

Acts 15

A case study in resolving doctrinal questions

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Is the Bible able to address our time? How are we to use the Bible to determine morality? How are we to use the Bible to solve doctrinal questions? How are we to use the Bible to answer today's questions? To answer these and other related questions, we will consider an event in Acts chapter fifteen.

In the early days of the Church, Christians were perplexed concerning salvation being offered to the Gentiles. There was a contingent among brethren who were demanding Gentiles to be circumcised in keeping with the Law of Moses. This issue was being hotly debated throughout the brotherhood. Notice how the scene is described:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question" (Acts 15:1-2).

Christians were greatly troubled by this issue. This was an unavoidable question that needed to be answered. Did the Gentiles need to be circumcised to be saved? Should the Church divide over this issue? How could they find an answer in keeping with the will of God? Luke recorded how these men resolved this dispute.

About the Discussion

1. Peter offered evidence and a summation (Acts 15:7-11). After the group had been debating for a while, the apostle Peter spoke. He recited God's intervention in his life. God had shown a vision to Peter. The vision represented God's welcoming of the Gentiles to His family. Also, God had poured His Spirit on Gentiles: the household of Cornelius (Acts 10).

Based on the evidence of God's acceptance of the Gentiles, Peter gave his summation: "Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10-11).

2. Paul and Barnabas cited evidence of God's welcome of the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). After Peter spoke, the audience was silent. There was nothing that could be said against the proof and conclusion of Peter. The silence broke by Paul and Barnabas supporting Peter's conclusion with more evidence. Like Peter, they had witnessed God validate the Gentiles by miracles. Their missionary work had born witness to God's approval of the Gentiles many times. Not once had God indicated the need for the Gentiles to obey the Law of Moses to be saved.

3. James cited prophecy (Acts 15:13-21). After Paul and Barnabas spoke, the apostle James took the floor. He explained how God's welcome of the Gentiles had been prophesied. The prophets supported Peter's conclusion. Based on the evidence of Peter, Paul and Barnabas, and the prophets, James' conclusion was simple: "we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:19).

4. About the letter (Acts 15:22-29). The apostles decided to compose their conclusions into a letter. In their judgment, a letter was a good way to disseminate their views on this matter. A letter "seemed good" to them.

Significantly, the letter stated this problem stemmed from people teaching things for which the apostles gave no instructions (Acts 15:24). The apostles never taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved. They were silent about this issue. The resolution of the apostles and elders was in keeping with the approval of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). Their decision was not a matter of preference, but of divine approval. The elders at Jerusalem selected two men, Judas and Barsabbas, to accompany Paul and Silas with the letter. They delivered the letter to the church at Antioch.

Acts 15 & Us

Acts chapter fifteen is an important case study in how we are to solve doctrinal questions. First and foremost, the apostles and elders were dedicated to solving doctrinal questions with God's approval. They did not simply take a vote on the best way to deal with the Gentiles. They took great care to ascertain God's will on this pressing matter.

Second, the apostles and elders brought evidence to the center of their deliberations. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas cited examples of God intervening to show His acceptance of the Gentiles. James cited the Scriptures as evidence. The word of God had a direct bearing on the issue at hand. God's family being opened to the Gentiles was the fulfillment of the Scriptures. The evidence could not be ignored.

Third, the silence of Scripture is prohibitive. We cannot begin a practice based on the silence of the Scriptures. The problem in Acts fifteen stemmed from people teaching a doctrine that the apostles had not authorized. Only the apostles were given authority to establish orthodoxy in the Church; therefore, no one else was given the right to formulate new teaching in the Church. No one had the right to enforce the Law of Moses on the Gentiles.

Conclusion

When we have questions of faith, we must heed the lessons of Acts fifteen. There is a strong temptation to disregard the Bible when struggling with difficult questions of faith. Personal preference is no substitute for God's approval. Instead of jumping to conclusions that may not be endorsed by God, we must consider...

1. Has the Bible directly or indirectly addressed a specific issue?
2. Are there examples documented of God giving His approval?
3. Is the Bible silent about a specific issue?
4. How can we resolve a specific issue that is consistent with the Biblical evidence?

This is how the apostles approached and solved an unanticipated doctrinal issue. By appealing to examples of God's approval and clear explanations in the Scriptures, they reached a conclusion that was consistent with the evidence presented. This approach will ensure that we will do all things in the name of the Lord (Col. 3:17).