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### The First Great Crisis to Face the Early Church

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## THE FIRST GREAT CRISIS TO FACE THE EARLY CHURCH

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS  
NUMBER 59  
ACTS 15:1-3

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ACTS 15:1-3 "And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren."

The Jerusalem Church was a legalistic church and they lost their place of leadership in the world because of this spirit. They refused to give the gospel to the rest of the world and it was necessary for God to by-pass them and move on to other centers. It was the church at Antioch not Jerusalem where the missionary movement had its birth.

ACTS 15:1 "And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." The issue is clearly stated in this one verse. The representatives from the church in Jerusalem came to Antioch and immediately set out to get everybody straightened out concerning salvation. They came and in plain language proceeded to tell the Christians at Antioch that they were only part Christians, that they were only half Christians. They told them that in addition to having faith in Christ they had to do some other things in order to be Christians. They would need to be circumcised and would need to keep the law of Moses. These were pseudo-spiritual leaders who were claiming to have a corner on salvation, and they were plainly stating that salvation was not by faith only but was by faith plus works. They had forgotten that circumcision was a legalistic function under the Mosaic law and was given to Israel, not to the church. This law had no function as far as the church was concerned. The Mosaic law was used for teaching moral standards, but it has no function at all in salvation.

GALATIANS 2:16 "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." There is absolutely no place in the life of the church for the function of the Mosaic law so far as salvation was concerned. The Mosaic law taught a system of overt action. The purpose of teaching the Mosaic law was to let man know that he is bankrupt. There is nothing in a man or in man's actions that brings salvation to him.

TITUS 3:5 "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost"

ROMANS 3:20 "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." Here we see the present function of the Mosaic law, and that is that men need Christ. Bankrupt man has one hope and that hope is Jesus Christ. The Mosaic law was given so men would have guidelines for moral living. It also gave many helpful suggestions for health and cleanliness. It made suggestions about how to live in harmony with others. It also gave suggestions about how to handle finances. So the Mosaic law was not just for Christians but was for the whole human race. The Mosaic law was given so the four divine institutions might function. Volition, marriage, the family and the nation are all dependent upon the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law was given so the nation could function properly.

There are two things the Mosaic Law cannot do . . .

1. The Mosaic Law cannot save.
2. The Mosaic Law cannot provide spirituality. Only the Holy Spirit can provide spirituality.

So the Mosaic Law is just completely out of it so far as salvation and spirituality are concerned.

These men from Jerusalem were teaching salvation by ritual. This is the controversy that was raging in Antioch when these legalistic Jews from Jerusalem came down and began to teach that it was the cross plus something, it was faith plus works, it was salvation by faith and works. This was indeed contrary to all that Paul had taught them. These legalists operated unchallenged in Jerusalem, but when they came to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas challenged them at this point. The controversy didn't break out in Jerusalem for there was no one there to challenge them. Some time later Paul will brace Peter right to his face over this very same point.

So we are facing the greatest controversy that ever touched the early church, and the outcome of this issue would set the tone for Christianity for all time to come. So legalism is challenged here in Antioch and this led to the Jerusalem Conference.

"You cannot be saved" means you do not have power or ability to be saved except in this one way we define. The word for saved is "Sozo" and is in the aorist, passive infinitive and means that in no point of time in the history of the world will you ever be able to be saved unless you subscribe to this exact formula. So it is the cross plus circumcision. You must believe to be saved plus something. In other words, salvation is the monopoly of the Jews. Believing Gentiles may accept the cross and atonement but to be saved they must also become Jews. This is a distortion of all that is sacred in salvation, and if allowed to stand could destroy Christianity before it ever really got started.

God called Abraham and he became a believer and became the first Jew and was the founder of the Jewish nation. They were given a special call and a special task, but now they have added something, and that is that only Jews can be saved. These Pharisees have added something to God's original design. So when the Church Age began these Pharisees said, "We have it made in two ways. We are circumcised Jews and we are also born again Jews." Thus when they faced Gentiles they said in substance this: "You Gentiles have believed in Christ and that is fine, but you were not circumcised in physical birth therefore you cannot be saved." In other words, a Gentile who believed and thought he was saved, was not saved unless he added a ritual. It seems that this is the point a legalist can never get through his thick head that at the point of belief, a person is entered into union with Christ. Therefore when saved a Jew is no longer a Jew but a born again child of God. The mistake these legalists made in Jerusalem is the same mistake legalists make today when they say you must be saved, but you also must be baptized or join the church or do something else in order to be really saved. Many people join the church and get baptized to gain spirituality and to get salvation and they have nothing to do with either. That is why it is so important not to baptize people until you have explained to them exactly what baptism means. Ritual without reality is meaningless. But these legalists were determined to super-impose ritual on a church and on individual believers. Let us all remember that the way we are saved is by faith and by faith alone, and that human work comes after salvation and never before as a part of the salvation process.

ACTS 15:2 "When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question."

Please notice that there was no small dissension. There was much strife and questioning and cross examination. In reality the division was sharp and bitter. It was such a vital issue that for Paul and Barnabas and the Antioch Christians to take a nonchalant attitude would have been tragic. (Some soft-hearted individual might come along and say that you will just have to love them out of their errors. Just be a nice little boy and don't cause any controversy, and just let the thing ride for awhile. If Paul and Barnabas had taken such an attitude, Christianity might never have gotten out of Palestine. This was a vital issue and it had to be met head-on.) The only way to confront these misled people from Jerusalem was in a direct confrontation. So the confrontation was bitter. They have just come back from a trip where they saw thousands accept Christ by faith, and they know by experience that it doesn't take Christ plus something in order for one to be saved. So since these legalists couldn't answer Paul and Barnabas, they decide to get them back down in their bailiwick at Jerusalem to settle it. "They" refers to the legalists. They were so sure of themselves that they were just sure that once they got Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem they could shove this great truth down their throats. They took the attitude of "Now you come home and talk to my big Pharisees dad and he'll show you what's what. You come and talk to our graduate students in Jerusalem and they can show you a thing or two."

ACTS 15:3 "And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren." How did the people in Antioch feel about the controversy? Well, the answer to that question is given in this verse--"Being brought on their way".

The Greek word is "Pro-pempto" and really means a guard of honor. The Antioch Church felt so strongly about this issue that they sent an honor guard to accompany them to Jerusalem. They didn't go straight to Jerusalem but took a zigzag route and touched several Gentile areas and told them how to be saved by believing in Christ. Notice it says that as they went on their journey they "declared the conversion of the Gentiles". They had seen so many Gentiles saved on that first missionary tour that Paul and Barnabas knew what they were talking about, and they wanted to demonstrate it to these legalists as they went back to Jerusalem. The thing that caused great joy to all the brethren was the teaching of doctrine. Doctrine always does bring great joy to the believers.

By the time they got to Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Church was an isolated pocket of legalism. And as Paul and Barnabas returned, Simon Peter was also just getting back in Jerusalem from one of his trips. Things were shaping up for a big conference. This was going to be a big one, as we say "This one was a whing ding".