

## BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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### ACTS 15-16 RESULTS OF JERUSALEM CONFERENCE; SECOND MISSIONARY TRIP



We start this study by further clarifying the crucial results of the Jerusalem Conference, which set the foundation for what we practice and differentiates us from traditional Christianity.

Remember, the initial event that led to Jerusalem Conference was when the Gentile Cornelius and his household received God's spirit without being circumcised or observing the purity laws to be ritually cleansed. Other Gentiles followed suit in Antioch and other foreign lands.

Then, what was the chief accusation against Peter? Acts 11:2 says, "And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You (1) went *in* to uncircumcised men and (2) *ate* with them!'"

So there were two accusations based on the Law of Moses: (1) they had *fellowship* with uncircumcised men and (2) they *ate* with them. In fact, Peter had emphasized these same points about the law in Acts 10:28, "Then he said to them, 'You know how *unlawful* it is for a Jewish man to *keep company* with or *go* to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call *any man common or unclean*.'" So up to that time, Jewish Christian believers had not been able to "keep company" or "go to [a house] of another nation" without becoming ritually unclean.

David Stern notes, "Consider that Peter went frequently to the Temple; he would *not* have been able to enter in a ritually impure state, but eating with Gentiles and being in their homes could render him *impure* and thus subject to criticism by the picky. A major point of Acts 10-11 is that Gentile believers in Christ were purified by God, so that Peter learned to regard himself as *ritually pure when eating with them*. But before the overly critical Jews 'from James' he backed off and became a hypocrite or at least was intimidated into not being true to what he believed..."

Stern adds, "Circumcision quickly became the token of the entire controversy, precisely because when a Gentile allows himself to be circumcised, he obligates himself to obey the *entire Torah, both written and oral*; that is, he obligates himself to join the Jewish people as a Jew, to become fully Jewish...Circumcision is part of an initiation rite

which makes a Gentile part of the Jewish community. At that point he ceases to be a Gentile, becomes a Jew and voluntarily obligates himself to do everything a Jew is expected to do. And what is a Jew expected to do? Obey the Torah" (*Jewish New Testament Commentary* on Acts 11:2 & Gal. 2:11).

*The IVP Commentary* says, "Because Judaism used baptism alongside circumcision to signify conversion, if God had baptized someone in His Spirit, He had certainly accepted their conversion, with or without circumcision" (notes on Acts 11:3). So the Jerusalem decree ruled there would be no religious, racial or social difference between a circumcised or an uncircumcised Christian. Yet, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:19, they are still to keep *all* of God's commandments: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but *keeping the commandments of God is what matters*." In Rom. 2:25-30 he adds, "For circumcision is indeed profitable *if you keep the law*; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man *keeps the righteous requirements of the law*, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, *if he fulfills the law*, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that *of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter*; whose praise is not from men but from God."

So what now would change is what Paul clarified as having been received from Christ in Acts 13:38, "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is *justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses*."

Christ's sacrifice would now forgive sins that under the Old Testament law would mean a certain death. This showed the practice of the Law of Moses as done by the Jews was inadequate, for they lacked God's spirit, so the ritual law was unable to forgive spiritual sin, something only accepting Christ's sacrifice by faith could truly do, as more fully explained in Heb. 8-10 and 2 Cor. 3.

In addition, it is important to note how the Law of Moses (which of course is the law of God *as written down* by Moses) was understood in Jesus' day. There were two interpretations in His day about the Law of Moses: (1) one was the Law of Moses, *as found in Scripture*, which was binding, and (2) the other was the Law of Moses, *as interpreted by the Pharisees*, which included *thousands upon thousands* of regulations based on the 613 laws in the Torah to memorize and keep.

Bruce explains about the Jerusalem Conference: "...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" (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 307).

So the Conference of Jerusalem can be broken down into six parts:

(1). The initial dispute at Antioch (Acts 15:1-2) where some brethren from Judea visited them and insisted the Gentile believers must be circumcised and submit to the Law of Moses (presumably from what follows, of the Law of Moses as interpreted by the rabbis). It then says, "Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question." (Galatians 2:11-21 appears to give this same account at Antioch, but from Paul's view).

(2). Once at Jerusalem, the accusation was made by the Pharisaic party in the Church (Acts 15:5) against accepting of Gentile believers without first being circumcised and keeping the law of Moses as they interpreted it, with the 613 regulations in the law based on the rulings of the Sanhedrin (now basically found in the Talmud). Of course, that would entail placing them under the "yoke" of the entire written and oral law, including all of the ceremonial and ritual regulations.

(3). There was then a heated discussion among the Pharisaic sect and the rest of those present.

(4). So Peter brings up the case of Cornelius and his household, showing that parts of the law of Moses were no longer necessary for Gentiles to keep and be saved. God had "purified" them by

other means (a saving faith) than parts of Moses' law requiring circumcision and rituals to be justified before God. Peter insisted they not be placed under this "yoke of the law," with its thousands of Pharisaic regulations. For instance, for keeping the Sabbath properly, there were 1520 Pharisaic regulations to keep!

What had become particularly burdensome were many of the ritual washings, which Jesus had condemned in Mr. 7:1-5, "Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with [ritually] defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the *tradition of the elders*. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the *washing* of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches."

(5). Next comes Barnabas and Paul's account of their missionary trip to Gentile lands and the many miracles and conversions of Gentiles, which backed Peter's experience with Cornelius.

(6). Then we have the ruling by James, with the consent of the elders and apostles (Acts 15:23-28), that backs what Peter, Paul and Barnabas had said and then gives the practical applications of what the Gentile Christians must keep of Moses' law to have table fellowship with Jewish Christians.

The implications would be wide-ranging and long term. First, a new people were recognized to comprise the Church, who through baptism and the laying on of hands, had God's spirit. Paul called them, "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), or spiritual Israel, composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 9:6-7). Also, the inadequacy of the ritual law has been revealed as a means of salvation so something superior took its place as a better covenant, a better sacrifice and a better ministry. Most of Paul's Epistles would address and clarify this matter. Now, the spirit and not only the letter of the law would be kept, just as Jesus had mentioned in Mt. 5-7 in the Sermon on the Mount. This accurately describes what we teach – the keeping of all of the commandments of God and having the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

## Second Missionary Trip

So now, Paul and Barnabas, along with several others, set out to deliver the Jerusalem decree to Antioch and the churches beyond. At Antioch they were received with joy and stayed many days.

Then, Paul wanted to visit the fledgling churches in Turkey and bring them the good news as well. But now there is a falling out between Paul and Barnabas that the Bible is candid to reveal.

Luke writes, "Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, '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.' Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:36-41).

Now, Mark, who was Barnabas' cousin (Col. 4:10), had abandoned them in the first missionary trip and Paul did not want to risk this happening again. Barnabas, on the other hand, insisted Mark go, and the dispute became so heated that they decided to part ways. This of course doesn't mean they caused a division in the church, for they were still part of the same church, but just divided their operations. In the long run, Paul recognized Mark did mature spiritually and used him (2 Tim. 4:11).

Luke continues, "Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:1-5).

We will not hear more about Barnabas' trips, only of Paul's, which Luke will soon join in. They had the most impact in spreading Christianity around the Roman Empire.

At Lystra, he meets a young man, Timothy, who was looked up to in the congregation. Both his grandmother and mother were in the church (2 Tim. 1:5), and were dedicated members. Timothy was highly involved in the church and there was leadership potential which Paul saw. But there was one problem – Timothy's father, a Greek, was not in the church, nor was he circumcised. Yet, Jewish identity was established not by the father, but by the mother, which is much more secure, so Timothy was regarded as a Jew, but was apparently uncircumcised due to his father's wishes. So as Paul traveled to other synagogues, those there would realize Timothy, a Jew, was not living up to the biblical standards, and would have annulled Paul's credentials. So Paul had Timothy circumcised to avoid further conflicts. This, by the way, shows that a Jewish born convert would do well to be circumcised because of his heritage.

This issue was later brought up, when Paul arrived in Jerusalem, "On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach *all the Jews* who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to *the customs* [traditions]...but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.'" (Acts 21:18-25).

So Paul was never authorized to ban circumcision – it still had a purpose as an identity marker for a Jew – but it wasn't necessary as a sign of salvation. Notice it also dealt with *the customs*.