

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 15:1 – 16:5 The Council of Jerusalem

What were the consequences of making Gentile converts to the Christian faith? In Acts 15, we read of the first ever Synod meeting, called to discuss this very issue.

About ten years has passed since the conversion of the first Gentiles. After initial scepticism, the Jewish Christians were delighted and 'praised God'. The gospel had spread to Syrian Antioch, and from there into Asia Minor, with the first missionary journey of Paul, with Barnabas. As the Gentile mission gathered momentum, it began to raise questions with the Jewish authorities. What status did these Christians have? How should they be incorporated into the Jewish background of the first believers? Should they become Jews first, and then Christians, or could they retain their identity as members of other races? In short, did these Gentile Christians need to carry out all the traditional, ritual Jewish rites of initiation?

This raises the question, what is necessary for salvation? Is circumcision a pre-requisite for salvation? Luke summarises three speeches made by Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and James.

Peter first, reminds the council of the conversion of Cornelius, 'some time ago'.

- God chose Peter to be the agent of taking the gospel to the Gentiles.
- God chose to give the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, just as He did to the Jews. There is no racial barrier to the spread of the Gospel.
- God purified their hearts by faith. It is the inward purity of faith which makes fellowship possible, not the external purity of diet and ritual. It is important to remember that 'by grace we are saved' (v.11)

Paul and Barnabas described what had been going on in Asia Minor. You couldn't argue with the fact that the Spirit had been at work.

Finally, James cites scripture to portray how the Lord will do great things amongst the Gentiles. He then, in the interests of harmony between all believers, urges that Gentiles abstain from four things: abstain from things polluted from idols, from fornication, from eating anything which has been strangled, and from eating blood.

These are all ceremonial matters. They relate back to Leviticus 17 and 18. They are all issues which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile relationships. They seek the courtesy of respect between the different groups. (Compare with 1 Cor. 8 – have a mind for your weaker brother). Even these are not an essential Christian duty, but a concession to the consciences of others.

This advice is well received by the council, and by the Gentile Church in Syrian Antioch. The lesson for us is that it preserves the unity of the church. Scripture, experience, finding a common mind are all applied. There is one way to salvation. It cannot be supplemented by anything else, nor is it supplementary to anything else, but having established that, it is important to maintaining Christian fellowship and be considerate of one another.