

The First Reformation

Part II

Acts 15:13-35

Introduction

When we began our study of Acts, chapter 15, I made the serious mistake of poking fun at people from the deep south – as if I had forgotten where I was speaking. Afterward, some people told me that they did not think it was very funny. Some of my staff told me that they were sitting around people who were definitely not laughing as I read from a list of ways to tell whether you are a redneck or not. I even had some responses through the Internet. It is obvious that I have started a scandal. Instead of resigning, I thought I would get back on friendly terms with the south by making fun of the north. That way, everyone can be mad at me!

One of the men in our church sent a story to me a couple of days ago that I thought I could use to balance the scales. Let me read it to you.

A Texan, a New Yorker, and a North Carolina resident were drinking their favorite beverage one afternoon in a North Carolina saloon. The Texan drained his glass of tequila, threw the half-empty bottle up in the air, drew and fired his pistol, shattering the bottle. The other two were shocked. The Texan simply announced, “Where I come from, we have plenty of that stuff.”

The New Yorker, not to be outdone, finished his glass of wine and threw his bottle of wine into the air, drew and fired his pistol, also shattering his bottle. Looking over at the other two with an air of superiority, he announced, “Back in Manhattan, we have plenty of the finest wines available.”

The North Carolina resident drained his glass of sweetened ice tea, threw it up in the air, drew his pistol and shot the New Yorker dead. He then caught

the glass on the way down and said to the Texan, “Where I come from we recycle glass, and we also have too many people from New York.”

I just knew that would make you feel better.

Reviewing the crisis

During the time Acts, chapter 15, was being written, if you had interviewed the average Jewish Christian in Jerusalem, he would probably have whispered to you in confidence, “Frankly, I think we have way too many Gentiles in the church. It just doesn’t seem right!”

As we learned in our previous discussion of Acts, chapter 15, the church was changing and the Jews were no longer the majority stockholders in the church. The Jewish leaders decided enough was enough – it was time to dig in their Israelite heels and demand that the Gentile believers respect and submit to the sign of the covenant; that is, circumcision.

In order to refresh our memory, let us return to Acts, chapter 15, and look at verses 1 and 2.

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.

From the language alone, you can almost smell gunpowder. The crisis that erupted from this issue threatened to destroy the unity of the church. If

indeed the Jewish leaders succeeded, there would have been the creation of another church body – the Gentile church – with the Jewish church continuing to mix truth with error; that is, grace plus works.

So, a reformation was needed in the first century church. Grace through faith in Christ alone must win – and it will.

Leaders of the Reformation

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas

Look at verses 4 through 12 of Acts, chapter 15.

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.”

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, “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;

“and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

“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?

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

All the people 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.

This is the point at which we ended our last discussion.

Peter has clearly declared that salvation is not faith in Christ plus circumcision. The covenant with Israel has been supplanted by a new covenant – a

covenant delivered through the cross work of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ own words declared from the cross, “It is finished” or in the Greek “tetelestai,” which means, “paid in full”.

The words “Jesus paid it all” are more than poetic words from some hymnal, they state the promise by which we dare to look eternity in the face without fear; they summarize the peace treaty, signed with His blood, between us and God that ends eternal war.

As Romans, chapter 5, verse 9, says,

... having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.

Salvation is faith alone, in Christ alone, as declared by the scriptures alone.

James

Now notice verse 13 of Acts, chapter 15.

After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, “Brethren, listen to me.”

Wait a minute! Why should they listen to James? Who was he?

Well, you ought to know that for one thing, James was the leading elder in the Jerusalem church. He was the half-brother of Jesus and had been an unbeliever who thought his brother was mad to claim Messiah-ship. It was not until after the resurrection that he believed. In fact, I Corinthians, chapter 15, tells us that the resurrected Christ made a private, personal appearance to James. That appointment dramatically changed James forever. When James began his epistle, we notice that he did not breathe anything of his filial relationship to Christ, he simply says, in verse 1a,

James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

James became deeply devoted to Christ and the church. In fact, his nickname was “Camel knees,” because his knees were callused from so much time spent in prayer.

James was also deeply concerned about Old Testament law. In his epistle, he referred to the law more than ten times.

When James stood to speak, everybody listened – especially the Jewish leaders whose hearts filled with hope. The Jewish leaders must have thought, “James is especially careful about keeping the law. James will set them straight.”

James continues to speak in verse 14.

Simeon [Peter] has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

Wait a second! James not only sides with Peter and Paul, he uses one of the key phrases that has been used for the children of Israel! The Jewish people are the people God chose for His name and now, James uses that special designation for the Gentiles!

How dare you James! What proof do you have from the Old Testament scriptures that would defend your use of that special phrase for a Gentile?

James essentially says in verse 15, "I'm glad you asked that. If you turn to the book of Amos, you will notice in chapter 9, verses 11 and 12, that he agrees with me. For just as it is written . . ." (look at Acts, chapter 15, verses 16 through 18, as he quotes Amos),

"After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name," says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago.

James' logic is that Amos tells us that in the coming kingdom, there will be Gentiles also enjoying the privileges of the nation Israel. However, Amos did not see that between Christ's first coming and His second coming, there was this era or dispensation called the "church age"; or the broader term, "the dispensation of grace".

So, James simply says that Amos would agree, not fulfill, but agree with this Gentile inclusion. In other words, "If there are going to be Gentiles in the Millennial Kingdom in the future, then it makes perfect sense that there will be Gentiles in the church in the present! So, it is time to open our hearts to the Gentiles. They're just as special to God as we are."

What a shocking declaration!

Continue to verse 19.

Therefore it is my judgment ["krino" (κρίνω) in the Greek, which means, "decree, verdict"] that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles,

In other words, faith in Christ alone has won the day; the definition of salvation is "sola fide" or "faith alone," based upon "sola scriptura" or "the scriptures alone". Let the church bells ring – the Gentiles are

full partners in the corporate life of the New Testament church!

Now it gets really interesting because you do not see a period at the end of verse 19, but a comma. And the next word, in verse 20, is,

but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.

Wait a second! We were flying along so well! The sunlight of grace was warming my face, but now, suddenly, I feel the cold wind of legalism . . . and so soon.

You need to understand that James is no longer referring to the definition of salvation. And legalism, properly understood, has to do with the definition of salvation. It is the belief that if you keep a certain set of rules, you will be saved. James is no longer dealing with the definition of salvation, but the demonstration of salvation!

You might say, "Well, you still shouldn't tell someone they shouldn't do something unless you have a clear verse of scripture."

I will tell you that in verse 20, apart from fornication, James did not have a biblical leg to stand on in this age of grace.

The Gentiles had every right to send word back to Jerusalem's leaders, "C'mon, this is the age of liberty – let that old stuff go. The quicker the better!"

Do you think James knew that? Do you think he was a legalist? No! In fact, if you look at the way the letter ends, in the latter part of verse 29, there is a key phrase,

. . . if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will . . .

(. . . be saved??!! No, you will . . .),

do well. . .

James was no longer dealing with the definition of Christianity, but the demonstration of Christianity. In other words, "Don't flaunt your freedom."

There are those who run around saying, "I can do anything I want to do, I'm under grace. It doesn't matter what you say. In fact, if you say anything negative to me, you're only proving you're the weaker brother because only weaker brothers get bothered, right?"

I believe that person is as imbalanced and immature as the person who runs around making up

rules for everything; reading everyone's mail; living life in the accusative voice.

I am reminded of the pastor I heard about this past week. He canceled a youth event because the church that they were joining together with for the youth activity was planning to take all the kids bowling later that night. He told the host pastor, "It's wrong to go bowling and I won't have anything to do with it!"

The host pastor asked, "What's wrong with bowling?"

"Well," the pastor retorted, "it's a bad environment for the kids. Why do you think they call them alleys?"

The host pastor said, "Cause they're long and narrow?"

Then he added, tongue-in-cheek, "Maybe you've got something there – it seems that every time I go bowling, I spend most of my time in the gutter."

Frankly, every sincere Christian is struggling for balance between these two extremes: license and pseudo-legalism; liberty and responsibility. If you are honest today, you will admit that there is very little to go on in the New Testament as it relates to much of life's specific activity. In fact, the broad principles of liberty in Christ are so broad that every Christian usually feels justified in whatever they happen to be doing.

That is why I find this letter to the Gentiles so intriguing. James could have simply dictated a general principle, "Gentile believers should be sensitive to the cultural traditions of Jewish believers."

That is a general principle we would all agree with – in the first century and the twentieth century. Instead, James is painfully specific.

James' four requests of the Gentile believers

Let us break the request in verse 20 into its four components.

Abstain from things contaminated by idols

1. First, James says,

but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols . . .

In other words, "Avoid anything related to idolatry; specifically, things sacrificed to idols."

Much of the meat for sale in Gentile markets had been ritually offered to idols. To eat such meat, in Jewish eyes, would be to become a partaker in idolatry. So, James was telling the Gentiles not to do it.

Abstain from fornication

2. Secondly, James says,

. . . and [abstain] from fornication . . .

This is the only part of James' request that can be backed by New Testament scripture.

The Gentile world was widely tolerant of sexual sin. The Greek word for "fornication" or "porneia" could refer to the entire industry of sexual sin. Porneia gives us our word "pornography". Tiberius, the Roman emperor, was known to have collected in his palace the largest library of pornography in the Roman empire. I believe the Gentile believers were challenged to clean out their closets, as well as purify their relationships by practicing abstinence until marriage.

Abstain from what is strangled

3. Thirdly, now notice that James says,

. . . and [abstain] from what is strangled . . .

This is simply a reference to non-kosher meat. A strangled animal would not have had its blood drained away properly. So, they were to ask the butcher how the animal had been killed.

Abstain from blood

4. Finally, the fourth thing James told the Gentiles to abstain from, in the last part of verse 20 and again in verse 29, was,

. . . and [abstain] from blood.

Leviticus, chapter 17, declared, "the life of the flesh is in the blood," and that blood belonged on God's altar, not on your plate. So, you could not eat a rare steak or prime rib – it had to be well done.

Why these rules James? The only reason he gives is in verse 21.

For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

That's it!! The reason for these rules is because the Jewish people they are trying to reach, and the Jewish people who have been reached are naturally

going to struggle with the enormous changes brought about by grace, and liberty. So, James requests, “Because of their struggle, limit your liberty so the cause of Christ can be advanced.”

In other words, “Do not let a rare steak get in the way of the gospel.”

It was no longer a matter of law – it was now a matter of love.

Now, let us read the heart of the letter dictated by James. Look at verses 24 through 29.

Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls,

it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials:

(underline that word “essentials” – it is interesting that James considered essential certain things that we would consider trivial),

that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.

Chuck Swindoll writes in his commentary on this passage, these interesting words:

Wishing to avoid needless and often unintentional offense, James wanted to remind the Gentile Christians to love their Jewish brothers and sisters by voluntarily restricting their liberty in these kinds of practices. “Don’t flaunt your freedom,” James was saying. Restricting one’s liberty is a burden – but limiting our freedom for the sake of others shows maturity. Harmony in the body of Christ often depends on our willingness to forego a privilege. This is not capitulating to legalism, it is a sign of maturity and love.

Would the Gentile believers love the Jews enough to change and adapt their own lifestyle? Will the Gentiles, with grace, demonstrate the gospel of grace?!

Notice verses 30 through 35.

So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.

When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.

Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message.

After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out.

[But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.]

But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

Incredible!

The Results of the Reformation

What were the results of the reformation?

The Jews were silenced, yet stretched

1. First, the Jews were silenced, yet stretched.

The definition of salvation did not include circumcision!

By the way, it is interesting that James did not add circumcision back into the list and yet, as we will discover in the next chapter, Paul had Timothy circumcised because of the ministry he would have among the Jews.

The bigger issue for us today is this – salvation is faith in Christ alone plus nothing – period.

As Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 and 9 tell us,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And as Titus, chapter 3, verse 7, says,

. . . being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The Gentiles were included, yet cautioned

2. Secondly, the Gentiles were included yet cautioned.

They were challenged to:

- avoid anything associated with idolatry;
- avoid anything associated with sexual impurity;
- limit their liberty in order to advance the church.

Two Questions for Personal Reformation

That leads me to ask two personal questions. Let us move from then to now and ask ourselves two questions for personal reformation:

- 1) Is there anything in my private life that is disobedient to God's will?
- 2) Is there anything in my public lifestyle that could hinder God's work?

You have probably never heard of Stephanie Stephenson. You probably will not hear of her. However, there was an article about her in a magazine I receive, entitled *Moody Monthly*. Jerry Jenkins, the author of the article, gave it the title, "A Matter of Principle". This is a classic illustration of what we are talking about that other people might say, "Oh, you just need to lighten up." Stephanie, however, felt to "lighten up" would obstruct and confuse her testimony for Christ. Let me tell you this story.

Stephanie Stephenson was a freshman music major at Southwest Missouri State University. Her teacher encouraged her to try out for the Broadway production of *Les Miserables*, for the sake of experience. It was going to be played in Brandon, Missouri. So, she tried out, along with hundreds of others.

Stephanie was shocked to receive a telephone call from the director in New York a few weeks later. He asked her if she would be willing to travel to New York to audition. The competitors had been

narrowed down to five women, and she was one of the five.

Stephanie had always dreamed of playing on Broadway. She talked it over with her parents, who were farmers and were deeply committed to Jesus Christ. They agreed, so she got on an airplane, went to New York, and auditioned.

A few weeks later, Stephanie received a phone call telling her that she had landed the role in *Les Miserables*. But because she did not have as much experience as other veteran actresses, she was asked to join a traveling group and travel for one year in order to gain stage experience. Afterwards, she would join the Broadway cast of *Les Miserables*.

Stephanie joined the troop and, when the parts were handed out for the first performance, she was given the part of a prostitute who wore a very revealing costume. She was torn over this dilemma. She struggled with everything that you would imagine she would struggle with. In fact, she approached the director and asked if she could have a different part.

The director gave her the answer you would expect, "It's just acting, and if you cannot separate your personal life from this role, you'll never make it in this business."

Stephanie appealed to a higher authority. They gave her the same answer, "You need to get over this. It's just acting, it's not really you. Get on with your career."

Stephanie resigned and walked away from her hopes. The associate director and executive producer of *Les Miserable* talked to the Associated Press (although it was not in the newspaper; you do not hear this kind of stuff, but what a great testimony it was!). He said, "She's gorgeous and she's talented and she could have played the daylights out of the role, probably to great acclaim on Broadway. But I respect what she did. She is a brave young girl to forgo an amazing career."

Stephanie Stephenson walked away from a career, but in the process, she honored the name and the cause of Jesus Christ.

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