

Study 6 6/3/14 Salvation by grace alone

Acts 15:6-21

The setting (15:1-5)

It is clear that Israel's law cannot lead to justification (13:39), but how necessary are the ceremonies and regulations that helped maintain the distinctiveness of Judaism? If they are a witness to what is to come, they have had value. If they are a replacement for justification in Christ or a prop for an uneasy conscience, they intrude on the freedom of the gospel. This is an issue always needing to be addressed where the gospel becomes established and the line between faith and custom gets blurred. What then is in the heart and mind of the apostles?

I will assume that the men from Judea who insist on circumcision at Antioch (vv. 1-2) are the same as 'certain men from James' that Paul talks about in the letter he writes soon after to the churches he had recently established (Gal. 2:12; cf. Acts 15:24). Certainty is impossible, but the issues and outcomes are the same in both descriptions so the insight they give us into the heart and mind of the apostles is unchanged.

Paul has seen the establishment of churches in Galatia: in the towns of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. He returns to his base church at Syrian Antioch for a 'long' visit (14:28), describing how God has 'opened a door of faith for the Gentiles (14:27). During this time (assuming the connection with information in *Galatians*) Peter visits the church (Gal. 2:11).

Teachers from Judea (cf. Acts 15:24) also arrive asserting that *salvation* still depends on circumcision and keeping Mosaic customs (v. 1). Peter thinks it best to withdraw from eating with Gentiles (10:15 notwithstanding). He would not believe as they did, but may withdraw so as to not to cause difficulties for the church living in Jerusalem.

Paul rebukes them all publicly for their hypocrisy (Gal. 2:13). Luke does not mention this but does record the 'no small dissension and debate' that Paul has with those who arrive from Judea (v. 2). The question needs to be settled in Jerusalem and delegates are sent, including Paul and Barnabas. They are not discouraged by the dispute because they continue to tell churches along the way of the Gentile conversions and the news is greeted with joy (15:3).

Paul has been in Jerusalem previously, after 3 years in Damascus (Acts 9:26; Gal. 1:18-24), and again after some 11 years in Tarsus and ministry in Antioch (Acts 11:30:12:25). He knows his gospel is the same as the gospel preached in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18, 24) but this pastoral issue can do much damage to the gospel and to the church and must be resolved.

The Jerusalem church, apostles and elders welcome the delegation. If Peter has just been to Antioch, he has soon recovered from the rebuke. The trouble comes from members whose attachment in conscience is more to the Mosaic customs than it is to the grace of God. (If one prefers to think of the Antioch visit recorded in Galatians being later, one must allow for a later aberration in Peter after this conference.) There is much debate until Peter stands to speak.

The speech (15:6-21)

Peter has a duty to speak because God has chosen him to lead the way with regard to Gentile proclamation and Gentile believing. He did the proclaiming and witnessed the believing. All this has been rehearsed before (11:1-18) but now in solemn assembly and in a more highly contested environment. Are these Gentiles converts saved (v. 1)? 'Trouble' of this kind (vv. 19, 24; also Gal. 1:7; 5:12) can do much damage to faith and needs to be resolved.

Peter's answer is: God knows the *heart*; he gave these Gentiles the Holy Spirit; he made no distinction based on circumcision; and he cleansed their *hearts* by faith (vv. 8-9). He uses the same word for cleansing God used with him, saying that he should not call unclean what God has cleansed (10:15; 11:9). Salvation must be a work in the heart, something only possible by the work of Christ by the Spirit. And this salvation must cleanse the heart, and this apart from every human agency (such as circumcision).

Jesus said this cleansing needed to happen (Luke 11:39). *Hebrews* tells us that the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience, leaving no reminding of sin (Heb. 9:14; 10:2). John says the blood of Christ cleanses from all sin and unrighteousness (1 John 1:7, 9). The prophecies are being fulfilled as Gentiles seek the way first taught to Israel (Isa. 2:1-3; Jer. 31:31-34).

The alternatives are clear to Peter: 'Don't tie Gentiles to a code that has not freed us (13:39)! We and they together are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus!' He uses strong language to those who want to tie salvation to ceremony and performance—'You are testing God!' that is, questioning his judgement (Exod. 17:2; Matt. 4:7).

Peter speaks of what Paul teaches more fully later on. Grace is God's gift, mediated to us by Christ's death, and it abounds towards many (Rom. 5:15). The ceremonial and moral law, all of one piece for the Jews, cannot be the basis of acceptance with God. All need to know the grace of God in Christ. All need to be redeemed and forgiven (Eph. 1:7). It is grace that trains us to renounce sin and to live humbly before God (Tit. 2:11-12). The issues here are not cultural but moral and eternal. These, not circumcision, are the things needful for salvation.

Paul and Barnabas add to the testimony, not with theological argument but factual testimony: God bore witness with signs and wonders as they went about their ministry to Gentiles.

On the basis of this testimony, James must show the way forward and does so with two stunning conclusions. First, God has *visited* the Gentiles (v. 14), just as he first *visited* Israel (Exod. 4:31) and as he has done in sending their Messiah (Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16). Jesus is a 'Moses' for all. He has done this with a view to *taking from the Gentiles a people for his name*, again as for Israel (Deut. 7:6; Isa. 43:21; Acts 18:10). God has created a new people of God, through Christ alone and comprising people from all nations.

Second, the future greatness promised to Israel by Amos is not fulfilled by military victories, or even by moral superiority but by having a gospel for Gentiles. This is now core business for Israel, the secret of her greatness and the realizing of her hopes. Far from protecting their past they should embrace their future.

James follows this with a pastoral judgement. The Jerusalem church and the apostles will not 'trouble' the Gentile converts (v. 19) as would happen if the Pharisee sect had their way.

Such pastoral decisions continue to be needed for there will always be people who want righteousness to consist in something they do rather than in what God does. On the other hand, faith works by love and freedom leads to serving others (Gal. 5:6, 13). Faith in Israel's God, promulgated for centuries by widespread synagogues, has always avoided the trappings of idolatry, from fornication, and eating un-bled meat. It will aid the cause of the gospel, and the emerging conscience of many believers, if the church does the same. And no one sees any trouble with this, at least, not for the present. Those who keep these instructions will not ensure their salvation, they simply 'do well' (v. 29).

The sequel (15:22-35)

News of this decision is conveyed by Saul, Barnabas and others to the Antioch church and brings encouragement and strength to the believers.