

Acts 15:1-35

January 15, 2006

A Dispute About Salvation (1-5)

- Here the church faces its first crisis of doctrine in a dispute over whether the Gentiles must be circumcised (v.1) and follow the Law of Moses (v.5)
- At issue is the very nature of the Gospel (1Co 15:1-4)
 - Thus the salvation of the Gentile believers was under attack!
 - One of the hardest things for the natural mind to grasp is the freeness of God's salvation
 - The legalist has always persecuted the free (Gal 4:29)
- Though this issue occurred between Jewish and Gentile believers centuries ago, it applies to matters of legalism today
- Legalism is a particularly perverse heresy (note the strong language Paul used in Galatians 3:1ff.)
 - It can keep the lost in bondage to sin in their futile attempts to reach God through self-effort (as man-made religions do)
 - It can likewise keep the saved in bondage to self-effort and from enjoying the true liberty Christ intends them to have (Gal 5:1ff.)

Peter's Testimony (6-11)

- Peter here shares what he learned during the experience at Cornelius' house (Ac 10:28ff.)
 - That God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (v.8; cf. 10:44-46)
 - That God makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile (v.9; cf. 10:34; Rom 3:22; 10:12)
- Note that God purifies people's hearts by faith (v.9)
- The Jews have never been able to keep the Law (v.10); indeed, no one has ever been saved through the Law (Ro 3:9; 19-24; Gal 3:23-25)
 - *At the same time God gave the law, He gave the lamb.* ^[4]
 - *At the same time God gave Moses the law-giver, God also gave Aaron the priest to make atonement for the broken law.* ^[4]
- Note what Peter says in verse 11
 - Not that the Gentiles are saved just like Jews are
 - But that Jews are saved just as Gentiles are!

James' Explanation (12-18)

- The notion that the Gentiles would be “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” is called a mystery in Ephesians 3:6
- Because the church is a mystery not foretold in the Old Testament, we should not be surprised that the early church didn't “get it” about the Gentiles entering the church on an equal footing with their Jewish brothers
- James explains (through Amos' prophecy about the Millennium) that God is in the business of saving Gentiles
 - “After this” means after the church is taken out of the world
 - “I will return” (v.16) is the second coming of Christ described in Revelation 19
 - When Christ returns, there will be a way for the remainder of men to “seek the Lord” (v.17)

James' Conclusion (19-21)

- Having dealt with the issue of the Jews troubling the Gentiles with the law (v.19), James goes on to stipulate that the Gentiles not trouble the Jews with their freedom (v.20)
- The forbidden practices pertain to particular issues of conscience (Ro 14; 1Co 8; 10) and to the issue of immorality
 - “Things contaminated by idols” refers to food offered to pagan gods and then sold in temple butcher shops. [5]
 - “Fornication” describes sexual sin in general, and the orgies associated with the worship of pagan gods in particular. [5]
 - “The meat of strangled animals and blood” involved dietary laws. [5]

The Letter To The Gentile Believers (22-29)

- To add credibility to the council's message, Judas and Silas accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch (v.22)
 - Paul and Barnabas otherwise would have had a credibility problem because of where they stood on the issue originally (v.2)
- Note that those who caused this disturbance and trouble were ones who went without the authorization of their leaders (v.24)
 - We might well assume that—had they sought the counsel and blessing of their leaders—none of this would have happened
- Paul and Barnabas are commended as men who “risked their lives” (v.26)
 - Men who risk their lives have the courage to overcome their fears
 - While we may not be asked to risk our lives, we certainly will be challenged to overcome our fears
- Note that what is “my judgment” in verse 19 becomes “good to the Holy Spirit and to us” in verse 28
 - “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19; cf. 18:18)

Bibliography

- [1] Scripture from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society
- [2] J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, Volume IV, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville TN, 1983.
- [3] H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts*, Loizeaux Brothers Inc, Neptune NJ, 1943.
- [4] Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979.
- [5] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Acts 13-28*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1996.
- [6] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Volume III, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1930.