

Acts of the Apostles

Week 18 – Acts 15:1-35

A Debate about Circumcision (15:1-4).

- The news of Gentile conversions stirs up some of the people in Judea who travel to Antioch in order to compel the Gentiles to be circumcised (v 1).
 - o The text only identifies them as “certain people.”
 - o These people clearly linked circumcision with salvation.
 - o This stands in contrast with Peter’s quotation of Joel at Pentecost, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21).
- Paul and Barnabas quickly jump into a debate with them, and this leads to a trip to Jerusalem for a consultation with the apostles (v 2).
- Along the way they stopped in Phoenicia and Samaria and shared testimonies of what God was doing leading to the rejoicing of “all the believers” (v 3).
- Paul and Barnabas received a warm welcome by the church in Jerusalem and were given an opportunity to report all that God had done through them (v 4).

The Debate Continues (15:5-12)

- The warm welcome did not illuminate the debate. Some of the believers who were connected to the Pharisees continued to insist that Gentile believers should be circumcised and follow the laws of Moses.
- The apostles met to consider the question.
 - o Peter speaks first. He notes...
 - Outreach to the Gentiles via Peter’s preaching was God’s choice (v 7).
 - God knows the heart and moved to accept Gentiles by giving them the Spirit in the same way he gave the Spirit to the Jews without regard to circumcision status (v 8).
 - God purifies hearts by faith (v 9).
 - o Peter asks why they want to test God by putting a yoke or burden on the necks of Gentiles that God did not put there (v 10).
 - The language of testing recalls Ananias and Sapphira (5:9) and emphasizes the danger of standing against God.
 - Peter notes that neither the current Jews nor the ancestors could perfectly keep the law (v 10).
 - Peter declares that all are saved through the grace of God (v 11).
 - o The church then fell silent to listen to Barnabas and Paul tell of all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles (v 12).

A Decision Reached (15:13-21).

- James, the brother of Jesus (see Galatians 1:19) speaks as the leader of the Jerusalem church.

- He has ascended to this position after the death of the disciple James and perhaps because of Peter's own missionary journeys.
- No one doubts his commitment to the law (see the letter he likely wrote).
- James declares the decision that allows Gentiles to become a part of the church without being circumcised (vv 13-14).
 - James bases his decision on Peter's testimony (v 13). He notes that God has "intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles." This echoes Zechariah 2:11 and anticipates 1 Peter 2:10.
 - He also notes that the prophets speak of God restoring David's fallen tent by reaching out to the Gentiles. The quotation is from Amos 9:11-12, but James speaks as if this is what all the prophets were looking towards (vv 15-18).
 - James says we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles "who are turning to God" (v 19).
 - James does ask them to do a few things – to abstain from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, and unkosher meat (v 20).
 - These requests would aid church unity.
 - They would also guard against idolatry.
 - Verse 21 suggests . . .

The Council's Letter (15:22-35)

- The church sent some men from Jerusalem with Barnabas and Paul to Antioch with a letter announcing the decision (v 22).
 - The letter addressed the Gentile believers as "brothers" a clear sign of acceptance (v 23).
 - The letter addresses the troublemakers as lacking authorization from the apostles (v 24).
 - The letter commends Barnabas and Paul as "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv 25-26).
 - The letter places the weight of the decision on the Holy Spirit (v28).
 - It lays out the requirements about food and sexual immorality. Again, these are primarily calls to avoid idolatry (v 29).
- The believers in Antioch were gladdened by the encouraging message of the letter (v 32).
- Judas and Silas (the designees from Jerusalem) spent time preaching to and encouraging the church in Antioch before returning home to Jerusalem with a blessing of peace (vv 32-33).
- Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch "where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord" (v 35).
 - This entire episode reminds us of the decentralized nature of the early church.
 - While the Jerusalem church exercised a kind of authority over the other churches, it was not a tight or controlling authority.
 - The Spirit worked through many people in many different ways.

Sources

Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

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I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1980).