

What Happened In Acts 15?

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There were some things done which were of significance to the whole church, which are recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, otherwise why would this chapter have found a place in the briefest Book in the world?

(1) The church was saved from becoming a mere adjunct of Judaism. Paul had fought, and continued to fight the battle for the recognition of the Gentiles and Jews upon the same basis in the Kingdom of Christ. There was no significance to Jews nor Gentiles, nor what they had believed and practiced prior to their conversion, when they were incorporated in the church. There was no difference, and Paul opposed the making of a difference in the kingdom, based upon that, or any other consideration. No class distinctions had any footing whatsoever in the church. Male and female, bond and free, old and young, learned and unlearned—all were in Christ.

In the second chapter of Galatians, Paul comments upon the visit to Jerusalem: thus we have two reports, instead of one. From verse 5 of Acts 15, we learn for the first time that a group of Pharisees had embraced the faith. Imagine a Pharisee being a Christian! This instance will not tax one's faith, however, for concerning them, Paul is Gal. 2:4, 5, says: "And that because of the false brethren privily brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place in the way of subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."

(2) The first inspired epistle of the New Testament was written at this meeting at Jerusalem. It was circulated by Paul, and by two men sent from Jerusalem for that very purpose, one of whom, Silas, became the companion of Paul. Doubtless many copies were made and it was circulated throughout the Gentile world. It gave proof of the settlement of the Jew-Gentile issue. We do not think about it being the first apostolic epistle, because Luke incorporated it in the Book of Acts.

The entire history of the church was affected by the decision made, and the letter written at the meeting in Jerusalem. As often is true, how-

ever, it is not so much what happened at Jerusalem at that time, but what definitely did not happen, that constitutes the real basis of our interest in the occasion. The thing that did not happen upon that, or any other day, was that in keeping with the will of God, two or more congregations met and made rules and bound them upon others. In no proper sense of the term was this a church conference.

We are concerned, not with a fair appraisal of what happened that day at Jerusalem, but with the false interpretation that has been placed upon it wherever and whenever it has pleased corrupt (doctrinally) men to use those events as a means of self-justification. These Pharisees, who apparently despairing of the damage they could do from the outside, had technically come inside the ranks to pursue the same purpose—namely, to destroy the gospel movement entirely, or else make it merely an adjunct of Judaism.

Why should the church at Antioch be disturbed by the delegation sent by these false brethren? Did they not have two men who are referred to in the Scriptures as Apostles, Barnabas and Saul. Had these two not made plain the way of life to the thousands of Christians in Antioch? Is not the word one time expressed by one apostle absolutely final? Apostles cannot differ concerning the law of God. To do so would prove that one, or possibly all, were wrong in their understanding; which in turn would prove that they could err, and that would mean that we have no sure word of prophecy, no guide, no standard.

Why, then, did not the church at Antioch stand pat upon what their own apostles had taught them? Why did not elders at Antioch do like the elders later did at Ephesus—try those who claimed to be apostles, and found them liars? Why did they not send them away, at once, as bearers of false doctrine, and disturbers of the peace of the churches? At least two reasons can be given: (1) No test had, so far as we have reason to believe, ever been made up to this time of the absolute certainty of things spoken by inspiration. Consequently the churches did not understand the absolute necessity of the harmony of all things spoken by inspiration. They did not understand, as we do now, the faith-wrecking consequences of a

difference between apostles over divine revelation. (2) the other reason was that there was apparently such a fundamental difference between apostles. The brethren, including the elders, at Antioch did not know that these visitors from Jerusalem who had introduced the disturbing evidence were "false brethren," both in purpose and in message. According to their testimony, the presumption was almost overwhelming that James had sent these people to testify that Gentiles brought into the church must be circumcised, and keep the whole law. They had no means of knowing of themselves whether or not these visitors were true or false.

It is my studied persuasion that Paul would not have gone up to Jerusalem on this matter, had God not revealed it to him (Gal. 2:2) that it was His will that he should go. Paul was inclined to stand upon his apostleship. When he had been chosen to be an apostle, he had not conferred with flesh and blood, but began preaching at once. It was at least three years before he visited the apostles at Jerusalem, and then they were afraid of him. Barnabas stood for Paul at that time, until the church learned that he was no longer a blood-thirsty persecutor, but a zealous champion of the cause which he had once sought to destroy.

Apparently, three meetings were held. The first was virtually a private conference between apostles, or of the most inspired men, so that if there were any differences, it could be known at once. Differences about revelation might have proven fatal to the whole movement. There were none of course. At the first public meeting, Paul and Barnabas spoke of their experiences among the Gentiles, a subject in which all could agree in spirit for all the things accomplished. The Pharisees then presented their case for binding the law upon these Gentile converts. Apparently, they were given opportunity to present their viewpoint to their own satisfaction. When you let an objector get everything off his chest, he is then weakest. He has nothing in reserve. His arsenal is depleted.

In the third meeting, after general discussion, Peter spoke, showing that Gentiles had first been received by his hands, without the slightest hint of the binding of any feature of the law of Moses upon them. Paul and Barnabas then spoke, not giving news

as at the previous meeting, but pointing out how miracles had confirmed continually the reception of Gentiles, without one hint of the law having anything to do with it. James then explained how the Scriptures were fulfilled in the bringing in of the Gentiles, etc. Who could withstand the evidence of these inspired men? The Pharisee faction was quiet.

The facts in this meeting, incorporated in the letter written to the Gentiles, showed that the ones who had disturbed the church at Antioch were liars. There had never been in reality any question about the position of Paul and Barnabas. It was a great thing for the church, however, that these matters all be brought to light, and the evidence made permanent in the writing and distributing of the letter to the churches.

Why did the elders at Antioch send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, rather than to any one of the hundreds of churches which had been established throughiut Asia? Surely any reader can see that it was because there were apostles there. It was fine that the elders and the members of the Jerusalem Church were invited to attend the meetings—two of the three—and were invited to concur in the action taken. It was far better that way, and it constitutes an example of the spirit that should govern any meeting of Christians. There was, however, only one question to be settled, as every elder and member, as well as the apostles, knew—namely, were the revelations of inspiration agreed? If not, the whole movement would have ended; if so, the Judaizers were false teachers.

In the final analysis, God called the meeting. (Gal. 2:2.) The vital question, in the absence of the published Scriptures, was, "Do the apostles agree?" James also introduced the "prophets" as agreeing. (Acts 15:15.) There is only one motive on earth that could enable any man to find an example in what happened at Jerusalem at this time, for churches to hold a conference—namely, self-justification of conscious error; and even that could have no consistency, once the New Testament was published!