

Acts 39

Chapter 15

Conflict over Circumcision

1 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." **2** 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.

3 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. **4** 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. **5** But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

These certain men who came down to teach were looking to teach heresy and thwart the gospel message. The Covenant was with Abraham, *Genesis 17:10*; "This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; *Genesis 17:12*; "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.

There is some confusion between the covenant and Abraham and the law. The covenant was between God and Abraham and all after him meaning all his descendants. This was not a covenant of agreement, Abraham had no choice, God made with Abraham, and the law was given to given to Moses. The problem exists more with the rabbinic law than with the Scripture. The Judaizer required that the Gentiles be circumcised to be regarded as believers and accepted into the fellowship. Which fellowship was it they were looking for? The Judaizers were looking back to Abraham and traditions, but now came a new dispensation, a change from the Law, which Jesus fulfilled, *Matthew 5:17-20*; "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.

The Talmud tells us of several people who were born circumcised and they give the verses for it, but the verses they list are not found in the Bible as they seem to imply. Amongst those who are included in this are Jacob, Moses Exodus 2:1, and Balaam Numbers 24:4, you will not find these verses in our Bibles. The Talmud does not imply they had a circumcised heart, they were speaking literally of circumcision.

How could it have been so complicated? Every child born to Israel was to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth, this was the law and tradition of the Old Testament. Paul says he was circumcised on the eighth day. B. B. Warfield points out,

“To Abraham, his faith was reckoned for righteousness. How then was it reckoned? When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they may be in uncircumcision, that the righteousness might be reckoned on to them; and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision.

” Sermons and Essays from the Works of B. B. Warfield, page 726

Warfield before the section we just read writes. God, of set purpose, gave Abraham the rite of circumcision not before but after his justification, for the precise purpose of making it plain that justification is by faith alone and is not secured or conditioned by the performance of any rite.

I changed the order of the writing so that we could better look at the mindset of the legalist as opposed to God’s purpose and intent of circumcision, action versus faith. Although there are many things we find, in faith that call for action it is faith that we act upon that separates works of faith and works alone. Abraham's faith produced obedience to the covenant God made with him. Here in Acts, we are looking at works first to demonstrate our faith, which is reversed from how it should be.

In our verses above we find, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” There is a fine line between works and works of faith, but here we find the focus to be more on the law than by faith which is given to all by the grace of God, it is not earned, Jesus paid the ransom believers now enjoy. Still not certain about the observance of circumcision Paul and Barnabus are sent back to Jerusalem where they will address the issue before the council.

The Jerusalem Council

6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. 7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, 9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.”

Peter who was rebuked for shying away from the Gentiles prior now boldly rises up and addresses the council. Peter demonstrates in words the difference between works and faith which itself will produce works in a desirous attitude. A true believer will want to serve our Lord by serving others. Fulfillment of the Law

“Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” When God sees our faith He will give us work, but when we spend time working through our own understanding we work in vain. I have watched many people over the years who seek to please God through their works, this is not the way. We will never achieve what has already been accomplished but we can, through the power of the Holy Spirit aid in bringing people to our Lord.

12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. 13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me: 14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

16 ‘After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; 17 So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.’

So at first, we are reminded that God’s people, the people of Israel were to become a new people, His chosen people to establish a nation that would demonstrate to the world His power and grace. First to the Jew then to the Gentile. God says He will rebuild the Tabernacle of David which has fallen down, He gives us the promise of knowing one Day our Christ Jesus will rule the world, that the government will be upon His shoulder, Isaiah 9:6, which has yet taken place, that there will be a great battle but that the church is not to experience the wrath the world will be under. ***Revelation 3:10; “Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.”***

18 “Known to God from eternity are all His works. 19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

Moses did what God placed in his heart, this is a work of faith. Had Moses not waited or listened for the voice of God we may be in a much different place today. The men then who were called were bold and steadfast in their faith, these were men God prepared to serve where they were called to. I see churches sold on the glitz and glamour, others preaching a message that most like, but this is not the manner of which we are to teach. The word has often

raised my attention to the things I have done in my life, without those words and direction I may have never repented. We are to teach the Scripture as it is written and if it offends some then that is between them and God, but pastors are to also be there to aid in the understanding of what God would have them do. Try to teach so as to not trouble those.

God has sent these men to dig a bit deeper and correct how the Gentiles are to live. We need to always be open to the word of God and to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. As we see in verse 19 they realized the yoke they were placing upon the Gentiles. ***“we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,”*** Sometimes we send a signal out that might look as a challenge to others to come to Christianity. People tell others they need to stop what they are doing and get it right. Here again, we are looking at that fine line between works and works of faith. This is when we need to slow down and rethink how what we want to say is correct, but more so, not in an offensive manner but with a tone of compassion. I am sure some of you over the years have heard Christians say, “You need to do this and not do that,” They show very little if any compassion making Christianity all about legalities. Try not to trouble those who are turning to God.

Over the years I have heard people who deem themselves better than others attempt to use the bible to correct the way others are living. They tend to be overzealous and often prideful and end up discouraging new believers. The excuses for people not wanting to believe are unending and most just plain do not want a God who convicts them of wrongdoing. On the flip side of this are those who are begging and prayerfully asking for wisdom, want so much to understand and be able to comfort others, these are those we need more of, this is what is taking place in the discussion we just read of.

The Jerusalem Decree

22 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. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren,

To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

24 Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment— 25 it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also

report the same things by word of mouth. 28 For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: 29 that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

This is an example of how we are to teach others, you can take these commands and send them in either the right way or wrong way, one needs correction showing them that we all need to change from the manner in which they had lived. Or, you can use the same words to beat someone over the head, send them home, torn, tattered, and all bruised, and don't be so cocky waiting for them to thank you, they may never come back or talk to you again. This is not the way we are taught to disciple others.

Farewell. Continuing Ministry in Syria

30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles.

34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

There were achievements made during this time. The church in Antioch wanted to correct and verify what the Judaizers had taught, was it right or was it false? They received back the truth and were filled with joy.

Division over John Mark

36 Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." 37 Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. 39 Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; 40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. 41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

As troubling as this seems to hear of it, it is also a good lesson for us today, there will be division throughout our churches just as there exists in every family, and we must work through it with love and patience. We are to be the example-setters, not the persecutors. Think of trying to win over a dog's trust, is it best to kick dust in the dog's face or offer a meal, like a big steak, and patiently wait by the food bowl for the dog to come?