

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

by Mario Seiglie

NT-55 10-25-2014

ACTS 15 CONCLUSION OF THE JERUSALEM CONFERENCE



In the previous study, we covered the vital background information about the Jerusalem Conference. In fact, without properly understanding Acts 15, most of Paul's epistles can be misinterpreted, as Peter later warned would be the case in 2 Peter 3:15-16. Galatians in particular can be misunderstood, but the key is you can see the same people, places and issues are covered in both Acts 15 and Galatians 1-2. The epistle of Galatians is dated around A.D. 49 while the Jerusalem Conference is dated later to A.D. 51.

Bible scholar F. F. Bruce is superlative on this important backdrop to the Jerusalem Conference: "The Council of Jerusalem is an event to which Luke attaches the highest importance...As he reports it, the Council was a meeting of the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church convened to consider, primarily, *the terms on which Gentile believers might be admitted to church membership* (with special attention to the question whether they should be *circumcised* or not;) in the second place, the means by which *social intercourse, and especially table fellowship*, might be promoted between Jewish and Gentile believers" (*The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Revised*, 1988, p. 282).

Notice the two main subjects at the conference were *circumcision and table fellowship*, the *same ones* as in Acts 11:2-3: "...those of the *circumcision* contended with [Peter] saying, 'You went in to *uncircumcised* men and ate with them!'" So it isn't as traditional Christianity has tried to make it sound as if it dealt with whether Gentiles believers should keep the Sabbath and biblical foods laws.

In an earlier edition of his commentary, Bruce notes, "The view taken here is that Galatians was written shortly *before* the Council of Jerusalem. This would adequately explain *why* that epistle makes *no* allusion to the Council of Jerusalem...[Acts 15:1 begins,] 'Certain men came down from Judea.' We take these men to be the same as the 'certain' who 'came from James' in Paul's narrative in Gal. 2:12. These men exceeded the terms of their commission...and took matters into their own hands by their insistence that circumcision and submission to the Mosaic law were necessary for salvation. The Epistle to the

Galatians enables us to fill out the brief summary here provided by Luke. These visitors from Judea would naturally refuse all social intercourse with uncircumcised persons...They thus introduced a controversial situation into the Antiochene church in regard both to the fundamental question of the way of salvation and to the practical question of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians...Peter was in residence at Antioch when the Judean emissaries arrived. When he first came to Antioch, he ate freely with Gentile Christians; his experience on the roof of Simon's house at Joppa and in the house of Cornelius at Caesarea had taught him not to 'call any man common or unclean' (Acts 10:28). But when the Judeans arrived and expressed their viewpoint so dogmatically, he withdrew from Gentile society and sat at table with circumcised persons only. No doubt he believed he was doing so in order to conciliate the consciences of his 'weaker' Judean brethren. But his example was bound to have a disastrous effect on others; it would, unless checked, endanger the whole principle of Christian unity...Paul saw quite clearly that the concession in the matter of table fellowship was bound in the long run to compromise the basic gospel principle that salvation was the gift of God's grace...Refusal to have table fellowship with Gentiles would soon be followed by refusal to admit them to church membership or indeed to recognize them as Christians at all. Peter's concession appeared in Paul's eyes to be the thin end of the wedge; no wonder, then, that Paul 'resisted him to the face' (Gal. 2:11). For his action implied that circumcision and all it involved, if not necessary in theory for salvation, were none the less necessary in practice. Peter himself knew that they were not necessary in either respect; that is why Paul describes his action as 'dissimulation' [or hypocrisy], (Gal. 2:15). Happily, Peter seems to have taken the rebuke in good part; we hear no more of such untimely appeasement on his side.

"But the trouble was not confined to Antioch; it spread to the young churches of South Galatia. These churches were visited by Judaizers who urged upon them that their faith in Jesus as Lord required to be supplemented by *circumcision and*

observance of the Jewish ceremonial law. In their innocence, the South Galatian Christians were disposed to accept this new teaching. When news of this came to Paul at Antioch, he wrote his Epistle to the Galatians in *white-hot urgency*, beseeching these recent converts not to be seduced from Christian simplicity by a totally different gospel which in reality was no gospel at all” (*NIC The Book of Acts*, 1974, pp. 298-304).

We now continue with the narrative in Acts 15:4-6, “And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the *sect of the Pharisees who believed* rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.’ Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.”

What *part* of the “law of Moses” were the Pharisaic believers talking about? From the context, it was same the part of the law where Gentiles Christians (such as Cornelius) would be required to become proselytes, or full-fledged members. This required them to be *circumcised*, take a *ritual bath* to become ceremonially clean, and *offer up a sacrifice*. As Bruce noted, this dealt exclusively with “circumcision and observance of the Jewish ceremonial law,” as Acts 11:2-3 says.

The issue is further clarified by Peter, “Now the apostles and elders came together to consider *this matter*. And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: ‘Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and *made no distinction between us and them, purifying* their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting *a yoke* on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (Acts 15:6-11).

Peter is the first to speak “after much dispute,” giving his testimony about the conversion of Cornelius and his household. He mentions how God “who knows the heart, acknowledged them by

giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made *no distinction* between us and them, *purifying* their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8-9). So God accepted them while they were uncircumcised and ceremonially unclean. This was the main point of the discussion, not other parts of God’s law!

The IVP Commentary mentions, “Gentiles were continually *impure* by virtue of their state as Gentiles; for this reason, they were expected to undergo *proselyte baptism* when they converted to Judaism. Here, however, Peter says that God enacts that ‘cleansing’ or ‘purifying’ simply through their faith” (Notes on Acts 15:9).

Note the Gk. term for cleansing, *katharizo*, is the same one used for the “cleansing” of Cornelius and his household by God through faith in Acts 10:15 and 11:9. So God had removed the heavy yoke of many additional laws that Christ had condemned.

Notice Peter also refers to the part of the Law in question as “a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.” What was that unbearable “yoke”? Not the Ten Commandments which John said, “This is the love of God, that *we keep His commandments*. And *His commandments are not burdensome*” (1 Jn. 5:3).

Bruce explains, “Besides, *the yoke which some were now proposing to lay on the necks of Gentile Christians* was one which they themselves and their forefathers had proved *unable to shoulder*. The term ‘yoke’ was particularly *appropriate* in this connection; a proselyte, when he undertook to fulfil the law, was said to ‘*take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven*.’ But to ordinary Jews like Peter and his hearers, *the traditional law*, especially as expounded by the severe school of Shammai, which was dominant at the time, *was a heavy burden* under which they groaned. Only a few could claim, like Paul, to have fulfilled all the detailed requirements of the written and oral law...By contrast with those ‘heavy burdens and grievous to be borne (Mt. 23:4), [as Jesus said], Peter and his companions had learned to rejoice in the easy yoke of Christ (Mt. 11:29)” (Ibid., p. 307).

Next, Paul and Barnabas give their testimony, “Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12).

They added further evidence of how God was calling Gentiles into the Church, giving them the Holy Spirit while not requiring them to be circumcised or placing the yoke of the ceremonial law on them as made so strict and binding by the Pharisaic teachings, especially of the Shammai School. Easton says, "As compared with the teaching of the Pharisaic scribes whom Jesus knew, the developed doctrine of the Talmud is a reformed religion" (Ibid., footnote, p. 307).

In other words, the Pharisaic practices then were much *more* burdensome than what Talmud later taught and modern Orthodox Jews do today.

Now all eyes turned to James, the Lord's brother and an apostle, who presently headed the Jerusalem church. "And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, 'Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things. Known to God from eternity are all His works.' Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath'" (Acts 15:13-21).

James used both the previous testimonies and Scripture to back the point that God would eventually call Gentiles into His church. He ruled that Gentile believers did not have to become circumcised nor keep the burdensome traditional and ceremonial laws as kept by Pharisaic decrees, but for them to carefully obey God's commandments dealing with idols and foods offered to them (the Second Commandment), also to abstain from sexual immorality (the Seventh Commandment) and from eating food with blood or of drinking blood (the Levitical laws about food). James was drawing the line of demarcation

between what was ceremonial from what was still binding on them. He then added that the rest of the details about God's laws would be received by Gentile Christians when they attended Services in their meeting places (or synagogues, Jam. 2:2) every Sabbath. With that, the issue was resolved and a letter was to be sent to the Gentile brethren.

As Acts 15:22-31 says, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, 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. 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. 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—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 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.' So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement."

So the issue of circumcision and table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians would no longer be a point of contention. The ceremonial and traditional law would not be necessary for them to observe since it didn't deal with their salvation, as Paul said in 1 Cor. 7:19.

Nonetheless, Jewish Christians would still be considered bound to the Levitical ceremonial laws, but no longer as they were interpreted by the Pharisees, with its heavy burdens. In fact, Paul, as a Jewish Christian, would later take a vow and offer sacrifices at the Temple according to the ceremonial law (Acts 21:20-24).