

13. Healthy Churches Develop Godly Flexibility

Today, we are beginning the first of four topics on the importance of Godly flexibility, in order to be effective at developing healthy reproducing churches. A very significant passage on this topic is Acts 21:20-26. We will begin by contrasting a major difference in the development of churches in different cultures. Acts 21:20 says, “And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.’” Then, Acts 21:25 says, “But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.” Here, we see that one culture was zealous for the law, while the other culture grew up with no background of the law.

The setting for this event was the return of Paul, to the city of Jerusalem, after ministering among the Gentiles for many years. The leaders of the church at Jerusalem were filled with joy as they heard about the conversion of the Gentiles, but they also saw that there were many people in the church at Jerusalem who might not accept Paul. Acts 21:19-20 says, “When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.’” The leaders of the church at Jerusalem recognized that both they, and Paul, must demonstrate godly flexibility, or there could be great conflict in the church at Jerusalem.

In Acts 15, the Council in Jerusalem had decided that the Gentile Christians were not under the Jewish law. The Jewish law included: circumcision, the keeping of the various feasts and ceremonies, and especially the diet that was contained in the Levitical law. Peter had this explained to him in a vision, in the first part of Acts 10. Peter explained what this meant when he went to the house of Cornelius. Acts 10:27-28 says, “And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together. Then he said to them, ‘You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.’” The Jews were not allowed to eat in the home of a Gentile, because the food might not be prepared according to the Levitical law. This effectively kept the Jews separated from the people of the nations.

In contrast, there were only four requirements decided on, at the Jerusalem Council, for Gentile believers. These four requirements are all given in the first chapters of Genesis prior to the call of Abraham, and so are universal. They have nothing to do with the Levitical law (the specific requirements given to Jews) such as: circumcision, the keeping of the feasts and ceremonies, and the eating of clean and unclean foods. Let us look at those four specific requirements.

First, the Gentiles were to keep themselves from things offered to idols. Idol worship was clearly demonstrated in Genesis 11 at the Tower of Babel. God changed the languages to slow down the development of rebellion and idol worship. Joshua 24:2 says that Abraham came from a family of idol worshippers.

Second and third, the Gentiles were to keep themselves from blood and from things strangled. Genesis 9:4 says, “But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” Here, we see that, immediately after the flood, Noah was commanded not to eat blood. Animals that are strangled would still have their blood in them, so that would also be a violation of this commandment.

Fourth, the Gentiles were to keep themselves from immorality. That would take us back to the very first institution established by God, when He performed the first marriage. Genesis 2:22-24 says, “Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman, and He brought her to the man. And Adam said: ‘This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” Any form of sexual immorality is a violation of the one-flesh principle God established when He established marriage.

Since these four things were all known before the scattering of the people at the Tower of Babel, nearly all cultures have similar prohibitions, although most cultures freely violate these four prohibitions. However, they recognize them as a violation of their own laws, whether they had passed on any knowledge of the Creator or not. Even though they might freely violate them, they were and are aware that these are violations of their own laws. The Jewish Christians, at the Jerusalem Council, recognized that the Gentiles were not under any of the Jewish laws given to the nation of Israel. This made it possible for the early church to spread rapidly among the Gentiles. However, it did require understanding both by Paul, and by the leaders of the church at Jerusalem.

We also see that the Christians at Jerusalem had heard a lot of wrong information about Paul, probably through the Judaizers. Acts 21:21 gives us some of the opinions they had developed about Paul. That verse says, “But they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.” At least three things were specific problems. They had heard Paul was teaching Jews to forsake the law of Moses. They heard that Paul was teaching Jews that they did not need to circumcise their children any longer. They had heard that Paul was teaching Jews to forsake the customs, such as various vows and the eating of unclean foods. These were things the Jews had been instructed, by God, to do throughout their generations.

The leaders of the church at Jerusalem, and Paul, recognized that Christians often believe opinions they have heard and do not stop to check out the facts. How many times have you had urban legends or stories forwarded to you by e-mail, from other Christians, that are totally false? Verses 21 and 22 show that the leaders at Jerusalem knew that the Christians had believed a lot of false rumors about Paul.

To end these rumors, Paul was very willing to submit himself to the leaders of the church at Jerusalem and take a Jewish vow (see verses 23-26). According to Acts 18:18, Paul, himself, had earlier taken a Jewish vow. “So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had his hair cut off at

Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.” As a result, we see that Paul himself kept the Jewish law, but did not even suggest to the Gentiles that it was necessary for them to keep the Jewish law. In fact, in a future topic, we will see that he stood strongly against those who tried to make Gentiles keep the Jewish law.

In verse 24, we see a key statement the leaders of the church at Jerusalem made about Paul. Acts 21:24 says, “Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.” This verse shows that the leaders of the church at Jerusalem recognized three things. They recognized that the things the Christians had heard about Paul, from the Judaizers, were not true. The fact that they knew the people had heard these things also indicated that they knew many of the Jewish Christians had believed what they had heard about Paul.

The second thing the church leaders in Jerusalem recognized was that Paul walked an orderly life. The words “walk orderly” are from one word that means *to direct one’s life or to walk in a way that is God honoring*. It was also used to speak of soldiers marching in order. The church leaders recognized that, throughout his ministry, Paul had demonstrated godly character. Galatians 2:9 showed that they had recognized this for many years. That verse says, “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

The third thing the church leaders in Jerusalem recognized was that Paul walked according to the law. Here, we see that Paul obeyed the Jewish law so that his actions would not be a hindrance to reaching the Jews for Christ. As a result, in each of the cities where Paul had preached the Gospel, some of those who became Christians were Jews. The leaders recognized that Paul walked according to the law but did not expect the Gentiles to do so. Here, we see that Paul understood the church leaders and chose to take a Jewish vow so that all of the Jewish Christians could see that the things they had heard about Paul were false.

The early church was able to reach both Jews and Gentiles, because the leaders of the church had developed godly flexibility and were teaching the entire church to do the same. They did not try to make Gentiles live like Jews, or make Jews live like Gentiles. Instead, they taught both Jews and Gentiles to serve one another in love. Galatians 5:13 says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” In order to plant churches effectively, especially across cultures, we must learn to develop godly flexibility. May the Lord richly bless you as you develop godly flexibility.