

The First Reformation

Part One

Acts 15:1-12

Introduction

If you ask the average person on the street, “What is a Christian?” or “How can you spot a Christian?” you will get ninety-nine different answers today.

Some friends at IBM sent a lengthy email to me of weekly humor. It tells how to spot someone from the deep south; someone called by the less than flattering name of “redneck”. Have you heard any of this stuff? I know of a comedian who made a fortune doing this line of humor, but I do not believe he came up with any of these. In fact, I am quite sure the engineers at IBM came up with them. The reason I am so sure is because half of them are too technical too understand! I thought you might appreciate some of my friends’ humor.

You might be a redneck if (my seminary professors would shoot me for this!):

- the “Home Shopping Channel” operator recognizes your voice;
- you hammer bottle caps into the frame of your front door to make it look nice (I could be risking my life here);
- your “momma” has ammunition on her Christmas list;
- there are more than five McDonald’s bags on the floorboard of your car (I did not appreciate that one!);
- you think Beef Jerky and Moon Pies are two of the major food groups;

- the fifth grade is referred to as your senior year;
- you have more than two brothers named Junior;
- you had to remove a toothpick for wedding pictures;
- on really special occasions you use your Elvis jello mold;
- the antenna on your truck is a danger to low flying airplanes;
- your house does not have curtains, but your truck does;
- you just now bought an 8-track player to put in your truck;
- you spent more on your pickup truck than on your education;
- you saved lots of money on your honeymoon by going deer hunting instead;
- taking your wife on a cruise means circling the Dairy Queen;
- you do not think any of this is very funny.

Now that you can spot a “redneck,” what do you do if you spot yourself in that list?!

A brief history

On October 31, 1517, a monk named Martin Luther nailed his famous *95 Theses* on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He was challenging the practices of selling forgiveness, papal

infallibility, and most importantly, the definition of justification by faith alone.

There had been others before Luther who had questioned the church – and paid the price – but this was different. Luther was a clergyman from the “inside” who was saying the definition of a Christian was something different than the established church’s definition.

The church was saying, “You might be a Christian if you do penance, buy indulgences, go to mass, confess your sins to the priest . . .”

Martin Luther, however, was coming up with a totally different list. So, in 1517, the rumblings of a reformation began.

The following year, heated debates were held in Augsburg and the lines were clearly drawn. It was in Augsburg where the battle cry of the Reformation, “sola scriptura,” or “the scriptures alone,” was forged.

Philip Melancthon, whose biography I recently finished reading, was a brilliant Greek professor at Wittenberg and Martin Luther’s closest friend. It was actually Melancthon who put into writing the *Loci* – the first systematic theology of the what would become the Protestant or the “protesting” movement.

Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and others became the heroes of the liberated German people. The liberation came through their preaching and teaching of a free gospel and full forgiveness. They also became enemies of the church.

The issues at stake were not trivial. They were not debating the color of the carpet or which side the piano should be on at the front of the church. They were risking their lives over the definition of salvation, the authority of church councils and leaders, the forgiveness of sins, and what would give someone entrance into the church.

I believe we are living in an exciting time. It is a period in church history when the debate over the nature and definition of salvation is once again in the forefront. We are hearing the rumblings again of the sixteenth century eruption; we are hearing the cry “sola scriptura” as the primary axiom around which every other issue and debate revolves.

Nearly every other day, there is something in the newspapers or magazines about the Catholic and Protestant debate over church issues and doctrine. A recent article in our local newspaper reported the accord that was struck between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Roman Catholic

church. They declared the issues of the reformation to be no longer dividing issues today.

I have an issue of *Newsweek* magazine in which the cover reads, “The Meaning of Mary: A Struggle Over Her Role Grows Within the Church”. The article says,

There is an incredible surge going on within the catholic community to have a new dogma made. More than 100,000 signatures are arriving every month in Rome from people around the world who want to see Mary take the next step in a progression of promotions that began in 431, when she was given the title Mother of God, to 1854, when she was declared sinless, to 1950, when she was declared to have been taken up bodily into heaven instead of dying. Now, the movement is gaining ground to have her formally declared Co-Redeemer.

The article explained that the current pope is quite convinced that Mary is the co-redeemer of humanity (he has said so at least five times). In fact, in one quote, dated April, 1997, he says,

Having created man “male and female,” the Lord also wants to place the New Eve beside the New Adam [the new Adam being Christ] in the Redemption. Mary, the New Eve, thus becomes a perfect icon of the church. We can therefore turn to the Blessed Virgin, trustfully imploring her aid in the singular role entrusted to her by God, the role of co-operator in the Redemption.

Mother Angelica, a nun whose *Eternal Word Television Network* reaches fifty-five million homes in thirty-eight countries, said on the air,

If the Holy Father [Pope] would define this dogma, it would save the world from great catastrophes and loosen God’s mercy even more upon this world.

What I found interesting is that *Newsweek*, a secular magazine, had the insight to simply state,

This view seems to contradict the basic New Testament belief that, “There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 2:5).

That, ladies and gentlemen, is the core of the issue – what do the scriptures say? This is the singular point which could settle the debate. What is so exciting to me is that for the first time in years, the dividing line between truth and error will be the cry of the reformation, “sola scriptura”. The scriptures

alone teach what is sufficient for faith and practice. The scriptures alone answer the question, “What must I do to be saved?”

That question, by the way, has raged in councils and the writings of theologians since the church began. In fact, the first reformation within the church began just twenty years or so after Jesus Christ ascended to the Father. The church in the first century reached a boiling point over the question, “What does a Christian look like; what does a person have to do to be saved?”

The book of Acts, in chapter 15, gives us the whole story.

Before we begin our discussion of this chapter, let me say that I do not want anyone to misunderstand my introduction to this study. I am not on a campaign against Catholics; I am not arguing about people, I am arguing for a pure gospel. I am not against Catholics, I am against Roman Catholic theology – and any doctrine that is at odds with evangelicalism, which historically has believed in the authority of scripture alone and justification by faith in Christ alone.

The First Reformation

Now, in Acts, chapter 15, a storm is brewing in Jerusalem, and it is spilling over in Antioch.

The church is taking on a new look – a Gentile look. You need to understand that the Jews are no longer the majority stockholders in the church – it is becoming a Gentile church. The focus of ministry has swung away from Jerusalem and centered on Antioch, where Paul serves on and off as the Pastor of Missions.

Locking horns . . . Dissenting viewpoints

The trouble is, the Jews are struggling, and rightly so, with the vast changes. Preeminent among them is the inclusion of the uncircumcised Gentile into the church as a member with full rights and standing.

The “Judaizer’s” view – Salvation is faith in Christ plus circumcision

That is the context behind the very first verse of Acts, chapter 15.

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

There you have it, pure and simple, you cannot be saved unless you believe in Jesus Christ *plus* bear the mark of circumcision.

The “Reformer’s” view – Salvation is faith in Christ plus nothing

Now you may say, “This is no big deal. Surely no one got caught up in this issue. It’s obvious that you don’t have to be circumcised to become a Christian. That’s easy, right?”

Wrong. Turn to Galatians, chapter 2, to discover with me, just how deeply this controversy developed. Chapter 2 recounts that, just prior to the Jerusalem council of Acts, chapter 15, the dissension was growing in Antioch. It gives you a behind the scenes look at the brewing discord. Look at verses 11 through 16.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.

The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

“We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles;

“nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

Did you notice who was caught up in the controversy over the inclusion of the Gentile believers? Verse 12 tells us that Peter used to eat with the Gentiles, but when the Jewish leaders came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof.

In other words, Peter began to act hypocritically out of fear of the prominent Jewish leaders. He was

eating with Gentiles, enjoying some barbecued ribs and smoked sausage, until some “big wigs” came to visit from his home church in Jerusalem. Suddenly, the Gentiles noticed Peter was not coming to supper anymore. In fact, he would not even speak to them in the street. Peter did not want to tarnish his Jewish reputation.

Notice who else got caught up in this racial division, in verse 13, “The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy . . .”. The church is now divided – the Jewish and the Gentile believers are sitting on different sides of the auditorium; they do not have dinner on the grounds anymore; the men’s softball team disbanded because the pitcher was a Jew and the catcher was a Gentile and they refused to touch the same ball; little Isaac cannot go over to Alexander’s house to play anymore because Alex’s mom does not have a kosher kitchen. This issue divided the church!

Did you notice the shocking statement in the latter part of verse 13? It says that, “. . . even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.” Paul’s own companion, the man who, years earlier, had begun the Antioch revival; the man who first declared the Gentiles true believers, is now struggling because of influential Jewish leaders and his own years of tradition and worship.

The passive voice for the verb “carried away” indicates that while Barnabas did not play an active role in the hypocrisy, he was indeed swept off his balance concerning the issue. He understood where the Jews were coming from and yet, he sympathized with the Gentiles. He was restored to balance fairly quickly because he joins Paul in debating the Jewish leaders in Acts, chapter 15.

So, we are not talking about a disagreement over the wallpaper in the lady’s room, we are talking about a division over the nature and definition of salvation. How do I know that? Because of what happened in verse 14.

But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of them all .

..

This disagreement is about more than barbecue, it is a matter of doctrine. So Paul grabs Peter by the collar and in the presence of them all, evidently at the next worship service, says, in effect, “Peter, there are going to be millions of people one day who will think you were as infallible as the first pope, but let me tell you something Peter, you’re dead wrong on this, you

have really stubbed your theological toe and you’re leading everyone astray. Have you forgotten, Peter, that a Gentile is not saved by acting like a Jew?”

As verse 16 tells us,

. . . that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law . . .

“C’mon Peter, get it straight! Stop this hypocrisy now!”

By the way, this public rebuke of Peter evidently resulted in Peter acknowledging his error. By the time you get to Acts, chapter 15, it is Peter who becomes the chief spokesman in correcting the theology of the Jews and he casts his vote to include uncircumcised Gentiles as full members of the church.

Taking sides . . . Debating doctrine

Now let us return to Acts, chapter 15. Look at verses 1 through 5.

Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.

When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

For centuries, the male Gentile who chose to follow the God of Israel would be circumcised as an outward sign that he was following the covenant given to Abraham by God – thus symbolically

following the Law of Moses. Circumcision marked the people of God as separate, pure, and distinct from the surrounding nations.

In other words, what the synagogue has done for years to Gentile proselytes, the church now has to do the same. You enter the church and the coming kingdom through the doorway of circumcision.

Indeed, the disagreement was bigger than circumcision. The debate was, “What must I do to be saved?”

The Jews wanted to add circumcision. Today, some want to add baptism by water. Others want to add acts of grace and love. Some want to add association with a church or worship on a particular day, etc. The religious landscape of the twentieth century is no different than the first century.

God says, “My Son died on the cross for you, in order to pay the penalty for all your sins – to offer salvation as a free gift.”

God wants to know, “What have you done with My Son?”

Peter’s points

Now look at verses 6 and 7a of Acts, chapter 15.

The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, . . .

You need to understand that when Peter stood up, the council expected him to defend circumcision. Peter was the Jew of Jews. Peter was the one who had already wavered in his acceptance of the Gentiles into the church. Surely Peter would set the matter straight for the sake of the Law.

Instead, Peter makes three points in favor of Paul’s argument. He, no doubt, shocks the audience.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within the Gentile community of believers

1. His first argument in favor of accepting the Gentiles was the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Gentile community of believers.

Continue to verses 7b through 8.

. . . Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows

the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

Now you can understand the critical importance of the sign gifts. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, there was the audible sign of speaking in tongues. Then at Cornelius’ house, as Peter alludes to in these verses, when the Gentiles believed, the Spirit of God manifested the same tongue gift through the Gentiles.

Peter now summarizes, “The Gentiles evidenced the same gift, proving undeniably that they had received the same Spirit.”

In other words, God is not looking at the Gentile believer differently than the Jewish believer. He is not saying that the Gentiles are second class. No! They were equal in standing with the Jew, having received the exact same manifestation of the Spirit the Jew had, thus proving they had received the same Spirit.

So, the first point is, the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The forgiveness of sin

2. The second point is the forgiveness of sin. Look at verse 9.

and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by . . .
(. . . works? . . . circumcision? No, by . . .),
. . . *faith.*

The inability of the Law to save

3. The third point is the inability of Law to save.

Look at verse 10.

Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

In other words, “You keep pointing to obedience to the Law; the works of the flesh as the means to salvation. Well, who among us have ever been able to keep the Law?!”

You should circle the word “yoke” and write in the margin of your Bible the reference of Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28.

The yoke of the Law was an unbearable burden. Rabbi Shammai and his school had already developed Sabbath restrictions that were oppressive.

For instance, on the Sabbath you could not carry a chair from one room to another or you would be bearing a burden and would therefore be guilty of breaking the Law; a woman could not look in a mirror lest she be tempted to pluck a brow which would be work on the Sabbath; you could not lift a spoon weighing more than one fig or you would be guilty of bearing a burden on the Sabbath. They even debated at long length whether a man wearing a false leg or false teeth on the Sabbath would be guilty of bearing a burden. The 613 commandments of the Law itself were more of a load than a man could carry.

The Law was a schoolmaster to point to mankind's need of a Redeemer. It revealed our need for a sinless Savior to bear the penalty of guilt before a Holy God. Peter is saying, "No Jew ever kept the Law, so why impose it on the Gentiles?!"

That is why Jesus Christ said in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28,

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.

In other words, "You are tired of self-effort; you are burdened with repeated failure and sin – come to Me."

Jesus Christ went on to say, in verses 29a and 30,

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, . . . for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.

The religions of the world make salvation hard. They say, "Do this . . . don't do that . . . go here . . . pray this . . . say that . . . accomplish this . . ."

Peter says, in verse 11,

But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.

Salvation is easy – because it is not attached to work of man. It is free – only because Jesus Christ paid it all.

Whose yoke are you attached to? The yoke of religion – of self effort – or the yoke of Christ?

Barnabas and Paul's illustrations

Now look at verse 12 of Acts, chapter 15.

All the multitude kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Peter finishes and sits down and no one speaks. I can imagine they are shocked, amazed, maybe troubled. Then, they listen to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating signs and wonders that God had done. Peter provided the content of the gospel and now, Barnabas and Paul are going to give two illustrations. They include:

1. personal testimony;
2. proof through signs and wonders.

James' conclusion

Then James, the leading elder of the Jerusalem church, as verse 13 tells us, stands to deliver the decision. We will look at this in detail in our next discussion of the book of Acts, but James stands to deliver the verdict and this is an incredible moment in church history. James basically concludes two things:

1. that God is moving among the Gentiles;
2. that God's word substantiates the movement.

It is not enough to discern a movement. Ask the question, "Does the word of God validate the movement? Is it a movement emanating from scripture; from the clear teaching of the word?"

You can almost hear the battle cry of the first reformation, "sola scriptura," coming from the verdict of James for the church.

Conclusion

When Martin Luther was eventually tried by the church as a heretic in April of 1521, he stood before the imperial court, in the presence of the Emperor, who was there along with many other officials of both state and church. He was being questioned by the brilliant Roman Catholic theologian John Eck. He was being told to recant of his teachings related to justification and others. Martin Luther responded to his charge of heresy by saying,

Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by right reason (for I trust neither in popes nor in councils, since they have often erred and contradicted themselves) – unless I am thus convinced, I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything . . . God help me, Amen.

Would to God that we would have such courage and resolution today, that you and I would live lives bound by the scriptures; that we would say, of our

lives and our church, “We are captive to the word of | God; ‘sola scriptura’.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/24/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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