

Acts 15:1–12



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- 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
- 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.
- 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.
- 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.
- 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."
- 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.
- 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.
- 8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;
- 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.
- 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?
- 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."
- 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

History is full of seemingly inconsequential pivotal moments which in retrospect changed everything. I remember as a young man listening to my grandpa recount the history of the infamous events of Pearl Harbor which plunged the United States into World War II. Just a few radar blips overlooked and the entire world was at war. More recently a simple cough or sneeze, a microscopic virus upon the breeze, and the entire world on lockdown, millions upon millions dead.

All the pivotal moments in all of history however pale in comparison to today's narrative. There's a seemingly simple disagreement which at first glance appears to have an obvious answer however deep beneath the surface eternal death itself crouches poised to strike a mortal blow to the infant church.



Christ is sovereign in salvation; not Moses, and forgiveness by grace through faith is how you enter in; not adherence to the law.

The Teaching



- 1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

These men appear to actually be well intentioned and deeply concerned. These are not the same Jews which have been plaguing Paul and Barnabas along the way, these appear to be Jewish Christians deeply concerned about the influx of Gentiles into the family of God in a way so contrary to Scripture. The Bible was crystal clear about entrance into the family of God and it came through circumcision as a symbol of adherence and a coming under the laws of Moses. These were very

dangerous games Paul and Barnabas were playing and these men determined it would be far safer at the very least to just play it safe by rolling the old with the new and requiring that Gentiles become Jews as part of their inclusion into the church.

Now I am begging you Gentile teenagers living thousands of years after this debate to transport your minds back to that time. This was such a reasonable request, it did not sound blasphemous, it sounded safe, even righteous, biblical.

So why the outrage, the flare up? Why this dissension and debate?

The Debate



2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Circumcision was so simple, just a bodily mark made at single point in time and then done. Why not just shrug, fine whatever and move on? Because there's something far more subtle – poisonous – than circumcision at play here. This is a question of the authority over salvation and for Paul and Barnabas this is hill they will die on even when stood against their own fellow believers. Who guards salvation? Who chooses what the bars and doors are to the paradise within? Is it Moses and the law or is it Christ and his apostles? Will this be a new thing rooted in the sacrifice of Christ paying for sins as the final sacrifice or will it simply be yet another sacrifice, another law, the next Israel built upon the previous? Unbeknownst to these poor well intentioned Jewish believers they have delivered on a silver platter a small sugar coated morsel containing the devil's final strike at the jugular vein of the church itself. The very gates of hell are here, swinging in full deadly force against the foundational headship of Christ in a church open to everyone or only old testament Jews. Paul and Barnabas know this and will have none of it, not one crumb.

The debate is so heated and divisive, so important and central to the early church it is decided they will take this all the way back to the foundations, Jerusalem and the apostles. This is again a critical victory and essential point for understanding the authority of the church as built on the foundations of Christ *and* his apostles. It was not up Paul or Barnabas or these men from Judea nor was it up to some vision of the Holy Spirit, it was up to the apostles under the guidance of the Spirit through the elders all within the context of the church itself. Every detail in these passages are important and form the actual counter mechanics for the old testament salvation structure. Moses and the law no longer call the shots, they did, they no longer do, Christ and his apostles do.

The Council



3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.

There is no fear, no trepidation or concern in Paul and Barnabas. They are not retreating back to Jerusalem. For them the victory has already been won, the right decision will be made by the right authority and I'm convinced they already knew that, while the church would take serious council, they would arrive at the same place as Paul and Barnabas and in fact with the seal of approval and blessing from the apostles themselves their door of opportunity would only blast further open.

The Resolution



7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.
 8 "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;
 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.
 10 "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?
 11 "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

The argument of Peter is simple yet eternally profound and upon this statement pivots the rest of Christian history. What is there to debate? God saves Gentiles by giving them his Holy Spirit which cleanses their sinful hearts by faith, and it is the same for us. He does not give them a law, he does not give them physical distinctions, God gives His Spirit by faith. Who are we? God has saved, he has done it this way, and thus that is the way we uphold, that is the way we preach, there is no debate to be had. In fact, and perhaps more profoundly and to turn the whole debate on its head it is not the Gentiles which must change, it is the Jew for they are saved in the same way, not through circumcision or the law of Moses but the grace of the Lord Jesus. There is now no longer any distinction.

Christ and the apostles win, salvation can continue its expansion, Christ the King maintains headship of the Church, the fulfillment of the law in Christ is upheld. Satan's strike at the neck of the church to separate her from her head fails, and praise God it did, or else there would be no church, there would be no salvation for the ends of the earth and we would still be dead in our trespasses and sins. Victory of victories, and note well the devil didn't need to use a single unbeliever to bring about this great debate, just a few Christians who didn't know their Bibles as well as they ought or submit themselves properly to the authority of their leadership. I pray they did come under at least the authority of the Jerusalem church but let it be a warning to you. Know your Bibles, know well how God actually works, and submit appropriately to the authorities he has over you, lest Satan himself deploy division directly through you.

The Resolution Strengthened



12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

The great debate ends with the testimonies of Barnabas and Paul recounting the salvation God has wrought by their hands among the Gentiles. If Peter's is an argument of "let God do what God is doing" this testimony only serves to increase and strengthen that argument. The conclusion of this Jerusalem council is yet to come but the debate has closed. The church is strong, established and poised to grow beyond all expectations.

Closing

- Do you recognize Christ as King of His Church? This may seem like a simple answer but dissension against Christ as King comes in many ways. Most obvious of which is how you treat and respond to the leadership within the church you find yourself under. Are you respectful, responsive, eager to serve, or do you close your heart and mind against the teachers here? Do you role your eyes at rules and restrictions to your freedoms? Christ's church is lead by elders and to dismiss them is to dismiss Christ himself. Be careful. Satan lies in wait to use the hands of disobedient believers.