

THE CIRCUMCISION CONTROVERSY

Acts 15

Introduction:

- 1. Nearly twenty years had passed since the establishment of the church.**
 - a. Despite persecution, the church had grown among the Jews.**
 - b. Cornelius and his household became the first Gentile converts.**
 - c. The church at Antioch became a center for spreading the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles.**

- 2. A large number of Pharisees had come into the church.**
 - a. They began to demand that Gentile converts must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved.**
 - b. Paul called them “false brethren secretly brought in {who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage}” (Gal. 2:4).**

- 3. The circumcision controversy created the first major doctrinal crisis in the church.**
 - a. Would the Gospel continue to be preached to Gentiles, or just to Jews only?**
 - b. Would salvation continue to be by grace through faith, or would keeping the Law of Moses be required?**
 - c. The outcome would determine whether the church would be a Jewish sect or a world religion.**

- 4. The apostle Paul emerged as the chief defender of the faith against the Judaizers who sought to pervert the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 2:5).**

- 5. Acts 15 must be studied with Galatians 2 to get the full picture.**

Discussion:

- I. FALSE TEACHERS CAME TO ANTIOCH FROM JUDEA (1-5).**
 - A. They taught one must be circumcised to be saved.**
 - 1. The Law of Moses was given to the nation of Israel (Exod. 19 ff., Deut. 5:1-5).**
 - 2. One who was circumcised was obligated to keep the whole Law (Gal. 5:3).**

 - B. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed the teaching of the Judaizers.**

 - C. The church decided to send Paul and Barnabas and others to Jerusalem.**
 - 1. Since Paul was an apostle, he did not need to confer with**

- with anyone else to know God's will (Gal. 1:11,12).
2. God revealed to him that he should go to Jerusalem with the others (Gal. 2:2).
 3. The false teachers had come from Jerusalem.
 - a. They were claiming to have the backing of the apostles and elders in the Jerusalem church.
 - b. The problem needed to be dealt with where it originated.

II. THE APOSTLES AND ELDERS MET TO DISCUSS THE ISSUE (6-29).

- A. There was much dispute and debating.
 1. The Judaizing party was made up of the former Pharisees.
 2. The apostles allowed the members to express themselves before they gave their inspired judgment.
- B. Peter was the first speaker before the assembly.
 1. Christ had given him the privilege of preaching first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles (Matt. 16:19; Acts 2, 10).
 2. Peter reminded the assembly that the Gentiles first heard the Gospel from him.
 3. God showed His acceptance of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He had given the Spirit to the apostles on Pentecost.
 4. God made no distinction but purified their hearts by faith just as He did the Jews.
 5. Gentiles were saved by grace the same as the Jews.
- C. Paul and Barnabas were the next speakers.
 1. They told of all the miracles God had worked through them among the Gentiles.
 2. If God had not approved of their message, He would not have confirmed it by miracles.
- D. James was the final speaker.
 1. This was not James the apostle for he had been killed by Herod (Acts 12:1, 2).
 - a. This was James, the Lord's brother (Gal. 1:19).
 - b. He was not a believer until after the resurrection (Matt. 13:54, 55; John 7:2-5; 1 Cor. 15:7).
 - c. He is the author of the epistle of James (Jam. 1:1).
 2. James quoted Amos 9:11,12 to show it was prophesied that Gentiles would come into the church.
 3. He recommended they bind nothing upon the Gentile Christians except that they keep themselves from:
 - a. Meat offered to idols (Exod. 20:1-4; 1 Cor. 8).

- b. Sexual immorality.
- c. Things strangled.
- d. Blood (Lev. 17:10-14).

E. The letter was written by inspired apostles and elders.

- 1. This is the first written part of the New Testament.
- 2. It was carried by Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch.
- 3. Silas and Judas also went with them.
 - a. They were prophets.
 - b. They were from Jerusalem.
 - c. They could testify to what took place in Jerusalem.

III. THE LETTER WAS TAKEN TO THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH (30-35).

- A. The church rejoiced at the good news that the Gospel prevailed and harmony was restored.
- B. Judas and Barnabas strengthened the brethren by preaching.
- C. Paul and Barnabas continued with the church at Antioch.

IV. PAUL AND BARNABAS PLANNED ANOTHER MISSIONARY JOURNEY (36-41).

- A. Paul said: "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the Word of the Lord, and see how they are doing."
 - 1. A missionary should keep in touch with his converts.
 - 2. Paul stayed in touch by both visits and letters.
- B. Barnabas "was determined to take John Mark with them."
 - 1. John Mark was a relative of Barnabas (Col. 4:10).
 - 2. Paul was opposed to taking John Mark because he had turned back at Perga on the first missionary journey.
 - 3. Their contention became so sharp they separated.
 - a. Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus.
 - b. Paul and Silas went to Syria and Cilicia.
 - 4. John Mark later redeemed himself with Paul (2 Tim. 4:11).

Conclusion:

- 1. The discussion at Jerusalem was not a "church council" but simply inspired men presenting a united stand for the truth of the Gospel.
- 2. God still saves us by grace through faith just as He did Jews and Gentiles in the first century.