

- A Study in Acts -

Chapter Fifteen – First Doctrinal Problem

ACTS 15:23-41:

In our last three lessons, we looked into the doctrinal conflict that has found its way from Jerusalem to Antioch of Syria. This is not an external problem, but one that has come from within; the attempted re-insertion of the Law of Moses (namely circumcision – Vs.1, and the keeping of the Law of Moses – Vs.5).

After a great dispute, whereby Paul would state in his own words, “**We did not yield submission even for an hour**” – **Galatians 2:5**; it has been decided that since the problem originated from these men coming from Jerusalem, they would go there to solve this issue. As the Apostles and elders have come together with the Spirit of God, they are now establishing the Divine authority by which unity will be found. This has now begun to be revealed to the multitudes.

There are three ways to establish Biblical authority:

1. **Direct Command** (James would share God’s direct teaching on this issue).
2. **Spirit or Apostolic approved example** (Peter has used this method in his presentation).
3. **Necessary inference** (Paul and Barnabas have used this method).

With God’s authority displayed in unity, the entire **Body of Christ** is now together with one accord (Vs. 22), as it should be when guided by God’s wisdom and not men’s. In this lesson, we will now look into the first inspired letter to be written.

Text #1:

Acts 15:23-29 “They wrote this *letter* by them:

The apostles, the elders, and the brethren,

To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “*You must be circumcised and keep the law*” —to whom we gave no *such* commandment— ²⁵it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹that you

abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

Farewell.”

Note: This is in fact an inspired letter (**Vs. 28**). This is not a decision of a general council, or board of directors. This inspired letter would later be absorbed in Luke’s account; however, it existed long before Luke would finish his account of these events.

No Such Commandment: The thing that was most wrong with those who taught that circumcision and commands of Moses were binding was that they had no command for it (**Vs. 24**). The same thing would be wrong to this very day with anyone teaching something other than what has been commanded. The authority of Christ Jesus has been established by God (**Colossians 1:18; Philippians 2:9-11**). We cannot teach anything other than what He has given, which establishes all the authority we need.

Judas – Barsabas: His surname (Barsabas) means, ‘son of Sabas’ and hints that he may have been the brother of Joseph whose surname was also Barsabas (**Acts 1:23**). This Judas would also be, through the laying on of the Apostles hands, a prophet of God (**Vs. 32**).

Silas: Along with Judas, Silas was additionally a prophet and a leading man among the brethren in Jerusalem. Silas will accompany Paul on his second journey, after a falling out with Barnabas. He will share in the ministry of the Gospel and the sufferings for the cause of Christ with Paul. Not much else is known or spoken of Silas outside of the book of **Acts**; however, the “**Silvanus**” in the introduction of the letters to the church of Thessalonica must surely be Silas.

These Necessary Things: The last portion of this letter deals with issues particular to the Gentiles. Since the majority of the Gentiles have come out of the world specifically from idolatry, they are going to have to forgo the previous practices they were accustomed to religiously and morally. It should be noted that all the items mentioned starting with “**Things offered to idols**”, are all things associated with idolatrous practices.

It is an absurdity to associate these commands with the issues of blood transfusions which did not even exist when this was written, nor do blood transfusions have anything to do with idolatry!

Text #2:

Acts 15:30-35 “So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. ³² Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. ³³ And after they had stayed *there* for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

³⁴ However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.”

Now with the letter complete, all will return now to Antioch and begin to disseminate this Spirit guided truth to the brethren there. Note the result in the hearts of the brethren in Antioch, **“They rejoiced over its encouragement”**.

Judas and Silas exhorted, confirmed, and strengthened the disciples in Antioch. As they finished this work, they were released from this work and sent back to report to the Apostles the result of the letter.

We find that Silas, however, is going to stay and is going to remain and go with Paul on the next journey (**Vs. 40**).

It is believed; and there seems to be enough evidence to support it, that now is when Peter will come down to Antioch and will be rebuked by Paul.

Galatians 2:11-13 “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹² for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

Text #3:

Acts 15:36-41 “Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, *and see* how they are doing.” ³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

Let us: This is something for your notes that is different from the start of the first journey. In **Chapter 13:2**, that the Spirit separated out Paul and Barnabas and sanctioned and sent them from the Body at Antioch. Although this is different from the first journey, we should not for a moment think that the Spirit of God was absent from this Apostolic work as we will see in the next chapter.

This is the official start of the second journey of Paul; and this time he does not wish to take with them John Mark, because he did not finish the previous journey with them. Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed on this matter, but they did not, as we should not, let their disagreement hurt the cause of the Lord (in issues of liberty). We know that later on John Mark is very useful to Paul and they would work in tandem for the cause of the Gospel – **Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11**.

Barnabas and John Mark will leave to go to Cyprus, as this is their home – **Acts 4:36**. We do not hear anything else of Barnabas again until **1 Corinthians 9:6**, where he may be with Paul in Corinth.

Being Commended: The brethren in Antioch approved of and sent Paul and Silas to the favor of God, which seems here by the context to represent this specific service to the Gospel.

Strengthening the Churches: In addition to strengthening and exhorting these brethren, they will likewise share with them the message of the letter written in Jerusalem, just as they will in the next chapter (**16:4**).

Next: “The Second Journey!”