

## 52. Certain Jews Taught It Was Necessary to Circumcise

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to understand the process of Biblical church development. We saw that Paul and Barnabas demonstrated that process in the various cities where they had been led by the Lord. That process of Biblical church development was followed in each of the main churches that began in the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas then came back and reported to the church at Antioch what the Lord had done. Acts 14:28 says that they stayed in Antioch for a long time (about a year). Today, we are going to learn about one of the things that happened during the year Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch.

During the year that Paul and Barnabas were back in Antioch, Acts 15:1-2 says, “And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.” These men who came from Judea were all Jewish. As Jews, they had been circumcised when they were eight days old. They had kept the Jewish law including all of the feasts and ceremonies. These were things that were true of all of the early Jewish Christians. Acts 21:19-21 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; 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.’” The Jewish Christians continued to practice circumcision, because that was commanded for all descendants of Abraham.

However, in Antioch and the cities where Paul and Barnabas had gone most of the new Christians were Gentiles. Acts 15:5 says, “But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.’” Paul was not the only Pharisee that had become a Christian. Here, we see that other Pharisees had also believed. They and all of the other Jews continued to practice circumcision and keep the Old Testament law as we saw in the previous paragraph. We will see in this chapter, and in Acts 21:20-26, that the Jews were never forbidden to do these things. We will also see that the decision made in this chapter meant that none of the Gentiles were required to do these things.

Later, false teachers known as Judaizers who rejected the decision made in this chapter continued to try and require the Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the Law. Acts 15:18-22 says, “Known to God from eternity are all His works. Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.’ Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, *namely*, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.” Here, we see that the whole church at

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Jerusalem including those who had been Pharisees came to agreement about this statement even though there had been much dispute when the discussion first started.

As a result, the Jews mentioned in Acts 15:1 were not false teachers. Rather, they would be Jews who were untaught about what was required for the Gentiles since the decision had not yet been made by the Jerusalem Council. Only those who continued to teach these teachings after the Jerusalem Council would be Judaizers and false teachers. We do see that their teaching in Antioch did cause much confusion and led to the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15:2 says, “Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.”

The word translated “dissension” means *strife, conflict or sedition*. Acts 23:7 says, “And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided.” The word translated “dispute” means *mutual questioning, dispute or discussion*. Other than verses 2 and 7 in this chapter, the only place this word is used in the New Testament is in Acts 28:29 where we read, “And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.” Here, we see that the church had many questions that they needed to answer for themselves.

Acts 15:3 says, “So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.” The church at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and some of the other believers to Jerusalem. We see that they were sent to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. In order for there to be true unity in the church between the Jews and the Gentiles, this question had to be decided by the apostles together with the leaders of the church from which these Jewish teachers had come. That is why the church at Antioch sent these men as official representatives of the church at Antioch.

As Paul, Barnabas and the others traveled to Jerusalem, they reported to the churches along the way how the Gentiles were turning from the worship of idols to the worship of the true God. This exciting report about what the Lord was doing among the Gentiles brought great joy to the other Christians throughout the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria. Many of the Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria were not Jews and so many of them did not follow the law. As a result, the question of whether Gentiles had to be circumcised was a very important question for the people in these churches.

Acts 15:4-5 says, “And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.’” The word translated “were received” means *to accept or to receive gladly*. The whole church, the apostles and the elders all gave a warm welcome to the men who came from the church in the city of Antioch. This word is used in Acts 2:41 where we read, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*.” Here, we see that many of these Jews in Jerusalem had earlier

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gladly received the message of the death and resurrection of Christ on the day of Pentecost and had become followers of Christ.

Paul and Barnabas gave a report to the church at Jerusalem telling “all that God had done with them” as they took the Gospel to the Gentiles. This report was probably similar to the report that Paul and Barnabas had earlier given to the church at Antioch. Acts 14:27 says, “Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” The report of Barnabas was probably especially important to the church at Jerusalem, because Acts 11:20-22 says, “But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Then, news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.” Barnabas was well known to the church at Jerusalem and had a good reputation in that church.

The report of Paul and Barnabas was well received by most of the people in the church in Jerusalem. However, some of those who had become Christians in the city of Jerusalem had been Pharisees before they placed their faith in Christ. The men who had come to Antioch from Jerusalem had probably been a part of this group of Pharisees that had placed their faith in Christ. Here, we see that the former Pharisees were in agreement about what they believed and taught about the salvation of the Gentiles. However, the report of Paul and Barnabas was in disagreement with what these former Pharisees believed and taught.

The former Pharisees had two key misunderstandings about salvation, for both Jews and Gentiles, because of their background as Pharisees. First, they believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Second, they believed that it was important to command all Gentile believers to keep the law of Moses. This teaching meant that they taught faith plus works (circumcision and keeping the Law) were necessary for salvation. In contrast, Paul later wrote in Ephesians 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” In these two verses, we see that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone and that no works are included. We will see that this is the decision that was affirmed by the Jerusalem Council in this chapter. This decision was guided by the Holy Spirit. Acts 15:28 says, ““For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”” We will see how the Holy Spirit guided the entire church to this conclusion in our next two topics.

It is very important to help our physical and spiritual children clearly understand the decision of the Jerusalem Council. This is necessary in order to help them know how to clearly explain the Gospel to those who are not yet Christians. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children clearly understand this decision.