

THE BOOK OF ACTS  
The Council at Jerusalem  
Chapter 15:1-35  
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## INTRODUCTION

The material of this section constitutes a sort of interlude in the narrative of the mission labors of the Apostle Paul and of the Antioch Church. And yet it would be a mistake to separate the events narrated here from that mission labor among the Gentiles, or, in fact, from the history of the entire church in apostolic times, or, moreover, from "the things which Jesus continued to do and to teach" after His exaltation and return as the quickening Spirit. It is especially, I think, from this last point of view that the present passage must be considered. In the council of Jerusalem and its decision the Lord Jesus Himself did something very important in and for His church, and was busy teaching them a very important truth, - a truth also of great bearing for the practical life of the church.

This is true, first of all, quite obviously with respect to the saints from among the Gentiles who were being gathered at that time. It was also true for those congregations in Gentile regions in so far as they were constituted of both Jews and Gentiles. This was true, moreover, with regard to the further labors of the church in evangelizing the Gentiles. With respect to all these this particular point in the history of the church is a crucial one. And we may surely observe that it was by no means an accident that this entire question arose shortly *after* the first missionary journey, but *before* any further labors were conducted. Since this question was so all-important for the future of the church from among the Gentiles and for the future labors of the gospel among the Gentiles, it had to be decided at once. If it would not be decided, the whole life and labor of the church would be hampered in a most serious manner not only, but the entire church would stand in danger of being divided by a most serious cleavage, and that too, just at the very beginning of its greatest growth.

We may observe, however, in the second place, that the same issue that confronted the council at Jerusalem was equally important for the Jerusalem Church and for all those congregations which were at that time almost entirely of Jewish constituency, who were traditionally more closely connected with the Old Testament ordinances, who lived locally near the temple and its services, and who could not as yet liberate themselves, - at least, not completely, - from the bondage of the law. Also them the Lord was leading and guiding and teaching in the incidents connected with the council at Jerusalem. The principle that the Gentiles had been taught from the beginning through Paul and Barnabas and which evidently had presented to them no problems until some from Jerusalem came and taught the necessity of circumcision was evidently not fully accepted at this time by the Jewish Christians. They still had not let go completely of the Old Testament ordinances, and did not see clearly that Christ had fulfilled the law, the whole law. Hence, they were in need of instruction, and had to be weaned away from their mistaken position, and had to learn to stand in Christian liberty. It was also, therefore, with a view to them that the Lord caused this whole issue to rise in the Antioch Church, caused the council at Jerusalem to be convened, and through His Holy Spirit caused the Church to come to a decision in which the principle at stake would be clearly decided.

As far as our study of this material is concerned, we call your attention to the fact that in Galatians 2 we undoubtedly find somewhat of a parallel record to that of Acts 15. We advise

you to refer to this passage in Galatians. But at the same time we call attention to the fact that the record in Galatians 2 is not entirely parallel: it concerns several factors not mentioned in Acts. And we therefore also caution you to keep in mind that the discussion at present is centered on Acts, not on Galatians.

## I. THE DISPUTE: vss. 1-5

### A. As it arose at Antioch:

1. Who caused this dispute to arise at Antioch? vs. 1.
  - a. Were they unconverted Jews or converted Jews?
  - b. Is it possible that these men were of the Pharisees? cf. vs. 5.
  - c. Were they men authorized by the Jerusalem Church?
2. What was their teaching? vs. 1.
  - a. Did this involve merely the rite of circumcision, or more?
  - b. How necessary was circumcision, according to their teaching?
  - c. Why was this such an important issue?  
(Note: Especially in regard to these questions it would be well to consult the epistle to the Galatians).
3. What was the effect of this new teaching? vs. 2
  - a. How is it to be explained that this should cause such dissension and dispute?
    - 1) On the part of the Gentile Christians?
    - 2) On the part of the Jewish Christians?
    - 3) Do you think an issue of this kind would have any great practical effect in the life of the congregation? Why?
  - b. Who, evidently, were the principal opponents of these Judaizers?
    - 1) Why was it Paul and Barnabas that opposed them?
    - 2) Was this an issue of importance to the two missionaries? Why?
    - 3) Do you think it strengthened or weakened Paul's position that he was a Jew, and that too, a Pharisee?

### B. As it was transferred to Jerusalem:

1. Who were delegated to bring this question to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem? vs. 2
  - a. Why was it decided to do this? Was the church at Antioch in doubt? Was not the teaching and authority of Paul and Barnabas sufficient?
  - b. Who are meant by "certain other of them"? Why were these sent?
  - c. Was this a mixed delegation of those who sided with Paul and those who opposed him?
2. Is it of significance that this delegation was "brought on their way by the church"? vs. 3
3. What did Paul and Barnabas do on the way? Why? vs. 3
4. At Jerusalem: vss. 4, 5.
  - a. Is it of significance that Paul, Barnabas, and those with them were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders?
  - b. Did Paul and Barnabas at once and directly bring up the issue? What did they do first? Why?
  - c. Who rose up at Jerusalem to oppose Paul and Barnabas?

- 1) Were these men still of the sect of the Pharisees?
- 2) Are we to take the notice that they "believed" in the sense that they truly believed, but as believers were victims of a serious misunderstanding and mistake, or in the sense that though they were members of the church they were at heart still Pharisees and legalists?
- 3) What did these men contend? Did they insist on two separate conditions, i.e., circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses, or are these two intimately connected?
- 4) How is it to be explained that they took this position in the light of Peter's experience with Cornelius and in the light of the fact that Peter acquainted the Jerusalem Church with what the Lord had taught him at this time? cf. Acts 10 and 11.

## II. THE COUNCIL: vss. 6-29

### A. Its Membership:

1. Who made up the membership of this council? vss. 6, 12, 22.
  - a. Are we to conceive of this gathering as including the whole Jerusalem Church, apostles, elders, and ordinary members? And did the entire congregation decide this issue in very democratic style?
  - b. Or did the decision of this issue rest with the apostles and elders?
  - c. If the latter is the case, what is the explanation of the references to the "multitude," vs. 12, and to the whole church, vs. 23?
2. What was the nature of this gathering?
  - a. It is sometimes called "the first synod." Is this correct?
  - b. Can you point out any important aspects in which this gathering did not partake of the nature of a synod?

(to be continued)

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