

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15

- In Acts 15, we see the issue of gentile inclusion reach a boiling point and we also see the resolution of that tension. The findings of the early Jerusalem council act as a baseline of understanding and should resonate throughout the centuries as the definitive ruling on the issue. It is perhaps the capstone of the issue for the early Messianic community. Unfortunately, many modern theologians and Bible teachers are not content with this original Spirit-led wisdom and continually challenge what the Scripture actually states. Let us not follow that path but seek to understand what the text actually says. It is critically important to keep “the issue” correctly in focus as we proceed through the chapter. Many theologians and Bible teachers change the issue into something that was not being addressed. If you answer the wrong question, you will get a wrong result.
- Over the last 14 chapters, Luke has presented us with

a progressive history of the expansion of the gospel message to Jews, then to Samaritans and finally to gentiles. Consider how this is a fulfillment of the following Scriptures:

- Matthew 28:19,20
- Luke 24:47
- Acts 1:8
- In Acts 14:26-28, we found the Apostles had returned to Antioch, their starting point for their travels.
- In Acts 15:1-2, we learn of some men who came down from Judea, referring to Jerusalem.
 - What were they teaching?
 - Were they referring to “how much Torah is applicable to gentiles”?
 - Was their “issue” related to the salvation of the gentiles?
- The “issue” at hand was whether a gentile could be “saved” without undergoing the Rabbinic invention of ritual conversion, culminating in circumcision.

- Is there any Scripture, anywhere in the Torah, that would support their theology and practice?
- According to verse 2, were Paul and Barnabas in agreement with their view?
- How did the men of Antioch decide to resolve this issue?
- According to verse 4, when Paul and Barnabas and a few others arrived in Jerusalem, what was their reception like?
- Verse 5 describes a sub-set of the community in Jerusalem.
 - What sect were they attached to?
 - Were they believers in Yeshua?
 - What was their position regarding gentile inclusion?
 - Based on the above, is it possible for people today to be “believers”, yet be under the sway of other “traditions of men” that are shown to be in conflict with the Scriptures?
- Verse 6 states, “The emissaries and the elders were gath-

ered together to see about this matter”.

- What was “this matter” the text refers to?
- Did “this matter” have anything to do with how much of the Torah is applicable to gentiles or was it the stated “issue” in verse 1?
- Verse 7 states that “there had been much discussion”.
 - It would be fascinating to have all that “much discussion” recorded for us to review and ponder upon. Unfortunately, we do not. Let us be content and limit ourselves to “what is written” and avoid speculation.
- According to verse 7, Peter rose up to speak.
 - Peter recalls the prior incident of the gentile Cornelius and his family all coming to faith, as recorded in Acts 10.
- In verse 8, Peter states that “God, who knows the heart, testified about them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just like He did to us”.
 - Does his use of the phrase, “just like He did to us”,

imply a sameness or a difference?

- In verse 9, he further states, “He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.”
 - Is Peter affirming a “separate path for gentiles” or is he refuting such a notion?
 - Is anyone’s heart cleansed by faith or by some other means?
- Verse 10 refers to a “yoke” being placed on their necks.
 - Within Rabbinic Judaism, the word “yoke” refers to the “whole Torah”, which includes the Oral Torah, the Rabbinic man-made traditions and rulings.
 - Peter is contrasting this was simple faith in Yeshua as the only requisite for salvation, Jew or gentile.
- In verse 11, how does Peter resolve the answer to the original “issue” at hand?
 - How does the phrase “just as they are” act as the exclamation point on his argument?
- Verse 12 states, “All the multitude kept silence, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul reporting what signs and

wonders God had done among the nations through them”.

- What do you make of the parties to the issue remaining silent and listening?
- How difficult is it today to get arguing parties to remain silent and listen?
- What do you think was the effect on the hearers of all those adventures of Paul and Barnabas that we have read about in the last few chapters?
- In verse 13, we see Jacob (Yaakov), the Lord’s brother and leader of the Jerusalem council, stand and introduce an opinion for them to consider and vote on to resolve the issue at hand.
 - What was the issue, again? See verses 1 and 5.
- In verses 14-18, Jacob gives a Scriptural basis for this inclusion of the gentiles from Amos 9:11,12.
 - Jacob is stating that the Kingdom of the House of David will be rebuilt and that all the nations (gentiles) that God has favorably dealt with will bear His name and be included.

- The gentiles that Paul and Barnabas and Peter have all witnessed regarding represent those gentiles who call on the name of the Lord.
- Verses 19-20 record the decision by the council to the “issue” question raised in verse 1 about gentiles needing to undergo ritual conversion “to be saved”. Jacob begins his judgment statement with “that we don’t trouble those from among the gentiles who turn to God”. Other translations say, “that we should not make it difficult”.
- As a criterion for salvation, why is it important to not “make it difficult”?
- Are there examples today of variations of the gospel message that “add to” the message with legalistic interpretations? Why is this wrong?
- Can it ever be true that adding to the gospel message is not, in effect, subtracting from it?
- Verse 20 lists four specific minimum requirements that the council should adopt in relation to Jewish/gentile relations.
 - To abstain from the pollution of idols.

- From sexual immorality.
- From what is strangled.
- From blood.
- They obviously did not believe this list, or any list of requirements, should be added to the criterion for a valid salvation experience.
 - Does this list provide some kind of blanket exemption for the gentiles from participating in any of the rest of the Torah?
- These four requirements have their basis in Jewish/gentile table fellowship. Remember that the gentiles being referred to here are largely coming to faith directly from paganism and they have little to no knowledge about the Torah. These four requirements have everything to do with pagan practices at the local temples. Gentiles coming to faith had to have some minimum understanding of these prohibitions, not to “get saved” but because they “were saved” by faith and needed to interact at the synagogue to learn more.
- Verse 21 finalizes the reasoning of the Jerusalem council by stating, “For Moses from generations of old has in

every city those who proclaim him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath”.

- The word “For” links this as the reasoning of the previous statements.
- Referring to Moses means referring to the Torah, as this is read every Sabbath.
- The overall wisdom of the council is that, once some minimum standards to allow Jewish/gentile fellowship are established, these new gentile believers will be in attendance at the synagogue every Sabbath to hear the rest of the Torah and grow in their Torah-based faith.
- There is a logic to the sequence here. Faith comes first, followed by growing in maturity and observing the Word of God. The council is applying the wisdom of “not putting the cart before the horse” and demanding observance of Torah or Rabbinic inventions as a requirement to salvation. As noted by the Apostles themselves, that does not work for Jew or for gentile.
- According to verse 22, what was the reaction of the

assembly to this resolution to the initial “issue” from verse 1?

- What did they do?
- Verses 23-29 record the text of the official letter sent by the leadership of the Jerusalem council.
 - To whom was the letter addressed?
- The letter acknowledged that “some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the Torah.’ to whom we gave no commandment.”
 - Why do you think it was important for the council to acknowledge the error of this previous teaching and to distance themselves from any connection with these teachers?
 - How does legalistic teaching “trouble and unsettle” the soul?
- The text states that the council had “come to one accord”.
 - How important is to be “in one accord” in matters of

essential questions of the faith?

- How difficult is that today?
- Is it even possible?
- In verse 30, Paul and Barnabas and other chosen representatives from Jerusalem, brought the letter to the congregation in Antioch.
- In verse 31-35, what was the reaction there?
- In verses 36-41, we see Paul wanting to take Barnabas and revisit their previously established congregations in the area.
 - Who did Barnabas want to take along?
 - Why did Paul object?
 - What happened between Paul and Barnabas?
 - Where did they each ultimately go?
- Was the rift between Paul and Mark permanent? Consider the following Scriptures:
 - Philemon 1:24

- Colossians 4:10
- 2Timothy 4:11