

Controversy Over Circumcision and the Gospel

Acts 15:1-35

Introduction

In Acts we've been learning about how Christ has been fulfilling his promise to build his kingdom, his church by using his people to spread his gospel to the uttermost parts of the Earth. First Jews witnessed and heard the gospel and many of them have believed it. Over time in Acts we see the gospel begin to trickle out to the surrounding Gentile world. The Church at Antioch in Syria has become a missions outpost. And now, Gentiles are beginning to come to Christ in droves. That raises a problem for some of the Jews. When a Gentile comes to Christ, does he have to also become a Jew?

Interestingly the problem in Acts 15 is probably our greatest problem today. Some Jews were arguing that in order to be saved, you had to believe the gospel and be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. So here in Acts 15 there has to be this huge Council in Jerusalem to clarify the gospel and be certain that we are holding fast to what it means to be saved.

The Controversy

Paul and Barnabas has completed their first missionary journey and were back in Syrian Antioch teaching the disciples there.

Men came down from Judea

Teaching – (v1) “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

Paul and Barnabas had no small dissention and debate with them.

Why is this such a big deal?

The gospel itself is at stake

Are we saved by what Christ has done or are we saved by what Christ has done plus what we do? Are we saved by Christ plus anything?

Our text shows us that, within the Church, there's always going to be a tendency, a temptation to smuggle other things in and place them along side the gospel as the basis of our salvation.

These teachers are doing it with Moses' Law. They're saying, in order to be saved you need to believe in Christ and be circumcised and keep the law of Moses then you'll be ok. It wasn't difficult for believing Jews to believe that Gentiles were becoming Christians, but they had a hard time conceiving of Gentiles becoming Christians without also becoming Jews.

Jews were using the Law of Moses, what are some things that we might use? Jesus + ?

Our traditions

Our obedience or our good works

Church attendance

Tithing

In Galatians, Paul shows us why it's so deadly to pervert the gospel

Galatians 5:1-4 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. 2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. 3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. 4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

To say we need Christ's sacrifice plus something else undermines the value and sufficiency of who he is and what he's done.

You can see why Paul and Barnabas think this is such a big deal.

These false teachers are teaching that converts must keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. What exactly is being referred to here by the Law of Moses.

Three parts of the Law of Moses

1. The Moral Law – The Ten Commandments – The moral law is binding on all people at all times. Just think about the first commandment (Thou shall have no other gods before me). There's never a time when that goes away. It never becomes ok to break the Ten Commandments.
2. The Civil Law – The Civil Law functioned exactly like our modern day criminal and civil laws do. God gave Moses the Civil law to the Jews for the functioning of themselves as a Theocratic nation. The Civil law is no longer in effect because Israel ceased to be a nation under God when they rejected Christ and the New Covenant.
3. The Ceremonial Law – The Ceremonial Law refers to the sacrifices and feasts that God commanded. The function of the Ceremonial law was to point to the coming of Jesus as the Great High Priest and the once and for all sacrifice. So once Christ came and offered himself up, there is no longer any need for those sacrifices, Christ has fulfilled them all.

There are two ways to break God's Law (think of the Ten Commandments)

1. Disobey them (under a curse)
2. Use the Law for something God didn't intend it.

God never intended for the Law of Moses to be a way back to God. The role of the Law was to point us to the fact that we could never live up to the standard of God's righteousness. The Law points us to our need of a Savior.

Romans 8:1-4 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The Council

Since these teachers came down from Judea, The Church at Antioch appoints Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem...

Paul and Barnabas report all that God had done through them.

Acts 15:5-7 But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate...

Peter's answer

Acts 15:7-9 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles **should hear the word of the gospel and believe.** 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, **having cleansed their hearts by faith.**

Acts 15:11 But we believe that **we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus,** just as they will."

By grace through faith – "cleansed their hearts by faith"

Under Judaism purification from sin came through keeping the Law of Moses.

Under the gospel, purification comes by grace through faith.

What is faith? When you hear the word faith or believe, you need to think dependence or reliance. So under Judaism you're depending on how well you keep the law. Under the gospel you depend (not on anything you've done but) on how well Christ kept the Law in your place and the fact that he atoned for your failure to keep the law.

What does faith look like?

Dick and Rick Hoyt

If we're not clear on the gospel, we are going to be crushed and we'll be crushing other people...

1. Peter v10 – insisting on circumcision is placing a yoke on the neck of believers that neither we or our forefathers were able to bear.

Spartan Race – two bags of sand

Matthew 11:28-30 Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Why can Jesus say that if we come to him, he's going to give us a burden to carry that is light and carrying it will feel like rest? Friends, it's because he's already borne the burden of our sin and shame. He was crushed under the weight of judgement that we deserved. So that when God places his load of grace on our shoulders, it's not the kind of burden that weighs us down. It's the kind of burden that lifts us up. It's the kind of burden that feels like rest.

Here's what going to happen if we add to the gospel.

1. Religion is always going to feel like a burden and you're never going to feel like you measure up. You're going to always feel defeated and it's going to seem like the Christian life doesn't work.
2. And if you ever do feel like you measure up, you'll be a Pharisee and you'll be looking down your nose at other people.

That's the threat for us as a Church adding anything to the gospel. My greatest fear is that we would be a Church that is great at a lot of things but not great with the simplicity of the gospel. If we're not careful to keep the clarity of the gospel then we'll take the beauty of it and turn it into something ugly and nasty.

The Conclusion

Send a letter back to Antioch – not going to trouble/burden

- don't have to be circumcised

- you don't have to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved

v.20 Advise them to abstain from

1. Things polluted by idols
2. Sexual immorality
3. What has been strangled
4. Blood

Reason

v21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the Synagogues.

1. What are you trusting in addition to the gospel for your salvation?
2. What are you tempted to trust in?
- 3.