

History in the Making
“Understanding the Book of Acts-Part Twenty-Six

Introduction: The chapter/narrative before us today is one of the key sections in Acts. (To Luke as epoch as Saul’s conversion/Peter with Cornelius)

A. Approximately 49/50 AD

1. Christ died/resurrection/Pentecost-30 AD
2. Saul’s conversion 36 AD
3. Church about 2 decades old
4. Quickly making inroads into Gentile world (Peter/Cornelius-Paul/Barnabas-first missionary tour)

B. Certain Jews/Pharisees-“unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

NOTE: Some wanted to even add back all of the “law of Moses” (more than 10 commandments).

C. A real concern-soon church would be more Gentile than Jewish-concern about lax moral standards (NOTE: from Paul’s letters-not unfounded concern)

D. It became necessary for the church (just 20 years old) to call apostles/elders together-let them converge to determine two things:

1. On what terms could Gentiles believers enter church membership. (Big Issue: Circumcision)
2. The means of social interaction between Jews/Gentiles (table fellowship: customs, traditions, laws, beliefs)

E. Paul and Barnabas will serve as witnesses but will not participate in the decision

PAUSE: Reflection Points

- ✓ There are things that are not clearly spelled out and aren’t easy to resolve still today
- ✓ There are some very different issues today where very good people struggle to find agreement

(DOES NOT MAKE ONE BAD!)

I. The Council Unfolds with Holy Spirit Direction.

A. Begins with a speech by Peter

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." Acts 15:7-11 NKJV

1. Alludes to the Cornelius episode (Acts 10)
2. God knew their heart-experience; spirit like us
3. Argues for Gospel liberty
4. Don't add the yoke of the law (we can't keep it)
5. Salvation for us and them is by grace

B. Followed by testimony of Paul and Barnabas

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. Acts 15:12 NKJV

1. Witnessed to their ministry 1st trip
2. Did not have voice in mother church like Peter

C. Summary of James

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.' 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." Acts 15:13-21 NKJV

NOTE: James—half-brother of Jesus—pillar of the church

(John's brother James was killed by Herod in 12:1, 2)

1. All listened as James addressed Peter
2. Recounts Peter testimony
3. His judgment—"don't trouble them"—they are turning to God NO CIRCUMCISION REQUIRED
 - a. Abstain from meat offered to idols
 - b. Sexual immorality (not just fornication/adultery—that would be part of elementary principles of obedience—that had to do with Levites 18—marrying too close to other family)

'None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness: I am the Lord. Leviticus 18:6 NKJV

- c. Things strangled
- d. Blood

NOTE: Circumcision not required for salvation and lay down these 4 things so that fellowship can occur between Jew and Gentile.

D. Letter sent

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. 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. Farewell. Acts 15:22-29 NKJV

1. Judas and Silas would accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch and deliver the letter.
2. NOTE: Church's role as vehicle of the Spirit (28)
3. A binding letter to the diverse church

E. The church in Antioch rejoices

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. Acts 15:30-35 NKJV

II. The Council Unveils Two Clear Principles

A. Anything we add to faith in the finished word of Christ as a condition for salvation is a grave offense to Christ and a yoke that no one should have to bear.

But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they." Acts 15:11 NKJV

B. Finding unity on some matters not directly related to salvation, can be very difficult

1. When there is diversity-unity is difficult
2. Jew/Gentile/Pharisee/God-fearers/Pagans
3. Very little scripture-limited communications

III. The Council Underscores a Crucial Truth

“Being part of the Church is more than just embracing private salvation...”

A. Would have been easiest for everyone just to go their separate way and divide along lines of clear conviction. (NOTE: We do this today)

NOT WHAT SPIRIT HAD IN MIND-COMPROMISE

B. Compromise (with Jews giving up the most) was called for to promote harmonious table fellowship

NOTE: Only 4 restrictions

C. How do we sort out those issues (matters of conscience today)?

— Examples: Movies entertainment, clothing, working on Sunday, drinking, gambling (lottery)

— Underlying principle

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. 24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 NKJV

— NOTE: This is in reference to matters of conscience, not things clearly identified as sin

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5 NKJV

NOTE: Question: Why pick on alcohol? Isn't gossip a worse sin? Bitterness? Lust? YES!-sins-alcohol is not! Only drunkenness.

SEVERAL KEY/HELPFUL TRUTHS

1. It is wrong to make spiritual preferences-spiritual principles
 - a. I sin because I judge you based on my preference
 - b. It disregards God's desire for unity amongst diversity (easy to be unified if uniform)
 - c. It does not display grace to others

2. Beware of the faulty adage-"just follow your conscience."

For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. 1 Corinthians 4:4 NKJV

(Bible speaks of good conscience but also a "weak", "seared", "corrupted" and "evil" conscience)

NOTE: A good conscience needs to be trained by word of God and law of love-think biblically

3. An immature or untrained conscience is not the same as a sensitive conscience that some treat as being more spiritual.

(People offended by coffee, beards, clothes)

NOTE: There is a difference between making a strong believer grumble and weak believer stumble!

(ILL) Grumble over platform dress. Stumble over alcohol consumption.

Example of meat offered to Idols

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NOTE: Forbidden by Jerusalem Council but 10 year later. Paul has a different tune in writing to the Corinthians

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; 26 for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." 27 If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." 29 "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience? 30 But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks? 31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 1 Corinthians 10:25-32 NKJV

- ✓ Paul says you can eat. Not a big deal.
- ✓ Here again...

Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 NKJV

- ✓ Idol is nothing-meat won't hurt you
- ✓ God only forbids drunkenness, not a sin to drink (I feel more Christ-like when I drink?)
- ✓ RIGHT! - We more mature believers must not castigate those who drink, or play the lottery, or listen to music you would not
- ✓ Should not stumble when someone else does
- ✓ I may stumble-but should not expect them to change because of my gambling!

BUT—That is not the highest place

- ✓ Not just personal salvation
- ✓ I am called to walk in love

I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. Romans 14:14-15 NKJV

— NOTE: Destroying one another with liberty? (Why pick on alcohol?!

- ✓ It's the biggest controversy
 - ✓ It's the most out of control fad
 - ✓ No one starts out wanting to be an alcoholic (lose job, family, life)
 - ✓ It's expensive and addictive
 - ✓ Some will vigorously defend it but change mind if it wrecks their child's life
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- ✓ Return to 1 Corinthians 8

— Our knowledge says it is OK-liberty

Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. 1 Corinthians 8:1-6 NKJV

— Not all have that knowledge

However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 1 Corinthians 8:7 NKJV

— But the one who walks in love looks out for the weaker

But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 1 Corinthians 8:9-11 NKJV

- ✓ I emboldened him
- ✓ He is trapped
- ✓ He dies without Christ
- ✓ What good is my liberty now?

— So, I choose to lay down my liberty

But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. 1 Corinthians 8:12-13 NKJV

Summary:

1. Nothing can be added to faith in Christ for salvation.
2. I have amazing liberty in Christ.
3. I should never judge someone else based on my convictions-don't grumble.
4. Those who want to influence others, lead in the church, must lay down many of their rights in order to care for others.