- d. James seems to be the head leader of the church at Jerusalem, not Peter, this is the last time he appears in Acts.
2. James declared God's prophets verify what Peter declared, quoting the LXX. vs. 15  
\* Isaiah, Jeremiad, Ezekiel, Daniel etc.
3. James declared God after choosing the Gentiles, will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down. vs. 16  
\* James understood the promise referred to Jesus in fulfillment of both by quoting Amos. 1Sam. 7:12, Is. 11:10, Amos 9:11-12
4. James declared God, then through Israel will reach the rest of the Gentiles. vs. 17  
\* Is. 2:2, 11:10, 60:5, 66:23
5. James declared that known to God are all His works. vs. 18
  - a. He had revealed them before they happen.
  - b. He would bring them to pass in their appropriate time.
  - c. He had done so in the salvation of the Gentiles, as part of His eternal council of His will.  
\* "Tell and bring forth your case; Yes, let them take counsel together. Who has declared this

from ancient time? Who has told it from that time? Have not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me. Is. 45:21

### **Illustration**

The Jesus movement in the late 60's and early 70's declared that God could save long-haired hippies. The board at Costa Mesa was concerned about the carpet getting dirty, Chuck told them to take it!

### **Application**

1. Some churches think they are very progressive and culturally relative today.
  - a. Churches allow the congregation to have open discussions as to what should be allowed as doctrine and what is not.
  - b. Other churches interpret scripture by open discussions based on their human reasoning and logic, rather than the word of God, embracing false doctrine.
  - c. Still other churches run the church board, especially the big tithers and the board runs the Pastor, therefore the Pastor is a hireling.
2. The "Seeker Friendly Churches" wanting to be culturally relative provide a church according to the people's desires.

- a. They canvas their neighborhoods and pass out surveys asking people to express the kind of church they would like.
  - 1) The majority to who this appeals to are those from 20-30 years of age.
  - 2) Those giving the recommendations for what a church should be and do, are mostly un-churched, religious or lost.
  - 3) It would be like a father says to his child, “What kind of Dad do you want me to be?” and then do exactly as the child asked! That would be insane and irresponsible!
- b. They ask the subjects and topics the people would be interested in, as well as those they would not want mentioned.
  - 1) They do not want topics on hell, fornication, adultery, drunkenness, sin or repentance.
  - 2) They want to hear positive things about man, human potential, motivational sermons to trust in themselves.
  - 3) Certainly not verse by verse exposition, through the Bible, in fact they don’t even have to carry a Bible to church!
- c. The people are asked the type of atmosphere they would like to have in the church they would attend.
  - 1) Very informal, starbucks kind.
  - 2) Nothing that would resemble traditional church.

- d. They never judge others but see that all people can work together in “all faiths”, ignoring the words of Jesus that you are either for Him or against Him!
  - \* They are operating under Rodney King theology, “Can’t we all get along”.
- 3. The “Emerging church” seeks to establish the Kingdom of God through good works.
  - a. Undermining the word of God and Gospel of grace for salvation.
  - b. Including all faiths, as being spiritual, without having to be saved by the gospel of grace.
  - c. Mixing mystical practices of Catholicism, Hinduism and New Age that contradict the gospel of grace.
- 4. The “Emerging Church” disdains prophecy and declares Christians have wasted time focusing so much on the Second Coming, therefore it is of the greatest importance to know the prophetic program of God in relation to the gospel of grace.
  - a. God has promised to the nation of Israel a future Kingdom, here on earth at the Second Coming of Jesus. Rev. 20:1-10
  - b. God is presently collecting for Himself a bride, the church, which will terminate with her removal from the earth. Rom. 11:25
  - c. God will give the world over to seven years of Tribulation and Great-Tribulation, under the deception of the Anti-christ, due to the rejection of the gospel of grace. 2Thess. 2



5. The “Emerging Church” teaches that the life of Christ is only an example to follow, not atoning for the sins of the world.

- a. The Christ they preach is the “cosmic Christ”.
- b. The “god in you” “the Christ in you” of Hinduism and New Age.
- c. The “Eucharist Christ” of transubstantiation in the host of the Catholic communion.

*The council over circumcision was in favor of Grace!*

### III. The conclusion over circumcision. vs. 19-31

- A. The decree of the council came by the mouth of James. vs. 19-21
  1. The Jewish Christians were not to trouble the Gentiles who were turning to God. vs. 19
    - a. The personal pronoun “I” is emphatic representing the head authority of the church in Jerusalem, of which James seems to have been occupying.
    - b. The judgment was based on the facts of the gospel of grace, through a word of wisdom by the Holy Spirit, the representative of Jesus Christ. vs. 28a
      - \* The judgment of James was in agreement with the Holy Spirit, not the Holy Spirit with James.

- c. They were to literally, “stop annoying” the Gentiles, it was unscriptural and unloving.
2. The Gentiles would be given a letter of the councils decree to observe only four things. vs. 20
  - a. The first two would affect their relationship with God. vs. 20a-b
    - 1) From things polluted by idols, meats offered in sacrifices. vs. 20a
      - \* They were sold to the butcher shops in the market place. Rom. 14, 1Cor. 8-10
    - 2) From sexual immorality. vs. 20b
      - \* Porneias describes every kind of sexual vices before marriage and outside of marriage. 1Cor. 6:9,13, 1Thess. 4:3
  - b. The second two would affect their relationship with man. vs. 20c-d
    - 1) From things strangled. vs. 20c
      - \* The is meat that is not thoroughly bled when killed. Lev. 3:17, 7:26
    - 2) From blood. vs. 20d
      - \* The drinking of blood in pagan rituals and daily practices. Gen. 9:4, Lev. 17:11-13
3. The Jews synagogues had taught the Law regarding these ordinances and would continue, as Jews. vs. 21

- a. James was not saying Jews should live under the law and not Gentiles.
  - b. James was saying that if a Jewish Christian wanted to keep some of these rituals, they were free to do so, but not to required them for salvation.
  - c. James was also saying the Gentile Christian must not judge the freedom of the Christian Jew.
- B.** The decree of the council was to be delivered to the Gentiles. vs. 22-29
- 1. The action was taken to reveal the decree was excepted by all. vs. 22
    - a. It pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church. vs. 22a-b
      - 1) The church did not vote on it.
      - 2) The church excepted the decree of the elders and apostles.
    - b. It pleased all to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. vs. 22c-f
      - 1) To communicate the authenticity and authority of the letter.
      - 2) To demonstrating the church was one in Christ, Jew and Gentile, the middle wall of partition had been removed, one body. Eph. 2:14-16

- 2. The letter regarding the decree was sent to all. vs. 23-29
  - a. The Christian Jews greeted the Christian Gentile as one by the term “brethren”, “They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.” vs. 23
  - b. They cleared themselves by stated they had not given authority to those who compelled them to be circumcise nor command to keep the Law, “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law” --to whom we gave no such commandment.” vs. 24
    - \* The word troubled “anaskenasso” means to agitate, in Classical Greek it meant “an entire removal of goods”, this is the only time it appears in the New Testament.
  - c. They wanted them to know their oneness in the decree and the men being sent. vs. 25-27
    - 1) At the top of the list are Barnabas and Paul, honored for their uncompromising stance for the gospel of grace and the gentiles,

- ”It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul. vs. 25
- 2) Their love for the Gentiles being evident by risking their lives in the first journey and still continues by the perfect participle, “men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” vs. 26  
\* Without doubt the persecution and stoning of Paul was recounted.
  - 3) They named two leading Christian Jews from Jerusalem to verify the decree, “We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth.” vs. 27
- d. They wanted the Gentiles to know, the decision was from God, not man. vs. 28-29
- 1) The elders and apostles came to their decision by the Holy Spirit, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden, at any time by the present infinitive, than these necessary things.” vs. 28  
\* The Comforter would guide them into all truth. Jn. 16:13

- 2) The particulars are a mere summary of the discussion and decision, without concern for the exact order stated previously by the council, “That you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” vs. 29

C. The decree reached Antioch. vs. 30-31

1. Their mission had been accomplished, “So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch.” vs. 30a-b
2. Their message was delivered, “And when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. vs. 30c-d
3. Their response was elation, “When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.” vs. 31
4. The church at Antioch was the place of the original conflict and became a watershed for all the Gentiles!

**Illustration**

The song Amazing Grace should forever be ingrained in our hearts and minds, the gospel of Grace.

**Application**

1. The church today does not need any councils in our day to determine what is doctrinal, for we have the Bible.

- a. Pastors need to teach the entire Bible, in doing so every doctrine God wants the believer to know will be covered.
- b. Pastors need to expose false teaching and heresy that attempt to be passed off as the gospel of grace and is not.
- c. Pastors need to, even at times, name the names of false teachers and deceivers.

2. Every believer needs to be careful to not allow anyone to mix anything with the gospel of grace.

- a. Mysticism, that seeks spiritual experiences through whatever means to experience a God-encounter, often through special knowledge, are vainly puffed up. Col. 2:18
- b. Asceticism, the practice of denying oneself of food, drink, comfort, etc to become more spiritual. Col. 2:20-23
- c. Legalism, the attempt to impose certain practices, rituals or the prohibition of dress, make-up, etc to be righteous.

\* The true circumcision had always been of the heart by grace through faith, being complete in Christ Jesus. Deut. 30:6, Jer. 4:4, Rom. 2:25-29, Eph. 2:8-9, Col. 2:9-10

3. The nature of the church never changes.

- a. The church is an organism not an organization.

- b. The church is subject to Christ, the head of the church by His word.
- c. The Holy Spirit is the agent to carry on the work of Jesus in and through the church.
- d. The church are those who Jesus saves through repentance and He alone adds to the church daily as they are saved.
- e. The church is described by many metaphors, in order to give a comprehensive view of her nature but the most intimate is that of “the bride of Christ”, living, loving and faithful to only One, Jesus! Eph. 5:24-27

4. The responsibility of Pastors and the people of God is to receive, abide and grow in the gospel of grace.

- a. Trusting the atoning work of Jesus Christ alone for their salvation.
- b. Trusting that I am as close to God as I can ever be, being a Christian “in Christ”.
- c. Trusting that the only means to measure of truth about God, man, sin and salvation is the Bible, the gospel of grace.  
\* “Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established by **grace**, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them.” Heb. 13:9

*The conclusion over circumcision was salvation by Grace!*

**Conclusion**

The First Church Council over circumcision gave a clear decree:

- I.** The conflict over circumcision was opposed to Grace!
- II.** The council over circumcision was in favor of Grace!
- III.** The conclusion over circumcision was salvation by Grace!