

Paul and Barnabas had completed their first missionary journey. New churches were planted and elders were appointed. These new churches consisted mostly of Gentiles. Jews who had rejected the gospel followed Paul and Barnabas to stir up persecution everywhere they went, but they couldn't stop the churches from being established. The church that had sent Paul and Barnabas on this mission, Antioch in Syria, was thriving. It, too, consisted mostly of Gentiles. ¹ *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* Acts 15:1

The church in Judea consisted of Jews who had found Jesus to be the Messiah. They had a previous council meeting of the apostles and elders in which they determined that Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit through the message brought to them by Peter. (See Acts 11ⁱ.) Apparently there were some of those Messianic believers who believed Gentile converts must keep laws of Moses. Some Pharisees had become a part of the Jerusalem church. They held the keeping of the laws of Moses as an absolute priority if you were to be pleasing to God. The doctrine of Jesus having set us free from the law was not yet clearly established (Romans 7:4ⁱⁱ). The issue at hand was whether Gentiles needed to keep the laws, especially the covenant of circumcision. This ritual was one thing that kept Gentiles from converting to Judaism.

² *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.* Acts 15:2 Paul and Barnabas objected to their teaching and strongly debated them. The issue was whether salvation was by grace alone through faith alone or was any other work a part of salvation. Is the only requirement to believe and receive what Christ has done, or is anything else required? A team was sent from the church in Antioch to Jerusalem to settle the issue. Most of the Apostles were still in Jerusalem and they could determine what Jesus and the Scriptures had declared on this issue.

³ *So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers.* Acts 15:3 On their way to Jerusalem, they stopped at the various churches and told the testimonies of Gentiles who had come to Christ in Antioch and on the missionary journey. We just have the broader outline of what happened. When we meet these brothers and sisters in heaven, we, too, can hear the details of their conversions and transformed lives. Sharing testimonies brings great joy to all believers who hear them. It reminds us of our own conversions and the joy we experienced when we accepted Jesus as our Savior.

⁴ *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.* Acts 13:4 The church of Jerusalem, the apostles, and elders welcomed this team from Antioch. They shared the testimonies with them as well. ⁵ *But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."* Acts 15:5 Though these Pharisees believed in

Jesus, they thought everyone should keep the 613 laws God gave to Moses. It may have been the pride they had in being more pious than others or it may have been their personal conviction that since God ordered His people to keep those laws, so the Gentile converts should too. It was an issue that needed to be resolved.

Because we have the letters of Paul, the whole issue seems clear, but at that time it was a troubling question. It sneaks into the church today in various forms. Some claim you have to witness in a certain manner if you are a real Christian. Others claim you must be baptized in a certain way or by a certain denomination. Then there are those who say communion is essential. Things some believers say real believers never do are subtler forms of works added to salvation. That implies if you do those things you weren't born-again. The reason it is such a difficult issue today is that Christians should indeed live transformed lives and be different from the world (2 Corinthians 6:17-18ⁱⁱⁱ). But when we define too precisely what that looks like, we start re-creating the laws of Moses. We start to judge others by outward things instead of the heart. We add to what Jesus did, and that implies that what He accomplished was insufficient. The real issue is what Jesus accomplished and whether it is enough. James tells us the good works are a result of our faith (James 2:26^v), but the works he refers to are not the laws of Moses.

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. Acts 15:6 An official meeting to determine where the church stood on the issue of Gentile requirements for salvation was overseen by apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Once again, we see the important role of elders in the church. They even had a say along with the apostles (See verse 22; 1 Peter 5:1^v). That is because each one has the Spirit of God indwelling them. Each one's input is valued.

⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Acts 15:7-9 Peter reminded them of his testimony from ten years earlier of the conversion of the household of Cornelius and how the entire group of Gentiles were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues just like they had experienced at Pentecost. Peter was declaring that it is an issue of the heart. They were wholeheartedly seeking God (Deuteronomy 10:16^{vi}). The Law promised that if a person seeks God with their whole heart they will find Him (Deuteronomy 4:29^{vii}; Jeremiah 29:13-14^{viii}). God bore witness to that wholehearted condition by saving them and pouring out His Holy Spirit on them in the same way He did with the 120 Jews in the upper room at Pentecost. God will not pour His Holy Spirit in a vessel that is not sanctified. Our hearts are cleansed by faith in what Jesus did for us on the cross, whether we are Jew or Gentile. God looks at the heart, not the lineage or our works. No one can be good enough for God (Romans 3:23^x). We must repent and accept the goodness of Christ on our behalf. We must humble ourselves and realize Jesus paid it all. He lived the perfect life, fulfilling the law, and then took the punishment for our sins (Galatians 3:13^x).

10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? Acts 15:10 Jews were never able to keep all the laws of Moses and they knew it (James 2:10^{xi}). So why would the Jews then demand that the sanctified Gentiles keep them? The law was burden to the Jews. It showed them how sinful they were and their need for a Savior. Born-again Gentiles didn't need to hear that message. They already recognized their sin and accepted the Savior. A yoke was a fitting description of the law. Animals labored under a yoke that connected them to a weight of either a plow, a cart, or a mill. It was a connection to a constant burden to be pulled. Jesus did the work for us and trusting in Him sets us free from that yoke, replacing it with His easy yoke (Matthew 11:30^{xii}).

11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. Acts 15:11 Peter stated the obvious. Since no one was able to keep all the laws of Moses, the law never saved anyone. They will be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as Gentiles will. I should point out that some translations use the future tense, "will be" and others the present tense "are saved." In one sense, we are saved, for we have forever been made right with God. In another sense, we are being saved as we still stumble and fall short of the glory of God in our daily lives (Hebrews 10:14^{xiii}). But the point is that there is no difference between the salvation of Jew or Gentile, it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus alone apart from keeping the law (Romans 3:20^{xiv}).

12 And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. Acts 15:12 That seems to have ended the discussion with an irrefutable argument. No one was going to stand up and say they were justified by the law, for doing so would mean they hadn't placed their faith in Jesus to save them. Nor could they refute the fact that Gentiles had been filled with the Holy Spirit before they kept the law or were baptised. Barnabas and Paul added to Peter's points by sharing the testimonies of the Gentile ne believers. Signs and wonders were evidence that God loved the Gentiles and desired that they be saved. The fruit in their lives was evidence of salvation.

13 After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. Acts 15:13-14 James reminded them of their first council meeting in which they decided that God was welcoming Gentiles into the church. That was a precedent. Notice the phrase, "a people for his name." When you are adopted into a family, you take the family name (Deuteronomy 14:2^{xv}). You represent the family. Gentiles were called Christians just like the Jews were. They both represented Jesus to the communities in which they lived, as do we! May God help us to faithfully represent Him (2 Corinthians 4:11^{xvi})!

15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, 16 "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.' Acts 15:15-18 James went from the precedent that was set to the Scriptural backing for it from the prophets^{xvii}. He quoted Amos 9:11-12 from the Septuagint. Rabbi

sometimes would argue for amending interpretation of the Torah with the words of the prophets along with a quote from the Torah. We do not have a quote from the Torah in this text so we might assume this was an abbreviated form of all James said.^{xviii} Paul will later make the case in his letter to the Romans that to be a child of Abraham is by faith not blood line (Romans 9:6-8)^{xix}. James could have, and may have, argued from the promises to Abraham that the blessing to the world through Abraham's seed came through Jesus resulting in the salvation of the Gentiles and freedom from the bondage of the law (Genesis 12:3^{xx}; Romans 8:3-4^{xxi}). Paul makes that argument in Galatians 3:15-18^{xxii}. Amos and other Old Testament prophets clearly stated many times that the Gentiles will be a part of God's kingdom (Psalm 22:27^{xxiii}; Zechariah 2:11^{xxiv}).

The "tent of David" is not only the kingdom at the time of David, but that communion that David had with God (2 Samuel 7:18^{xxv}). David, even though not from the tribe of Levi, went in where the priest alone were allowed, and talked with God. Jesus, from the lineage of David, began a kingdom much more expansive than that of David. There are members of His kingdom living in every nation on earth. We are free to come before God in prayer at anytime, into the most holy place in heaven itself (Hebrews 4:16)^{xxvi}.

Because of precedent and the words of the prophets, James then gave his conclusion: *¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.*" Acts 15:19-21 Here is what they decided to tell the Gentile converts to Christ, all of which had to do with former pagan practices. Abstain from things polluted by idols. Doing so would appear that Christians also worshiped those idols. This was not something added to make one saved, but rather to demonstrate that they no longer believed in man made gods. It was very difficult for them because it would cause them to be ostracized by their communities. Natural disasters would be blamed on their refusal to worship the city gods. Guilds would not allow them to be members. But our message must be clear (1 Thessalonians 5:22)^{xxvii}.

In a similar way, we should be different from our culture in areas where our faith causes a difference. **We are to be more concerned about being Biblically correct than politically correct.** We differ from our own culture in many ways. Our culture increasingly worships sexual freedom and despises government. But we are new creatures in Christ and the Word teaches us sexual purity, moral boundaries for our good, and to honor those in authority (Romans 13:1-5)^{xxviii}.

The next instruction was to abstain from sexual immorality. Antioch in Pisidia was a very wicked city that worshiped sexual immorality right in their temple to the emperor. How were the Gentile believers to live? They were to make a break with their former habits and way of thinking and see marriage as the only place for sexual relations, for marriage of one man and one woman represents Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32)^{xxix}. Promiscuity and adultery pictures of unfaithfulness to our Lord and Savior. James was well aware of the culture in which the Gentiles lived and how these basic guidelines were needed to help them, not to be saved, but to live out their salvation.

The last command to the Gentiles was to refrain from eating animals that had been strangled and from blood. This was another part of pagan worship. It was also something Jews would find offensive to them. Hearing the gospel would be hindered if it came from someone who was breaking a law to which they so strictly held. We don't have that particular problem today, but we do have a similar problem depending on where you live. Whatever is taboo for the culture in which you reside, you should not flaunt the disavowing of it if you want to reach your neighbors. If your neighbors are Buddhists, don't brag about your love for hunting and fresh game. If your friends are Jewish, don't have them over for a pig roast (Romans 14:15)^{xxx}. We should strive not to offend and thereby have a greater opportunity to share what matters most.

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, Acts 15:22 There was a united consensus that the conclusion was from the Holy Spirit. They would send a letter and authenticate it with witnesses that came from the church in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 19:15^{xxxi}).

23 with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, Acts 15:23-24 It was important for the Gentiles believers to know that those who came from Jerusalem and told them they had to keep the law to be saved were not sent by the elders in Jerusalem. The one great difference between Christianity and all other faiths is our belief that works add nothing to our salvation. That is a humbling conviction and goes against the pride of man.

25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 15:25-26 The mother church in Jerusalem respected and honored the bravery and physical risks taken by Paul and Barnabas.

27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. Acts 15:27 Everything was to be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses. *28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: 29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."* Acts 15:28-29 What a relief it was for the Gentile converts to hear these simple instructions and how they were not necessary for salvation but merely guidelines for Christian living. Our guidelines are similar in that we should not appear to worship the things the world worships. Our lives should show that our priority is the one true Creator of all who saved us. Our words and actions should represent Jesus to a lost world. There must have been sighs of relief when the Gentiles heard that they did not have to keep the 613 laws of Moses. Paul and Barnabas must have also been pleased that they had understood correctly that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. And we should be thankful as well, very thankful, that Jesus paid it all!

Questions

- 1 What was the issue?
- 2 How did they decide to resolve it?
- 3 What did P&B do on the way to Jerusalem?
- 4 What group voiced dissent and why?
- 5 How does the same idea creep into the church today?
- 6 What was Peter's point?
- 7 So how are we saved?
- 8 How did James make his case?
- 9 Why those three instructions?
- 10 How can the third point apply to us?

ⁱ **Acts 11:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

ⁱⁱ **Romans 7:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

ⁱⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 6:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you,

¹⁸ and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

^{iv} **James 2:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

^v **1 Peter 5:1 (ESV)**

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:

^{vi} **Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

^{vii} **Deuteronomy 4:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.

^{viii} **Jeremiah 29:13-14 (ESV)**

¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

ix **Romans 3:23 (ESV)**

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

x **Galatians 3:13 (ESV)**

¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—

xi **James 2:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

xii **Matthew 11:30 (ESV)**

³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

xiii **Hebrews 10:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

xiv **Romans 3:20 (ESV)**

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

xv **Deuteronomy 14:2 (ESV)**

² For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

xvi **2 Corinthians 4:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

xvii James is using a pattern Hebrews referred to as *yelammedenu*. When a question of conduct is raised, the matter can be settled by precedent along with Scripture.

xviii *Taqqana* – to amend or alleviation an idea from the Torah using the Torah and the prophets. The idea amended here is that God commands His children to obey the laws of Moses.

xix **Romans 9:6-8 (ESV)**

⁶ But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel,

⁷ and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

xx **Genesis 12:3 (ESV)**

³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

xxi **Romans 8:3-4 (ESV)**

³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

xxii Galatians 3:15-18 (ESV)

¹⁵ To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified.

¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

xxiii Psalm 22:27 (ESV)

²⁷ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.

xxiv Zechariah 2:11 (ESV)

¹¹ And many nations shall join themselves to the LORD in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you.

xxv 2 Samuel 7:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ Then King David went in and sat before the LORD and said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?”

xxvi Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

xxvii 1 Thessalonians 5:22 (ESV)

²² Abstain from every form of evil.

xxviii Romans 13:1-5 (ESV)

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,

⁴ for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.

⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.

xxix Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)

³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

^{xxx} **Romans 14:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

^{xxx} **Deuteronomy 19:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established.