

“KEEPING THE DOOR OF GRACE OPEN” PART 2

ACTS 15:6-41

INTRODUCTION:

Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker both had churches in London in the 19th century. On one occasion, Parker commented on the poor condition of children admitted to Spurgeon's orphanage. It was reported to Spurgeon however, that Parker had criticized the orphanage itself. Spurgeon blasted Parker the next week from the pulpit. The attack was printed in the newspapers and became the talk of the town. People flocked to Parker's church the next Sunday to hear his rebuttal. "I understand Dr. Spurgeon is not in his pulpit today, and this is the Sunday they use to take an offering for the orphanage. I suggest we take a love offering here instead." The crowd was delighted. The ushers had to empty the collection plates 3 times. Later that week there was a knock at Parker's study. It was Spurgeon. "You know Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed.

Moody Monthly, December, 1983, p. 81.

THE DEFENSE! **VV. 6-18**

Note: It appears that at least four different meetings were involved in this important conference:

- [1] A public welcome to Paul and his associates. **V.4**
- [2] A private meeting of Paul and the key leaders.
 - [3] A second public meeting at which the Judaizers presented their case. **Vv. 5,6**
 - [4] The public discussion described in **Vv. 6-ff**

In this public discussion, four key leaders presented the case for keeping the doors open for the grace of God to work in the Gentiles.

1. Peter reviewed the past:

vv. 6-11

v. 7 Much Dispute - After the arguments and counter arguments had been presented, there still seemed to be no clear consensus among the leaders.

Peter Rose Up - Peter was the first among this leadership to lead a Gentile to Christ (Acts 10-11). He then defend it before this same group of leaders.

God Chose - Peter begins by making it clear that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ was initiated by God, not man.

v. 8 Giving Them the Holy Spirit - Peter reminds them that the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurred on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4) accompanied the reception of the Christ by the Gentile household of Cornelius (Acts 10).

v. 9 Purifying Their Hearts - It was not by the rituals of Judaism but faith in what Jesus did for them on the cross that cleansed them of their sin.

v. 10 Why Do You Test - Peter makes it clear that continuing to question the validity of the conversion of Gentiles outside Judaism was in itself a great sin against God.

Yoke on the Neck - The yoke, used to control oxen, is a symbol of bondage to religious externals that cannot produce internal results (1 Tim. 1:14; Matt. 11:29, 30).

Able to Bear - Peter makes it clear that even the most committed of Jewish believers could not completely fulfill the requirements of the rituals and laws of Judaism because of the sin in all mankind.

v. 11 Through the Grace - Salvation for both Jew and Gentile must ultimately come by grace (unmerited blessing).

2. Paul & Barnabas reported on the present: v. 12

3. James related it all to the future:

vv. 13-18

v. 13 James - This was the brother of Jesus, who seems to have played a leading roll in the Jerusalem Church. He quotes Amos 9:11-12 as his biblical grounds for his position.

v. 18 From Eternity - James argues that it was from all eternity God's plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles and it must be adjusted to by these Jews who have trouble letting go of the past.

III. THE DECISION! VV.19-35

Note: The leaders and the whole church (Acts 15:22), being directed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), made a twofold decision;

1. A Doctrinal Decision About Salvation!

- a. They concluded that Jews and Gentiles were both sinners in need of a Savior.
- b. There is one need, and there is but Gospel to meet that need.

Galatians 1:11-12 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

- c. God has but one program today: He is calling out a people for His name; Israel is set aside but not cast away; and when God's program is completed, He will again fulfill His Kingdom promises to the Jews.

Romans 11:1-5 I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

2 God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel, saying,

3 "Lord, they have killed Your prophets and torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life"?

4 But what does the divine response say to him? "I have reserved for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."

5 Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.

v. 20 We Write to Them - Three issues are addressed that they decide are transferable to the life of faith in Christ that had roots in O.T. scripture. Though they are rooted in O.T. teaching, these moral standards are not to be discarded along with the ritual and ceremonial aspects of the O.T. law. It's interesting to note that these three issues were all established before the law was given and then reaffirmed in the law afterwards.

Polluted by Idols - This most likely refers to food that had been sacrificed to idols and then used in ceremonies that were put on as social functions which was a common practice in the Gentile world. Note Paul's exhortations on this in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

Sexual Immorality - This was an accepted part of Gentile behavior and it would need to be made clear to them that sexual purity was a moral standard that was in effect before the Law of Moses.

Blood - This was first given to Noah in Genesis Chapter 9. It would be an issue that if honored by the Gentile believers would maintain unity in the church with the Jewish believers. This was a major issue due to the "love feast" meals that were a common aspect of the early church fellowship and the Jews would be extremely offended at the presence of food they could not eat in clear conscience.

2. **A Practical Decision About how to live the Christian Life!**

Note: What did this decision accomplish in a practical way? At least three significant things.

[1] First, it strengthened the unity of the Church and kept it from splitting into two extreme "Law" and "Grace" groups. This is not doctrinal compromise, but rather give and take in the practical arrangements of life.

Jude 1:3 Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.

[2] Second, this decision made it possible for the Church to present a united witness to the lost Jews. **V.21**

v. 21 Moses Has Had - James feels that these issues should be understandable to the Gentile Christians as there had been an exposure to the Old Testament teaching of Moses and Jewish influence in almost all known regions of the world.

Illustration: The gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement. Paul Stromberg Rees (1900-)

Illustration: We could hardly believe the advertisement. It comes from Holt Renfrew and it focuses on a "Future Perfect Micro-Targeted Skin Gel" that promises to give your skin what it needs -- luminosity. The ad reads: "The past forgiven. The present improved. The Future Perfect." It used to be Gospel preachers who made this claim for the old-fashioned Gospel. It assures us of God's forgiveness for the past. It vastly improves our present. And it guarantees a perfect future.

These great words have surely lost their meaning when they can be employed for a product that is only skin deep!

[3] Third, this decision brought blessing as the letter was shared with the various Gentile congregations. **Vv. 30-31**

v. 28 Good to the Holy Spirit - In verses 24-29 the letter, which was sent to settle what could have split the church in a horrible way, was the result ultimately not of the men who talked it out but the work of the Holy Spirit within them.

Acts 16:5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

v. 31 Rejoiced over its Encouragement - The joy was the result of the unity and wisdom of scripture rising above the personal agendas of men.

v. 32 Judas - This may have been the Judas who was nominated to fill the vacant apostleship (Acts 1:23) or the Apostle James' brother, who also had the same name.

Silas - He became one of the most fruitful missionaries of the early church. He was apparently a Roman citizen, and traveled extensively with Paul as well as Timothy and Peter (Acts 15:40, 17:14, 18:5; 1 Pet. 5:12).

Being Prophets - They are gifted by God to teach, exhort, and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3-6; 24-25; 39).

Strengthened - The Word of God given by those gifted by God always results in the strengthening of God's people.

v. 34 Seemed Good - This provides an interesting insight into how the Holy Spirit led Silas. He had no idea that this decision would open up a whole new sphere of ministry by working alongside the apostle Paul.

v. 35 Teaching and Preaching - Paul spoke with passion as he implored people to accept the Gospel. He did perform healing and miracles, but that did not replace the consistent and thoughtful feeding of the Word of God to the believers.

v. 36 Paul Said - Here we see a different means of making a decision with regard to ministry. Paul's first missionary journey was the result of a directive prophecy (Acts 13:1-3). This second journey seems to be the result of Paul's reasoning being led by the Holy Spirit.

v. 37 John Mark - He was a relative of Barnabas.

v. 38 Had Departed - It seems clear that John Mark's departure was due to a weakness on his part, which caused Paul to conclude that John Mark could not be depended upon if the work became too difficult or fearful.

v. 39 Contention - *Paroxoomos* (Gk.) refers to a difference that is so severe that it causes pain. The scripture does not hide this conflict but honestly portrays two godly men who both sincerely believed they were right. The disposition of Barnabas as the Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36) is seen in his intense effort to give John Mark a second chance.

Paul's personality as an intense trailblazer is also seen in his feeling that in the midst of the inevitable battles that lay ahead there was no place for someone who had shown himself incapable.

Parted - Barnabas and Paul were divided, but this church split was eventually resolved. Barnabas and Paul later ministered and traveled together (1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:9). Paul came to regard John Mark in the same way Barnabas had (1 Tim. 4:11). It was John Mark who eventually wrote the Gospel of Mark.

To Cyprus - This was the homeland of Barnabas. Luke, the author of this account, does not follow Barnabas' ministry after this point, but rather focuses on Paul for the remainder.

Commended by the Brethren - It seems that the Antioch church sided with Paul's position, as this same commendation is not said to have been given to Barnabas.

Cilecia - This region had in it the city of Tarsus, Paul's place of upbringing.

Strengthening - *Episterizon* (Gk.) means to establish or make strong.

CONCLUSION:

As we deal with our differences as the early Church did, we must be willing to ask, “**How will our decisions affect the united witness of the Church to the lost community?**” Jesus prayed that his disciples would be united so that the world would believe on Him.

John 17:20-21 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

Remember that unity is not uniformity, for unity is based on love and not law. There is a great need for diversity in unity, for that is the only way the body can mature and do its work in the world.

EPH 4:1-7 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,

2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,

3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;

6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Illustration: Shortly after the close of the Civil War, in a fashionable Richmond church, members of the congregation were invited to come to the altar rail to receive Holy Communion.

After several rows of worshipers came and left after receiving Communion side by side, a black man walked down the aisle toward the altar. A tense silence gripped everyone.

No one got up to come down to receive the bread and wine, although many had not yet received Communion. The black man started to kneel alone.

Quietly, a tall, graying man with a military bearing stood up and strode down the aisle to the black man's side. Together, they knelt.

Before the officiating clergyman could continue, people recognized that the person kneeling beside the black man without showing any distinction was General Robert E. Lee.

Although Lee said nothing, everyone realized he had shown his faith through his act of joining that lonely black worshiper at the altar.

Lee's example is an example for all. We must not be content with any system that divides us as fellow Christians. We must seek to demonstrate our essential unity. Only then can we say truly: "We are one in Christ."