

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts 15A_The Jerusalem Council)

Introduction

In our previous studies of chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Acts, we observed the positive response from the Gentiles contrasted with the opposition posed by the Judaizers to Paul and his party's message on their first missionary into predominantly Gentile areas. This first missionary journey was launched from the church at Antioch while the church at Jerusalem observed the results and pondered how those results should be interpreted.

The Jerusalem church leaders had many unanswered questions. Should the Gentiles be required to observe the Mosaic Law? Were these Gentile believers a new party within Judaism? Did these Gentile believers need to become Jewish proselytes and be required to be circumcised? Should they have to obey other aspects of the Mosaic Law?

The grace oriented position of Paul and those who accepted Paul's Apostolic credentials was that there was no need for these restrictions and requirements for Gentiles. This group of believers had begun to view themselves as a distinct group separate from Judaism. The council in Jerusalem that Luke documents in Acts 15 began to crystallize the distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Paul's missionary expedition was the circumstance that served as the foundation for the debate.

The Conflict over Circumcision (15:1-5)

In these verses, we see the distinction between the two groups of "believers" – 1) Jewish "believers" who wanted to see the Gentiles become Jews or Jewish proselytes and 2) those who accepted Paul's position that these Gentiles did not need to become Jews or Jewish proselytes in order to be saved. The focal point of debate centered upon the rite of circumcision.

Today, there are two groups of "believers" who practice water baptism: 1) those who don't believe it is a requirement for salvation and 2) those who do believe it is a requirement for salvation. While I do not believe that the practice of water baptism is an ordinance or ritual that is required of a believer of the present dispensation, I would water baptize someone if they still desired to be water baptized after I explained my position on the subject – i.e. it is a "non-essential" ritual that has absolutely nothing to do with one's salvation and is not required today. It is just that – a "non-essential." Those who fall into category #2 would be akin to the hard-core Judaizers of Paul's day – i.e. those who had made a "non-essential" to the faith an "essential" to the faith.

It is possible that a segment of those who were "believers" in these early days of the church continued to practice circumcision even though they understood that it was not a requirement for salvation. (The believers in Jerusalem may have been among this group. Even Paul circumcised Timothy so that Timothy could be more effective in Jewish settings, thus illustrating the fact that Paul could be flexible about a non-essential – Acts 16:3).

The believers who continued to practice circumcision were simply bound to their tradition and they were confused (similar to many who continue to practice water baptism today). However, what is very clear from Scripture is the fact that there were "Judaizers" who were outright legalistic and adamantly opposed to Paul and his ministry.

The rite of circumcision was commanded by Yahweh as a part of the covenant with Abraham. (Abraham was like any other Gentile prior to his circumcision of the heart and of the flesh). It was designed to be an outward manifestation of one's acceptance of and identification with the promise of God. As such, it was designed to be a symbolic act of one's faith. (When a Gentile became a Jewish proselyte, he simply followed the precedent established by Abraham).

When a Jewish person had a male child, the act of circumcision was a way in which the parents expressed their faith in God's promise. The child was evidence of God's faithfulness to His Word, His promise. The rite of circumcision was rooted in such texts as the following:

And God said to Abraham: "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised male child who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." (Gen 17:9-14)

And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it [the Passover]; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised person shall eat it. One law shall be for the native-born and for the stranger who dwells among you. (Ex 12:47-49)

The claim of the hard-core Judaizers (i.e. those who considered keeping the Law an "essential") was tantamount to a denial of the sufficiency of faith in Christ for salvation.

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. (Acts 15:23-24)

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. (Gal 2:11-13)

Paul realized the seriousness of the issue. This distortion by the hard-core Judaizers made something which was a "non-essential" to saving faith equivalent to an "essential" of saving faith. If this issue was not highlighted and dealt with openly and transparently to all, it would dilute and neutralize the gospel. It was a doctrinal issue of the utmost importance – not only for that present generation, but for all generations to come.

Observation: These early believers were divided over a doctrinal issue.

Observation: In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul seems to be the only one in his camp to have realized the magnitude of the issue. (This event probably preceded the Jerusalem Council).

Observation: Even Barnabas and Peter were blinded and confused.

Observation: Paul was not one to “go along to get along.”

Observation: Paul had the ability to clearly dissect the issues at stake in the midst of a temptation to maintain “fellowship” with sincere believers.

Observation: Paul, as a leader, was responsible to one Person only – the Lord.

Observation: Paul was alone in his stance.

Principle: Sometimes, the leader has to take a bold, courageous stance alone and not compromise when an “essential” issue is at stake.

Principle: A leader must be able to clearly dissect the issues at play.

Principle: A leader must be objective and set aside all temptation to be seeking the approval of others.

Principle: History measures the success of leaders based upon how they shaped history, not on the basis of whether they were a “nice guy.”

Principle: A leader does not have to be a jerk, but a leader who demonstrates love for people (not just talks about it) and who demonstrates character by commitment to principle will be respected in history.

Principle: It is proven fact that doctrine sometimes divides and sometimes unifies.

Application: We should seek to unify based upon doctrine.

As Paul and Barnabas and “certain others” from Antioch passed through the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, they described the conversion of the Gentiles during their first journey to those who would listen (v. 3). The excitement generated was due to the fact that these Gentiles were converted apart from any commitment to Judaism. If these Gentiles had simply become proselytes or simply remained “God-fearers,” this would have not been something new and unusual so as to cause the excitement and “great joy” that it did.

The Judaizers of verse 5 probably consisted of two categories of “believers:” 1) those who would eventually be persuaded by Paul’s arguments in favor of grace and 2) those who would eventually reject Paul’s arguments in favor of faith alone in Christ alone. The book of Hebrews in our Bible was written to encourage category #1 to not become apostate and slip into category #2. It is very Jewish in nature and appeals to Hebrew Scripture to document and argue for Jesus as the Messiah. (The term “Judaizers” is always used in Scripture as a reference to category #2).

Some of these Judaizers were probably motivated by the fact that they didn’t want to be seen as a separate sect from Judaism – disloyal to their Jewish heritage, thus attracting attention and persecution. They wanted the Christian faith to be a sect of Judaism and they wanted Gentile believers to become Jewish proselytes through the rite of circumcision. The rite of circumcision was a sign of having been identified with the covenant of God along with the Jews.

In what was most likely his second epistle written to one of the churches he had founded (Galatians was the first epistle), Paul describes the conversion of the believers of Thessalonica in

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. This epistle was probably written around A.D. 51 – about three years after the epistle to the churches of Galatia.

For this reason, we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. For you, brethren became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles [hard-core Judaizers] that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins, but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost. (1 Thess 2:13-16)
[Bracketed phrases are mine]

Based upon Paul's testimony, those Judaizers who continued to oppose the truth of the Gospel taught by Paul and who even opposed and persecuted Paul himself, were cursed. He states that "wrath has come upon them to the uttermost" (1 Thess 2:16) and that "he [the one preaching that circumcision was required to be saved] who troubles you [the Galatian believers] shall bear his judgment" (Gal 5:10). Paul states that he "could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off" (Gal 5:12).

Question: How do we explain the Jewish "believers" who desired that the Law continue to be observed, but who also were supportive of the gospel being spread to Gentiles? How or why could they support both? (Note: Those who opposed Paul and who advocated keeping the Law were not called "Judaizers" until after the events of Acts 15).

Answer: Hebrew Scriptures contained teaching that the Gentiles would share in the benefits of God's covenant promises made to Israel (Gen. 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Isa. 49:6; 55:5-7; Zeph. 3:9-10; Zech. 8:22). The Hebrew prophets also described Gentile salvation that would occur during Israel's "last days" or "latter days" (Isa. 2:2; 11:10; 25:8-9; Zech. 8:23) through the witness of a restored Israel (Isa. 2:3; 60:2-3; Zech. 8:23).

In your [Abraham's] seed [the Coming One, the Redeemer, the Messiah/Deliverer] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 22:18a)

And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 26:4)

Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 28:14)

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isa 2:2-4)

And in that day [the Coming of the Redeemer and the establishment of the Kingdom] there shall be a Root of Jesse [a phrase which presents the Messiah to be the source of the Davidic line, not just the product of the Davidic line], Who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. (Isa 11:10)

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day; “Behold, this is our God; We have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord; We have waited for Him; We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.” (Isa 25:8-9)

Indeed He [God the Father] says, “It is too small a thing that You [a prophetic reference to the Messiah whom Isaiah portrays in his ministry] should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel [a reference to the believing remnant that will inherit the earthly kingdom of the Messiah]; I will also give You [a Messianic reference] as a light to the Gentiles, that You [the Messiah and even Isaiah as a type in his servant ministry to Israel] should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.” Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to Him whom man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel; and He [God the Father] has chosen You [His Servant/Redeemer/Deliverer].” (Isa 49:6-7)

Surely you [Israel] shall call a nation you do not know [a reference to Jewish evangelism], and nations who do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you.” Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isa 55:5-7)

For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people [references to the troubled times of the “latter days,” i.e. the Tribulation period]; but the Lord will arise over you [a reference to the Coming of the Messiah/Redeemer], and His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isa 60:2-3)

“Therefore, wait for Me,” says the Lord, “until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy. For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord.” (Zeph 3:9-10)

Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. “Thus says the Lord of hosts; ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”’” (Zech 8:22-23)

The mindset of the believers during the period covered by the book of Acts had no other Scripture upon which to formulate an interpretive grid for these events. Even though the requirements of the Mosaic Law had been satisfied by Jesus through his propitiatory sacrifice,

these believers are trying to construct an interpretive grid as they experience the transition of God's plan from one age to another – a transition that is due to the national rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 3:17-26 cf. 13:46). The conversion of so many Gentiles would have been interpreted by Jews as a possible indication that the Messianic Kingdom might be near – a period that would be accompanied by a restoration of Israel to prominence and blessing among the nations.

"It [the revelation contained in such passages as those previously quoted] was the underlying presupposition for Jewish proselytizing (cf. M[ishnah] *Pirke Aboth* 1:12; Matt 23:15) and was implicit in the sermons of Peter at Pentecost (2:39) and in the house of Cornelius (10:35). But the correlative conviction of Judaism was that Israel was God's appointed agent for the administration of these blessings—that only through the nation and its institutions could Gentiles have a part in God's redemption and share in his favor."¹ [Brackets and underline are mine]

The Council at Jerusalem (15:6-21)

The “apostles and elders” came together in Jerusalem to consider the issue. This is the manner in which many doctrinal issues would eventually be determined during the course of early church history, i.e. through councils of church leaders.

Peter's testimony (vv. 6-11) – God had prepared Peter for this type of situation through the vision Peter had received that is documented in Acts 10:9ff. This vision prepared him to evangelize the Gentiles – the first of whom was a Roman centurion, Cornelius, his household and other close friends. The result was the conversion of the entire group of Gentiles and their receipt of the gift of the Holy Spirit – manifested by speaking in tongues (Acts 10:44-48). This event is sometimes referred to as the Gentile Pentecost.

Peter reflected on this phenomenon in his speech to the council that was meeting in Jerusalem (15:7-9). Peter explained that these Gentiles had done nothing but believe and they had received the same gift of the Holy Spirit as had Jews at Pentecost. They were not required to become Jews or Jewish proselytes in order to be saved. Peter's rationale was that if the council now required Gentiles who believed to submit to circumcision and become Jewish proselytes, it was tantamount to questioning God's actions in giving the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, i.e. Cornelius and his household.

When a Gentile became a Jewish proselyte, the Jew in charge of the ceremony said the Gentile now took up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 23:4; Gal. 5:1).² Peter said this yoke, the Mosaic Covenant, was a burden that was both unbearable and improper (cf. Matt. 11:29-30).

The wonderful testimony of Peter here indicates his humility. He must have graciously accepted the rebuke from Paul back in Antioch (Gal 2:12-13) and he had fully recovered his poise so that he was able to once again to resume a leadership role. He referenced the Jews being

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles" in John-Acts, Vol. 9, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 440-41 quoted in Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts," www.soniclight.com

² F.F. Bruce, *Commentary on The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament series. Reprint ed (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 307 quoted in Constable, "Acts."

saved in the same manner as the Gentiles and by so doing, he pre-empted any arguments of Jewish superiority that might have been still circulating through the minds of the audience.

Barnabas and Paul's testimony (v. 12) – Note the order here in this setting. Barnabas was a respected member of the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36-37 and 11:22), thus the switch. Barnabas emphasized the signs and miracles that had been demonstrated since these would have been convincing evidence to the Jews that God was involved in this thing.

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks [Gentiles] seek after *wisdom*; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Gentiles *foolishness*. (1 Cor 1:22-23)

James' testimony (vv. 13-21) – James was Jesus' half brother, the writer of the epistle of James, as well as a leading figure in the Jerusalem church (cf. 12:17; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12).³ In verse 14, James uses several words or phrases that have more significance than meets the eye.

- “Simon” was Peter’s Jewish name and James probably used it to emphasize that fact as well as imply affection for him.
- James spoke of the Gentiles as a people whom God had taken for Himself thus applying a designation formerly used of Israel alone.

By doing so, James agrees with Peter that in the conversion of Cornelius, God had taken the initiative for a direct ministry to Gentiles.

Next, James uses eschatological passages from the Hebrew Scriptures to make a point. His point was that existing Scripture at that time supported the salvation of Gentiles apart from the Gentile being required to become a Jew. Unlike Peter’s use of Hebrew Scripture (Joel 2) to explain the Pentecost phenomenon, James did not indicate that the salvation of Gentiles was in fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture; however, the implication is that James is reflecting a view (as noted previously) held by some of the believing Jews that the conversion of Gentiles was a precursor to the establishment of the Kingdom on earth. Nevertheless, none of the Hebrew prophets (the full extent of documented revelation at that time) indicated that Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be saved. In other words, Hebrew Scripture supported the salvation of Gentiles apart from any rituals associated with the Mosaic Law having to be performed or followed.

James does not say that this is that which was spoken by Amos, or that the prophecy of Amos has been fulfilled in the salvation of Gentiles at the present time. James surely knew that Christ had not returned and rebuilt the tabernacle of David. The salvation of Gentiles in the prophecy of Amos was to occur after

³ James is mentioned by name only on two occasions in the Gospels (i.e. Matt 13:55 and Mk 6:3). In these passages, we see Jesus’ brothers mentioned by name as James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. In addition, Jesus had at least two unnamed sisters. Other passages simply mention Jesus’ brothers and James would have been included in those references (e.g. Matt 12:46; Jn 2:12; 7:3, 5, 10). None of Jesus’ brothers believed in Jesus – including James (Jn 7:5). Paul tells us of a special appearance by the resurrected Lord to James which may have accounted for his conversion (1 Cor 15:7). Also, we see James included with the Apostles in the upper room continuing in prayer (Acts 1:14). The appearance of the resurrected Lord to James was probably what set him apart for a special ministry in the Jerusalem church even though he is not one of the Twelve Apostles. The Apostle Paul had previously met James on his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (Acts 9:26 cf. Gal 1:18, 19). Paul also met James in our passage in Acts and on his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). Finally, James is mentioned as the source of the Judaizers who came to Antioch from Jerusalem and set the scene for Paul’s rebuke of Peter (Gal 2:12). It is most probable that the rebuke of Peter and Barnabas by Paul occurred prior to the Jerusalem Council. See Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 95-96.

the second coming of Christ and the restoration of the house of David. God had predicted a future outcalling of Gentiles; God is now calling out Gentiles, and thus there is agreement between these two facts. But what has that to do with the question before the Council? The Council was called, not to decide whether Gentiles could be saved, but to decide whether they had to be circumcised in order to be saved. It is evident from Amos and the other prophets that the Gentiles in the coming Kingdom are not going to become Jews by being circumcised. Circumcised Israel will remain separate and distinct from uncircumcised Gentiles in the Kingdom. Circumcision is the thing that distinguishes Jews from Gentiles in the Bible. Gentiles could become Jews by submitting to circumcision (Esth 8:17). But in the Kingdom the Gentiles are to remain Gentiles. Therefore if Gentiles are to be saved in the Kingdom apart from circumcision, surely they can be saved today without circumcision. The quotation from Amos settled the matter, as far as James was concerned and he therefore gives his judgment: don't impose Jewish restrictions on the Gentiles who are turning to God, but ask them to abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood.⁴

Amos 9:11-12 was a case in point on both counts (i.e. that salvation of the Gentiles apart from requirements associated with the Mosaic Law is supported by existing Hebrew Scripture and that the salvation of Gentiles was a precursor to the establishment of the Kingdom on earth) especially when we examine the greater context of the passage James quoted. Amos 9:9-10 is ultimately a reference to the events of the Tribulation which includes judgment upon unbelieving Israel. The following verses in Amos 9:11-15 is a reference to the restoration of Israel in association with the Messiah's Advent and the establishment of the Kingdom.

Reference to the Tribulation Judgments

"For surely I will command, and will sift the house of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground. All the sinners of My people shall die by the sword, who say, 'The calamity shall not overtake nor confront us.'" (Amos 9:9-10)

Reference to the Subsequent Restoration of Israel (vv. 11-12 are quoted by James)

(v. 11) "On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; (v. 12) that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name," says the Lord who does this thing. (v. 13) Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. (v. 14) I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. (v. 15) I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them," says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:11-15)

There are different views or interpretations of James' speech that is documented in Acts 15:13-21. Dr. Thomas Constable summarizes some of the views in this excerpt.

⁴ Baker, *Understanding Acts*, 96.

The non-dispensational understanding of this text is that James was saying that the messianic kingdom had come and Amos' prediction was completely fulfilled. Progressive dispensationalists believe he meant that the first stage of the messianic kingdom had come and that Amos' prediction was partially fulfilled. Normative dispensationalists view the messianic kingdom as entirely future. They believe Amos was predicting the inclusion of Gentiles in God's plan and that James was saying that the present situation was in harmony with God's purpose. Thus the Amos prediction has yet to be fulfilled. Deciding between these options depends on whether or not one believes the church replaces Israel in God's plan. If it does, one will side with non-dispensationalists here. If one believes the church and Israel are distinct in the purpose of God, then one has to decide if there is better evidence that Jesus has begun to rule over David's kingdom now (progressive dispensationalism) or not (normative dispensationalism). I believe the evidence points to the fact that David's kingdom is an earthly kingdom and that Jesus will begin reigning over it when He returns to earth at His second coming.⁵ [Underlining is mine for emphasis]

Dr. Constable doesn't mention another possible interpretation that I believe is preferable and the more valid. As illustrated by James' recommendations (v. 20), James is not as clear in his understanding of the transition that is underway as was the Apostle Paul. James is unaware of the fact that Israel has been set aside at this point and he is still using his Judaistic interpretive grid to assess the significance of these events. It was to Paul that God determined to reveal the mystery doctrines of the new dispensation.

The same confusion exists on the part of the rest of the Jewish leadership as is evidenced by their decree which contains restrictions based upon the Mosaic Law, i.e. "abstain from things polluted by idols...from things strangled, and from blood." Unlike the issue of circumcision and the Judaizers, they did not make these restrictions to be a requirement for salvation; therefore, Paul treated them as a non-essential to the faith and did not object to the requests of the Jerusalem Council.

Finally, in verse 21, James makes his concluding statement that provides more insight into his thinking. He states the following:

For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. (Acts 15:21)

Why did James conclude with this statement? I believe the best explanation is that James was supporting the restrictions that he had just recommended upon the behavior of new Gentile converts. James' reasoning was probably similar to the logic that Paul would later employ with regard to Christian liberty. James was simply acknowledging the fact that the Gentile converts lived amidst heavy Jewish populations and James recommended behavior that would insure that these Jews did not become offended and distracted from the Gospel due to such sensitive issues.

James was not putting Gentile converts under the Mosaic Law by imposing these restrictions. He was urging them to limit their exercise of Christian liberty to make their witness to unsaved Jews more effective and their fellowship with saved Jews more harmonious (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23).⁶

⁵ Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts" at www.soniclight.com

⁶ Ibid.

The Jerusalem Decree and Letter (Acts 15:22-29)

A very important thing to note first in regards to the content of this letter is that the content of the letter came by way of inspiration of the Holy Spirit – “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v. 28). So, the Jewish Apostles and church leaders in Jerusalem are requesting that the new Gentile converts avoid certain behaviors that might be offensive to their Jewish neighbors and contacts based upon guidance of the Holy Spirit. Some of these restrictions trace their roots to antedate the Mosaic Law as well as be included as restrictions in the Mosaic Law.

Important Question: Were the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church saying the Gentiles had to keep the Mosaic Law to be saved? To stay saved? Or, did they have another basis for these restrictions?

Answer: See the previous discussion regarding the motives for James’ recommendations. James was not trying to impose the Mosaic Law upon the Gentiles. The Jerusalem church leaders were not trying to impose the Mosaic Law upon the Gentiles. Rather, their basis was simply to insure that the Gospel that Paul and Barnabas preached was not compromised by behavior that would offend the long held traditions of Jews. This would give the Jews maximum opportunity to hear the Gospel, be converted and eventually accept grace oriented teaching. Paul had not yet had opportunity to communicate the full realm of doctrine related to and unique to the new mystery dispensation that was now dawning. The leadership of the Jerusalem church were not the recipients and would not be the agents to receive and communicate this new doctrine related to the Body of Christ.

An Important Distinction – Paul’s Teaching in Regard to Christian Liberty vs. the Restrictions of the Jerusalem Council

It is important to pause and note this distinction for it highlights the difference between Pauline teaching to a new dispensation of believers in contrast to the Judaistic paradigm held by the Jerusalem church leadership. The following points will highlight this distinction:

- Paul teaches grace principles relating to the issue of Christian liberty in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 10:23-33.
- In these passages, the subject at hand is meat that had been offered to idols and subsequently sold in the market place.
- Paul indicates that the believer is free to eat such meat since an idol is not a god.
- The believer could eat the meat with a clear conscience – unless certain conditions existed that would necessitate the believer foregoing his/her liberty
- If the believer’s conscience was weak (i.e. still influenced by the Mosaic Law) in regard to this subject and the believer was torn or would feel guilty by taking advantage of a new liberty, then the believer would be violating his/her conscience by eating the meat, thus the believer would sin.
- However, if the believer had a clear conscience to eat meat that had been offered to idols, yet there was another believer with a weak conscience regarding the matter, especially if a question was raised by the weaker believer, then the believer with the strong conscience had an obligation to abstain from the exercise of his/her liberty.
- The policy Paul recommended was to not ask any questions about the food, exercise your liberty as a believer in Christ and be willing to abstain from your liberty if a believer with a weak conscience is known to be present.
- The command within Judaism to abstain from eating blood antedated the Mosaic Law by approximately 800 years.
- When Noah exited the Ark, God changed man’s dietary regulations and for the first time placed His approval upon the consumption of an animal (Gen 9:3-5)
- The Law of Moses carried this restriction forward into the Age of Israel (Lev 7:26-27; 17:10-14)

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- This restriction did not apply (and does not apply) to a believer of the present dispensation per Pauline theology – a theology specific to the Age of the Body of Christ