

IT SEEMED GOOD TO THE APOSTLES AND ELDERS**Acts 15:1-35**

Intro: The Brethren in Christ have remained relatively intact over our almost 250 years, though we have had some groups that have gone their separate ways in our history. One group, which resided mostly in York County, Pennsylvania, and because of that became known as the Yorkers, were much more conservative than the already very conservative Brethren. That group has remained very plain, and some of them still use horse-drawn buggies and wagons.

One of the most notable splits we have had happened between 1851 and 1855. A church led by Matthias Brinser in the area near Middletown, Pennsylvania, decided that they would like to build a meeting house. By that I mean, they wanted to build a church building. You see, prior to this, the Brethren had mostly met in homes or in barns. But Bishop Brinser was a dynamic and, some would say fiery preacher with quite a following. When no home or barn could contain his burgeoning congregation, it was decided to build a meeting house. This fired up the Lancaster County District of the Brethren and it was brought to General Conference for debate. For peaceful Brethren it was pretty raucous – made worse that the day of the debate was a day of heavy storms and flooding which didn't make people's moods any more conciliatory. In the end the vote was to admonish Brother Brinser for his sin order him to cease and desist. He did not.

The denomination excommunicated Bishop Brinser and his entire congregation. The denomination that was formed out of this became known as United Zion's Children. It's interesting that they have always been close to the Brethren in Christ with their members serving in Brethren in Christ ministries and missions throughout the years. As a matter of fact, they have pretty much merged backed into the Brethren in Christ. However, in the 1850s there was a separation over the deeply theological issue of whether or not to have a church building. Roughly 1800 years prior to this, the fledgling church of the risen of Jesus Christ we have been following in our study of the book of Acts, was headed toward its own split. My account of the Brethren in Christ is just one of many accounts of schisms that have happened through the history of the church, but in its infancy the church practically split over the issue of old Jewish regulations.

As we look at this, I'll begin by reading the first five verses of Acts 15.

READ Acts 15:1-11

In the midst of all the wonder and excitement and successes, the early church was struggling with the age-old tendency to . . .

Major in Minors

- As a result of the success of Barnabas and Paul's mission journey there was a huge influx of conversions by people who were not from a Jewish background. They weren't even God Fearers, who knew about Jewish laws and customs. As we saw last week, these were people who had no idea of what the Old Testament prophets taught and required because they were out of a Greek and otherwise pagan tradition.
- This was threatening for some in the Church in Jerusalem. It's scary to have somebody come in with new ideas. As we see in our scripture here, some men came from Judea, that is they came from Jerusalem to Antioch, and taught *Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.* Acts 15:1b (ESV) They were putting a condition on salvation.
- Paul and Barnabas pushed back. I like the understatement here in verse two that the two missionary apostles *no small dissension and debate with them.* Acts 15:2 So obviously it was a lively discussion with these Judaizers – as Paul would refer to them in his letters. In the end Paul and Barnabas and some others went from Antioch to Jerusalem to raise the question: "Is circumcision and following the customs of the Jews a requirement for salvation in Jesus Christ?" and settle it once and for all.
- It's interesting that there's a joyful aside in these verses of how these brethren traveled to Jerusalem sharing the good news with the people that they met along the way concerning the salvation of so many Gentiles. It's good to note that it brought great joy to the hearers – so obviously they weren't hung up on Jewish tradition the way the Church in Jerusalem was.
- When they arrived in Jerusalem a council was convened and immediately the issue is raised. Verse 5 tells us some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said of new Gentile believers,

"It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." Acts 15:5. It's those Pharisees again!!!

- This, again, set off a spirited discussion and Peter was the first one to speak. Now, remember how in Acts 10 Peter was moved by the Holy Spirit to reconsider the requirements of Jewish Law concerning food. This the transformation work that showed that Gentiles could receive Christ. In that particular case, Cornelius, the centurion and his household and friends become Christ Followers. We also know that he was taken to task by Paul for being wishy washy. We find an account of this in Galatians 2 where Paul recounts his confrontation of Peter – so when you have a chance read it, beginning at Galatians 2:11. By the way, Galatia was the region where Paul concluded his missionary journey that we looked at last week.
- The upshot of Peter's address to the council is this

Salvation is by faith alone

- Peter's exact words were, *But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.* Acts 15:11.
- Notice that the group falls silent. Probably, you could hear a pin drop. Then Barnabas and Paul start sharing what they've been sharing ever since they arrived back from mission trip. They recounted the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. Listen to the next section. (**Read Acts 15:12-30**)
- James, the brother of Jesus, who was now the obvious leader of the entire church, stands up and begins to speak. As he does, he validates Peter's words by referencing the prophet Amos where he proclaims that Gentiles are also called to salvation. In other words, there should be no conditions place on Gentile Christians for salvation or for admission to the church with the exception of the condition which God himself had made sufficient which is Faith in Christ.
- Faith alone is what saves and then that faith changes behavior and ushers in holiness. The act of circumcision or some kind of behavior will not save you because salvation is by faith alone.
- James goes on and says there are some common courtesies. It is good to have. . .

A reasonable faith

- James tells the gathered group they should stay away from things polluted by idols, things that have been strangled rather than bled out, and certainly, stay away from sexual immorality. That's just good Christianity. And I love this line . . . *it seemed good to the apostles and the elders and the whole church.* Acts 5:22.
- F. F. Bruce writes, *It would manifestly be an act of courtesy and grace on the part of Gentile Christians to respect certain Jewish scruples.* Here's the truth, it is our duty as Christ followers to respect the scruples and the consciousness of others. Paul was not a libertarian and that is why he addresses this in First Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. Both of those letters were to churches that had come out of a Gentile background and they needed to be taught respect for the good things of the Jewish tradition. He strongly admonishes them to be careful to avoid causing others to stumble when exercising the liberty that faith in Christ brings.
- This is a good reminder for us. We need to be mindful of others as we consider how we dress or what we eat or drink or what station we have blasting from our car stereo. We may feel it's perfectly fine – but for others it may be a stumbling block. Here is my point: it's important that we have courtesy for one another and that we endeavor to let the love of Christ shine through us.
- It comes down to us having simple common sense. It seemed good to the apostles and elders and to the entire congregation to choose messengers and send them back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. Let me read the remaining scripture for our text.
- **Read verses Acts 15:31-35**
- What they're talking about here is . . .

Common sense

- I'm going to borrow the outline for this closing section of my talk from Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz.

- We must not put any stumbling block in the way of the Gospel. Our salvation is by faith alone. When our faith is put in Christ, our life changes, so we do things differently than we did before because now our direction is coming from the Holy Spirit and not from our heart.
- We need to respect one another's differences and preferences. I just spent a lot of time talking about this very thing, but let me say it again, we need to respect one another in our behaviors and our practices. Yes, other people think differently from us and it's important that we don't impose our own non-negotiables on them. We've arrived where we are by our own interpretation of scripture and reasoning and others may come at it from a different way. Are they saved by faith? Then the Holy Spirit will speak to them as he will speak to us.
- So, with that in mind, there are times that we must use our freedom to NOT DO what is permissible in other circumstances. In other words, we use simple and prayerful common sense.
- The council sent a letter that brought encouragement. It assured the new Gentile Christ Followers and everyone else that you don't have to follow the external requirements of the law in order to be saved – Jesus came along and changed that.
- At the same time, adjust your eating habits so you don't offend your Jewish brothers and sisters. And, for sure, always abstain from sexual immorality.
- The church in Antioch was encouraged. There was great joy through the church as they read the letter – it was the joy of an encouraging word.
- A split was averted, and the Gospel, literally the good news of Jesus Christ, flourished.

Conclusion: Did this mean that all the troubles were over? No way! We have holy history to remind us of how the people of God have not gotten along over 2,000 years. In fact, Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Corinthians show that the trouble did not go away. But the church dealt with it and the church needs to continue to deal with it with love and with reasonableness. Salvation is by faith in Christ alone. Let's practice courtesy for one another and strive to practice a reasonable faith. Amen.