

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM (Acts 15:1-39)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 11

1. A review of the record.
 - A. Men from Judaea come to Antioch urging that no one could be saved without circumcision (1).
 - B. Paul and Barnabas answer them (2).
 - C. Paul and Barnabas were urged to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this generation (2).
 - D. The missionaries made use of the opportunity as they journeyed to tell what God had done through them (3-4).
 - E. The apostles and elders were gathered at Jerusalem to consider this question (6).
 - F. Peter testified that God had taught him that the Gentiles might be saved, by faith, as well as the Jews (7-11).
 - G. Paul and Barnabas testified of the signs and wonders God had wrought through them (12).
 - H. James showed that the testimony of the prophets agreed with the experience of Peter (13-21).
 - I. James proposed resolutions to forward to Antioch to settle the dispute (20-21).
 - J. The church sent Judas and Silas to explain their decision (22-29).
 - K. They fulfilled their mission and the church was comforted (30-35).
 - L. Paul and Barnabas planned another missionary journey, but disagreed and separated (36-40).

2. Practical lessons.
 - A. It is well to treat disputants seriously and try to answer them.
 - B. The will of the Lord should be sought in settling every dispute.
 - C. When there is a dispute in the church it ought not to occupy the burden of our minds and conversation.
 - D. A church court ought to be firm but, as far as possible, avoid harshness.
 - E. Decided differences of opinion may occur even between good men.
 - F. Even disputes among brethren may be overruled to the extension of the Gospel.
 - G. Men of every class are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas had returned from their first missionary journey. They “**had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles**” (14:27). The church at Antioch had become enthused over the success of the missionaries. As is frequently the case, when the work of the church is prospering, Satan tried to dampen the enthusiasm by engendering a dispute to cause division among the members.

DISPUTE AT ANTIOPCH

“**certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved**” (15:1). These men were evidently Pharisees. They may have been earnest men, but they were not properly informed. They had an opportunity to know better before this time in the history of the church. There had already been a contention in Jerusalem about the reception of Gentiles who were not circumcised. Peter had told them that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles as upon the Jews at Pentecost when he had gone to Caesarea. They had agreed that God had granted unto the Gentiles repentance unto life: “**When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life**” (Acts 11:18).

THE MISSIONARIES ANSWER

Paul and Barnabas “**had no small dissension and disputation with them**” (15:2). These men from Judaea were not merely arguing that it was expedient that Christians should be circumcised; but they were urging that it was essential to salvation. Paul thought it expedient at times, that men should be circumcised. He circumcised Timothy in order that he might be a more acceptable missionary among the Jews: “**Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek**” (16:3). But when men contended that circumcision was essential to salvation Paul and Barnabas withheld them resolutely.

AN APPEAL TO THE APOSTLES AND ELDERS

The brethren asked Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. Since it was a matter of such great importance that it was said to affect the salvation of men it ought to be settled according to the teaching of Christ and the revelation of the Holy Spirit. There had been a time when circumcision was commanded of God. The whole church should know why it was not necessary in the Christian church.

MISSIONARIES USE OPPORTUNITY

As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem they did not spread a spirit of contention, but rather a spirit of joy.

As they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria they told how God had converted the Gentiles through their ministry. The report of their missionary work brought joy to these people and also at Jerusalem as it had done at Antioch. This was the first time that Paul had been received favorably by the Christians at Jerusalem. Some years before he had been their most bitter opponent. When he returned from Damascus, a Christian, they were afraid of him at first. Now he is returning to contend against such zealous Pharisees as he himself had been. We would like to have been there to hear Paul tell the church at Jerusalem of the trials and triumphs of their first missionary journey.

APOSTLES AND ELDERS GATHERED

The apostles and elders were gathered to consider the necessity of circumcision. This has been called the first general assembly of the Christian church. It does not seem to have been of such proportions. The church at Antioch asked for the advice of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. We are not told from what distance the elders were gathered but we suppose they were residents of Jerusalem. There is nothing to indicate that the assembly was made up of elders and ministers from over the whole Christian church. Elders had already been ordained in the churches which were established in Asia Minor. We have no reason to believe that they waited to secure a delegation from these churches. It was to the apostles particularly that the will of Christ had been revealed, and it was their advice especially which was sought.

PETER'S TESTIMONY

Peter testified that God had taught him that the Gentiles might be saved as well as the Jews. He said that God gave them the Holy Spirit as He did unto the Jews and that He "**put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith**" (15:9). He urged them not to put "**a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they**" (15:10-11).

PAUL'S AND BARNABAS' TESTIMONY

Paul and Barnabas told of the signs and wonders which God had wrought among the Gentiles through them. God had thus given his approval to their teaching in a miraculous manner. If they had been offending God by their teaching he would not thus have manifested his approval.

JAMES' TESTIMONY

James showed that the testimony of the prophets agreed with that of the experience of Peter. He quoted from Amos: "**In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this**" (Amos 9:11-12).

This was to show that it was foretold of old that the Gentiles were to be called. He showed, first, that there was to be a greater King than David and that there was to be a new kingdom set up; secondly, that in this kingdom the Gentiles were to have an equal place with the Jews; thirdly, that this was not a new discovery, but it had been the plan of God from the beginning; and finally, that this does not set aside the law of Moses. Some of the law of Moses has been fulfilled, but it is still read, and worthy of being read and studied by God's people.

JAMES' RESOLUTIONS

James proposed that they write some resolutions to be forwarded to the church at Antioch in order to settle the dispute which had arisen. They should, he believed, direct them to "**abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood**" (15:20). These resolutions, in substance, were agreed to by the apostles and elders and the whole church at Jerusalem, and it was decided that they should be sent to Antioch.

JUDAS AND SILAS SENT

The apostles and elders were very desirous, not only that the disputants might be silenced but that they might be convinced. They knew that a mere written message may sound cold and harsh when it is not so intended. They, therefore, sent two of the chief men among them to explain their findings and win the members who had been engaged in the contention. They also assured them of their love for, and confidence in, Paul and Barnabas. Judas and Silas, who were sent, were to tell the members of the church that the decrees which they had agreed upon were according to the will of the Holy Spirit.

THEIR MISSION FULFILLED

Judas and Silas fulfilled their mission. The members at Antioch were satisfied and rejoiced for the exhortation of these men. They were prophets and exhorted and established the brethren as they taught them for some days. When they felt their work was accomplished at Antioch Judas decided to return, but Silas remained for a longer time.

ANOTHER MISSIONARY JOURNEY

After some days Paul proposed to Barnabas that they return to visit the brethren in every city where they had already preached, and see how the work was prospering. They were agreed upon the duty of going, but they differed as to the personnel of the missionary party.

PAUL AND BARNABAS SEPARATE

Barnabas wanted to take with them John Mark. Paul did not want to take Mark again because he withdrew from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

As a result, there arose a sharp contention between them, “**that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus**” (15:39). “**Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches**” (15:40-41).

TREAT OBJECTORS SERIOUSLY

When objectors begin to cause a dispute in the church it is better to give them serious consideration and try to answer them. Even capable men may not be able to satisfy such persons. Paul and Barnabas were not able to satisfy the objectors at Antioch, but their answers were valuable and when they were sustained by the apostles and the whole church at Jerusalem the dispute was settled to the satisfaction and joy of the brethren of Antioch. When Paul was not able to satisfy all contenders we can scarcely expect to be able to be successful in every case, but an earnest serious effort may accomplish a more favorable result than we had at first expected.

When one has learned to control his temper he displays to every opponent an example of Christian conduct. It is better to honor Christ by self-control than it is to win the applause of men by a sharp and bitter answer. A father differed with his pastor as to whether his daughter was prepared to unite with the church. The pastor thought that she gave every evidence of being a Christian and felt sure that she had made the risen life her own. Her father insisted that she was not old enough and was not ready to make a profession of faith until one day he saw a playmate slap her in the face. For just a moment the little girl's face flamed; her hand was raised as if to return the blow. Then, suddenly the hand dropped to her side, while a look of peace came to her face. “I doubt no longer,” the happy father said a little later to his pastor. It would be well if all older Christians when provoked by a dispute in the church might manifest a similar spirit of control; then Christ would be honored and the dispute settled to the glory of God.

TRY TO PLEASE THE Holy Spirit

The will of God should be sought in settling every dispute in the church. The conclusion of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem “**For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost**” (15:28). The only way that we can arrive at a conclusion which will please the Holy Spirit is to seek His guidance from the very first. If doctrinal disputes are settled according to the Word of God we may be very sure that our decision will seem good to the Holy Spirit.

Dr. J.H. Jowett once spoke in this way: “A day or two ago I was at the end of the Palisades on the Hudson, where I could see some of the beauty of that most noble river. But a friend at my side gave me a pair of glasses, and I looked upon the scene again, and oh, how much more profoundly I could search the hidden things. The trees, and living things moving here and there, and smaller beauties, came into view.” When the Holy Spirit enlightens our understanding, it is like giving us another lens and we can look with increased power upon the Word of God; we can apprehend more clearly its application to our perplexities of life, and can be more certain that we speak and act according to his will.

DO NOT BE BURDENED WITH A DISPUTE

When there is a dispute in the church it ought not to burden our minds and conversation. Paul and Barnabas kept on testifying and preaching Christ. They did not tell their trouble over and over as they went from place to place on the road to Jerusalem. They told of the conversion of the Gentiles and the work which God had done through them. They left, not a trail of bitterness, but of joy behind them. Our burden ought to be to tell what God has done and is doing in the world. We do not help ourselves; we do not help the church by telling of the disputes everywhere we go. “**where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth**” (Proverbs 26:20). Where missionaries, and all active servants of God, tell of the wonderful works which the Lord is doing in the world Christian men and women are filled with joy.

FIRMNESS WITHOUT HARSHNESS

A church court ought to be firm, but as far as possible avoid harshness. The apostles and elders at Jerusalem could not yield to the idea that circumcision was necessary in order that men might be saved. They did, however, exercise caution that they should not answer the Pharisees harshly. If they had done so the church might have been rent asunder. One of the great problems of members of a church court in every age is to hold firmly to principle, and do so in a meek and Christ-like spirit. It is not always possible to be true to Christ and not give offence, but it is our duty to make an effort so to speak and act. This first council of the early church is worthy of our careful consideration that we may learn the method of the apostles in deciding a troublesome question, and at the same time foster the work of the church.

CONTENTION BETWEEN GOOD MEN

Decided differences of opinion may occur between good men. There arose a sharp contention between Paul and Barnabas concerning the acceptability of Mark as a missionary companion. It was no doubt more than a personal matter with Paul. He perhaps thought that the Lord’s work would be hindered by the presence of a wavering missionary. Mark had turned back once, he would not try him again until he had proved that he was ready to endure hardships with Christ. Mark became a faithful missionary afterward. This very contention may have had something to do with the change which came over him. No one doubts that Paul and Barnabas were both good men. They each became heated in this dispute. I think they would both regret the words which they spoke afterward. We have evidence that they were good friends afterward and that Paul loved and respected Mark. There is this consolation in it, that we know very devout men have failed as we fail. There is also the warning against failing as they failed. If we do not allow our contention to become sharp; if we withhold words that cut and sting, we will not have to regret our conduct afterward. We are in duty bound to oppose wrong. We should be ready to meet an opponent of truth face to face, but always as a Christian gentleman. We should remember the example of our Lord that “**when he was reviled, he reviled not again**” (I Peter 2:23).

There should not be an angry dispute when men differ about the best policy or the best men to use in Christian work. Paul and Barnabas had remained calm when they had argued with the Pharisees about a more important matter.

Disputes in the church are often more heated when they are over small matters than when over great ones. When men discuss great matters they often expect opposition and prepare for it. When discussing small matters they are frequently caught off their guard and lose control of their temper. We have therefore the more need of being ever on our guard against giving way to anger. We have an example, in this regard, in Paul Louis Couriera. When he was assailed with great bitterness by a French professor, he quietly remarked: "I fancy he must be vexed. He called me Jacobin, rebel, plagiarist, thief, poisoner, forger, leper, madman, imposter, libeler, a grimacing rag-picker. I gather what he wants to say. He means that he and I are not of the same opinion, and that is only his way of putting it."

DISPUTES OVERRULED FOR GOD

Even disputes among brethren may be overruled to the extension of the Gospel. The dispute between Paul and Barnabas resulted in two missionary bands in place of one. The two bands went in different directions and thus extended the Gospel in different fields. Thus God causes, not only the wrath of His enemies, but the wrath of good men to praise him. God allowed the disciples of the church to be driven out from Jerusalem into new fields by means of persecution; he allowed the first missionary band to be divided to go into different fields by reason of a wayward missionary and a resultant dispute concerning him. This does not indicate that God approves of persecution, or that he condones hot altercations between brethren, but it shows that he can make use of all forces to contribute to the spreading of the Gospel and the honoring of his holy name.

ALL ARE SAVED BY GRACE

Peter pointed out the great fact to the council that the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles are cleansed by faith and that they are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. Every generation needs to be impressed with this great Gospel truth. There has been a tendency in every age for men to think that they will be saved by reason of their birth or because of their good works. The early church had to face this false doctrine, Luther had to face it, we still have to face it in our day. Paul was the apostle who bore the brunt of this dispute, and he was the one who, more than any other, emphasized the fact that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Dr. Joseph Parker was once asked the question: "Why did Jesus chose Judas?" His reply was: "I do not know, but I have a harder question; why did He choose me?" As it has been said: "Our Divine Lord takes the bitter, thorny, unlovely lives of men and transforms them by His grace into beauty, fruitfulness and glorious usefulness. In His hands even the most unpromising are made into His own likeness."

Some of the wonders of God's grace are told in the late S.H. Hadley's story, "*Down in Water Street.*" One of the characters whom he describes was known as Old Colonel. This man wandered into the mission rooms one night. He was over six feet tall and sixty years of age, but he appeared to be at least a hundred.

“His dirty grey beard was a foot long, and his hair, of the same color, hung a foot down his back. His eyes were bleared, and the hue of his face showed that he had long been a stranger to water. He wore an old ragged overcoat fastened with a nail. His trousers could hardly be called a part of his outfit, for they were little more than holes with rags tied around them. On his feet, in place of shoes, were rags tied up with strings. Whiskey had brought him to this condition. After graduating from college he had studied law in the office of Lincoln’s great war secretary, E.M. Stanton; but the demon drink had ruined his prospects, and reduced him to the level of the lowest beasts. But ‘Down in Water Street’ Jesus Christ took hold of him. On his knees for six nights in succession the old Colonel cried out, ‘O Lord, if it is not too late, forgive this poor old sinner.’ The seventh night he arose and said, ‘Brother Hadley, I am saved.’ ‘I believe you,’ said Hadley. From that instant the old gentleman fairly loathed rum. God restored his intellect. His youth returned and he became a dignified Christian gentleman, faithful to the day of his death.” His life’s story is a wonderful testimony to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus.

QUESTIONS (Acts 15:1-39)

1. What brought dissension into the church at Antioch?
2. How does Satan often dissipate the work of a prospering church?
3. How did the Christians decide to settle the dispute about circumcision?
4. In what mood and with what message did Paul and Barnabas pass on their way to Jerusalem?
5. What was the first message they brought to Jerusalem?
6. What discussion did the Pharisees inject?
7. Who were gathered to consider the matter?
8. Who were some of the principal speakers?
9. What was the substance of Peter’s argument?
10. What was the testimony of Paul and Barnabas?
11. What was the argument of James?
12. What resolutions did they agree upon to send to the Gentiles?
13. Why were Judas and Silas sent to Antioch?
14. What additional work did they do?
15. What was the effect upon the church?
16. What caused the separation of Paul and Barnabas?
17. Whose will ought to be sought in settling every dispute?
18. When there is a dispute in the church should it occupy the burden of our minds and conversation?
19. How does God overrule disputes among brethren?
20. Were Paul’s plans changed for the better? Explain?

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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