

Gamma

Acts 15

Study 13 Clarifying the Gospel

1. A) Did the “some men” in vv.1-5 represent the apostles’ position in Jerusalem? b) Why were they contending that the Gentile converts of Paul were not obeying the law of Moses? (Were they breaking the 10 commandment?)

a) It is important to read v.1 (some men came down from Judea) with v.24. There the official letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem says, “some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you”. So, though these were men from the Jerusalem church where Peter and James presided (and even Paul refers to them as “men from James” Gal.2:12), these teachers did not represent the settled or official position of the apostles.

b) These teachers insisted that all the new Gentile converts had to be circumcized and adopt all the “custom” and “the law of Moses”. To our ears, this sounds rather strange. Surely the new Antiochan believers disciplined by Paul and Barnabus were taught to obey the 10 commandments given to Moses. Surely they were surely not lying and committing adultery at will. So why would these Judean teachers be concerned that the Gentile Christians weren’t obeying Moses? When they refer to circumcision and the law of Moses, they are not thinking so much of what we might call the moral principles of the Old Testament, but rather the ceremonial regulations. These regulations were very detailed prescriptions about food, dress, and other practices that the Mosaic law (Exodus thru Deuteronomy) said made one “clean” and “acceptable” for God’s presence in the tabernacle worship. Unlike the basic moral principles (e.g. “do not kill” “do not steal”) which set the adherent apart ethically from nonadherents, the ceremonial regulations set the adherent apart culturally from non-adherents. These regulations determined what and how you ate, how you dressed, and so on.

What was the purpose of the “Mosaic ceremonial regulations”? In Old Testament times, the ceremonial law was a way for the Jews to show their distinctness as the people of God. (It helped them marry within the believing community, making it much harder to fall in love with an unbeliever.) Also, it was also a way for God to show those who approached that they had to be clean and holy and pure, and that atonement and cleansing had to be effected for them to enter his presence. However, these regulations themselves were never meant to be ways to literally make one pure and acceptable to God. “...the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order.” (Heb.9:9-

10; cf. Col.2:16). In other words, these ceremonial laws have not been so much abrogated as fulfilled. They are fulfilled in Christ — it is Christ that makes us clean (cf. Mark 7). So, though it was understandable, it was mistaken for the Jews to come to see their cultural separation as spiritual separation and purity. These teachers continued to believe that this cultural change was necessary for all Christians.

2. vv.7-11. Of what three facts does Peter remind the Council, and what conclusions does he draw from them?

First, he notes that God had chosen to speak the gospel to the Gentiles through Peter (v.7). This is doubtless the incident of Cornelius. Peter's story—including the vision, the messengers from Cornelius, and the voice from God were strong evidence that God wanted the Gentiles to hear the gospel. b) Second, he notes that the Gentiles clearly had received the Holy Spirit (v.8). This means that the same grasp of the gospel, the same experiences of God's presence, the same transformations of character (note: purified their hearts by faith v.9) have all been observed in the Gentile converts. This is a powerful point. Even without circumcision, the Holy Spirit very visibly was doing the work of change and sanctification on the Gentiles. c) Third, he notes that the Jews had never been able to live up to the ceremonial law of Moses. ...a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear (v.10). Here is a clear admission that the Jews themselves have never been able to live up to the standards of the Mosaic regulations. This point is powerful. He is saying, "how can you demand that they be saved through obeying these rules when neither we nor our ancestors were ever able to do it?" His conclusion is incisive. From the third point, v.10, he concludes that "we Jews", if we are saved, are saved apart from obeying the law. From the second and first point he concludes that the Gentiles are being saved apart from obeying the law. Therefore — "it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are." (v.11)

3. How is this problem of culture a continual one for the Christian church, even when the particular issue is not Jewish-Gentile tensions?

Richard Lovelace (in *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*) explains that, whenever the Christian church loses its orientation to the gospel of grace (and subtly falls back into a view that we are saved by our performance), there is a tendency to grab hold of cultural distinctions and endow them with spiritual value.

"[When] the church had lost track of an important element in the saving work of Christ and was teaching that believers are justified not by faith but by being sanctified... as a result it became very easy for the church to revert to an Old Covenant lifestyle... Uneasiness about justification

[by grace alone] produced a flowering of asceticism reflecting an unconscious need for lists of clean and unclean activities and a rebirth of Pharisaism. Hard-line fundamentalists like Tertullian ruled out many intellectual activities: the theater (because of its origins in pagan worship), dancing (because it might inflame ill-controlled sexual passions), and cosmetics (if God meant you to smell like a flower, he would have given you a crop of them on your head).

...Thus [those] who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as if it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straightjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Cor. 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures. (Lovelace, p.190-191,198) There are innumerable ways in which we see our cultural distinctives as a kind of spiritual righteousness. Those of us from more punctual cultures may disdain cultures which are more relationally-centered than task-centered. Those of us from more emotive cultures may disdain cultures where people are more emotionally reserved and cognitive. It is easy to look down at someone else's taste in music. On the "mission field" it has been very common for Anglo European Christian evangelists to insist on a way to organize churches or conduct worship that is inappropriate to the new culture. The number of examples are endless. It is endemic for older churches and older Christians to impose upon newer churches/believers those patterns that are not essential to Biblical faith, but rather are cultural accretions promoted to a place of spiritual principle.

4. 16:1-5. Is Paul's behavior with Timothy seem in tension with his uncompromising stand in 15:1-5? What does this teach us about where to contend and where to compromise?

Paul's behavior here shows the same balance between truth and love exhibited by the Council. The Council had spoken the truth about gospel freedom, yet demanded loving consideration from the Gentile converts for Jewish Christian sensibilities. So here we see that, though Paul would not compromise on the gospel, he was extremely concerned to maintain Jewish-Gentile unity. It was important the church stay multi-cultural and in order to do that, he did not see it as unprincipled for Timothy to adapt to Jewish cultural practices out of consideration for the people they were seeking to reach and have fellowship with. This is no contradiction. See the comments by Lovelace above. When the conscience is freed from self-justification by the gospel, it makes us very culturally flexible. We must firmly contend for the gospel, but it is that very gospel that makes us pliant and open about most everything else! "Paul was a reed in non-essentials — an iron pillar in essentials." (John Newton)

5. **What are some actions or non Actions (behaviors or habits) that we often falsely impose on others and therewith judge their “Christianity “. (Think about what bothers you or makes you think of fellow church goers as not taking their faith seriously). List some with your group and discuss why they are non-essentials and nullify the gospel of grace.**

Leaders note: This is an open discussion. If your group does not generate ideas use these to guiding example to discuss.

1. Being late to church service or leaving before service is over
2. Dressing indecently
3. Not tithing
4. Baptism (full immersion , child baptism)
5. Selfishness
6. Smoking and drinking
7. Lying , Corruption , Tax evasion