

FPFWC Christian Development



Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

November 2023

Fall Quarter

November 4, 2023

Lesson #1 – Freedom From Expectations

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Acts 15:1-11

ICE BREAKER –

1. When dealing with difficult issues, what do we need to include in the decision-making process?
2. How should believers handle disputes regarding nonessential doctrines?
3. What steps can you take to ensure that you are being attentive to the leading of God's Spirit?

Key Verse – God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.—Acts 15:8–9

LESSON BACKGROUND

Most of Jesus' earliest followers were Jewish, and they still participated in many of the practices of Judaism. For example, until the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, Jewish followers of Jesus participated in some of the temple's ceremonies (examples: Acts 3:1; 21:26). Additionally, throughout the Roman Empire, Jewish believers continued to participate in the synagogues (example: 17:1–2). Jews gathered in these buildings for worship and teaching from the Scriptures.

Some Gentiles had become highly regarded within their local Jewish communities, partly because of their support of synagogues (example: Luke 7:1–10). The book of Acts mentions one such individual: Cornelius, a Gentile who "feared God" (Acts 10:1–2, 22). There is no indication that these Gentiles took up the requirements of Judaism. As a result, they were not considered "children of the stock of Abraham" (13:26).

There were, however, some Gentiles who chose to convert fully to Judaism. These converts were called "proselytes" (see Acts 13:43; compare 6:5). Male proselytes were required to be circumcised—a painful, even dangerous, surgical procedure in the days of rudimentary anesthetics and no antibiotics. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (see Genesis 17:9–14; compare Exodus 12:48). During the first century AD, some individuals had been teaching that Gentile followers of Jesus needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses (see Galatians 6:12–13). The reasoning for this position was that Israel had always been the distinct people of God. It was to Israel that God had revealed himself, given His law, and specified circumcision as the sign of His covenant. This group assumed that if God were making himself known to the nations, then the nations should be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

C. Lesson Context: The Jerusalem Council

The book of Acts was written by Luke. Acts is the second of a two-volume work by Luke addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1; see Luke 1:1–4). See the Lesson Context from lessons 1 and 2 regarding details about the author, Luke.

Prior to the events in this lesson, Paul and Barnabas, leaders of the first-century church, had been traveling throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These travels are identified as Paul's first missionary journey in AD 47–49 (Acts 13:4–14:28). The two visited various synagogues, where they taught from the Scriptures and preached the news of Jesus' resurrection (example: 13:32–33). They were not selective in choosing their audience; they preached to both Jews and Gentiles (see 14:1).

After their journeys, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (Acts 14:26–27), a city in modern-day Syria (not to be confused with another Antioch located in Pisidia; see 13:14). Antioch in Syria was located approximately 330 miles north of Jerusalem.

The events of Acts 15:4–29 depict a meeting sometimes called the "Jerusalem Council." This meeting took place in approximately AD 51. The council was an early attempt to answer the vital question of how to incorporate Gentiles into the people of God. The church's future depended on how the council answered this question.

LESSON COMMENTARY

Acts 15:1–4. As a result of the first missionary journey, the conversion of Gentiles alarmed a group of Jewish traditionalists who insisted on circumcision as an essential part of maintaining one's salvation experience. The issue was not about Gentile participation in the covenant people of God.

When a group of these traditionalists came from Judea to Antioch teaching that circumcision was essential for salvation, Paul and Barnabas correctly viewed this as a threat to God's grace. After a heated debate with the protestors, Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem and requested that the church resolve the issue. The meeting on this issue was called "the Jerusalem Council." Luke's account of this extremely important council explains how the early church resolved the issue of the law for Gentile believers. There is an enormous debate regarding the relationship of the Jerusalem Council with the timing of the writing of Paul's letter to the Galatians. It is not clear if Galatians was written before or after the Council. For these issues, see "Date" in the Introduction to Galatians. It is most likely that Galatians was written just prior to the Jerusalem council because Paul would likely have cited the decision of the council had it already happened.

15:5–6. Some men refers to those who belonged to "the party of the Pharisees" (cf. 15:5). It is not clear who these people from Judea were. They were Jewish people who may have been believing emissaries from the Jerusalem church who misrepresented the opinion of the apostles and the elders (vv. 5, 6), or they may have been false teachers with a Jewish background. However they are identified, they insisted that Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the other aspects of the law as befitting a member of God's covenant people. They insisted that every

Gentile become a Jew in order to be right with God. Because circumcision was the physical sign for identifying a person as a member of Israel (see Gn 17), the practice became the linchpin for adherence to the law of Moses. These Jews who advocated Gentile conversion to Judaism and obedience to the law were later rebuked as legalists in the epistle to the Galatians. Dissension and debate (v. 2) indicate that this was an enormously controversial issue, especially in light of Paul and Barnabas's practice of not requiring circumcision and law-keeping for those Gentiles already won to Christ. Paul's opponents understood Paul to be bringing a message that seemed to tell new followers of the Jewish Messiah that they need not obey God's laws.

Paul's concern was not primarily pragmatic, that adding circumcision to the gospel would hinder the success of the gospel. Rather, his concern was theological, that adding circumcision as a requirement would be adding works to the message of grace. Forcing Gentiles to submit to the law would distort the gospel of God's grace into a message of grace mixed with works. Paul and Barnabas protested this teaching and were appointed with a delegation to go to Jerusalem to resolve the controversy. The controversy broached in 15:1 is expanded in v. 5 and addressed beginning in v. 7. Some of the sect of the Pharisees (v. 5) are identified as believers.

Peter: Declaration of the Facts (15:7–11)

15:7–11. In the report on his ministry to Cornelius (vv. 7–11), Peter identified the heart of the issue. Salvation is by grace made available through the work of the Lord Jesus, not through the works of the law (v. 11). Even the Gentiles, as seen in the case of Cornelius, received the Lord by faith, received the Spirit, spoke in tongues, and were baptized. How could anyone think that they were not genuinely right with God, even apart from the works required by the law of Moses?

LESSON NUGGET – When God opens the door, (14:27) the enemy has somebody handy to try to close it. In this case, the legalist from Judea visited the Antioch church and taught that Gentiles must become Jews before they can be Christians. Their teaching was a denial of salvation by grace through faith. When sincere Christians disagree, they must get together, see what God is doing in his church, and find out what the Word has to say about it. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas told what God was doing among the Gentiles, and James related it to the word. (Amos 9:11-12)

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary