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Recommended Citation

Vaught, W. O., "Paul and Barnabas Journeyed to Jerusalem to Settle a Great Church Controversy" (1983).

Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts. 58.

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PAUL AND BARNABAS JOURNEYED TO JERUSALEM TO SETTLE
A GREAT CHURCH CONTROVERSY

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 60
ACTS 15:4-5

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ACTS 15:4-5 "And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

Paul and Barnabas have now returned from their First Missionary Journey. They have learned much and have witnessed the conversion of many unbelievers. The great lesson they learned on the missionary journey was that Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ. Both Jews and Gentiles were lost without Christ, and both Jews and Gentiles were saved by believing in Christ. This was the great hurdle their minds had made, but the Jews back in Jerusalem had not had the same experience and they did not understand this broader truth which Christ had revealed to Paul and Barnabas. The dispensation of Israel had passed and they had moved into the Church Age. In the Church Age every believer is entered into union with Christ and this is the age when every believer is in full-time Christian service.

But the Jews were very jealous of their position and they just couldn't believe that Gentiles were on an equal footing with them before Christ. Here we see legalism rear its ugly head. Paul and Barnabas had just completed a short vacation in Antioch when this problem arose and it was of such great significance that they felt led to go to Jerusalem to settle this issue once for all. Upon returning from their first missionary journey, they had been teaching doctrine to the people of Antioch. Some Jews from Jerusalem had visited Antioch, and they heard Paul and Barnabas in these doctrinal teachings, and they disagreed with them. Galatians 2 explains how these people came from Jerusalem, including Simon Peter, and disagreed with them concerning the conversion of Gentiles. Indeed Paul considered Jews and Gentiles to all stand on level ground before God, both needing salvation, and both being saved in exactly the same manner. So the issue which Paul's teaching brought into focus was the issue of grace. Last time we studied this issue facing them. They said, "Look, Paul, it is alright to believe in Christ and be saved by Christ, but remember, salvation is Christ plus something. It is Christ plus the observance of the Jewish ritual of circumcision". Now we have people and denominations like that today, it is Christ plus something. To many it is believe in Christ plus baptism. Or believe in Christ and feel sorry for your sins and weep and dedicate yourself and sign a card and get baptized and speak in tongues, and etc. Now this is exactly the issue they were facing in that day. But Christ is Lord of all and there is no place for legalism. Naturally Paul and these legalistic Christians locked horns immediately. Paul knew he was right on the principle of grace. A little later on he would write to the Ephesians, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: and not of works, lest any man should boast". Paul knew that Christ did all the work for our salvation and there is just no place for man to get in on the act by anything he does. So the Jerusalem church wanted to tack on circumcision and spirituality plus faith in Christ and claim that these things had something to do with salvation. Paul would have none of it. The Jerusalem church was legalistic and Paul knew it, so he wanted to go to Jerusalem and get the issue settled forever.

ACTS 15:4 "And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them." So they finally arrived in Jerusalem with their honor guard. They were properly received with respect and courtesy. In Greek the words "Were received" actually mean they were received in great pomp and courtesy and with great fanfare.

Paul and Barnabas did not wait long to get to the point. The Jerusalem church came together and the missionaries quickly reported to them their findings from the first missionary journey. The words "They declared" simply means they played back the tapes (as we would say) of the messages they gave to the churches in Asia Minor. They related step by step how the Gentiles had responded to the Gospel of Christ. They told them how human good was rejected and divine good was accepted. Paul went over very carefully how the Holy Spirit had opened the hearts of the Gentiles to receive the Gospel of salvation on exactly the same basis as the Jews. Paul told them that the Gentiles were just as much of the plan of God as the Jews. If there were to be degrees in Hell, it would be on the basis of human works. JOHN 3:18 "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." This verse is the basis on which we stand at the last judgment. In other words, Paul was saying that these legalists had blasphemed the plan of God. Believing on Jesus was not enough for these legalistic Jews and they wanted to get into the act and require believers to do certain things and accept certain things in addition to the cross. They wanted to have a part in the salvation package. But Paul insisted that salvation was by grace and by grace alone, and it was not Christ plus baptism or Christ plus church membership or Christ plus circumcision or Christ plus anything. But these super-pious Jews were trying to add something to the plan of salvation and Paul just wouldn't stand for it. (Sometimes preachers can be so sweet and so vague that they preach and don't say anything.) The way Satan tried to get to the Christian is by filling the mind with error and human viewpoint ideas. They tell you to live good moral lives and depend on your own strength. They tell you you will be alright if you live up to the light you have. But remember, in this way all your spiritual power is neutralized. There is no such thing as a one-shot decision and dedication. It is rebound every day. It is the use of 1 John 1:9 every day that keeps you in fellowship with the Lord. But these legalistic Jews were totally separated from doctrine and all filled with human viewpoint. But when the Holy Spirit fills your life, then you learn doctrine and you grow every day in Christ likeness. So we read, "They declared all that God had done". It must have taken several days for them to make this report. It is all that God had done "Through them". It is what "The God" had done through them.

ACTS 15:5 "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." "But there rose up" is aorist tense and means that certain ones just popped up and interrupted and were critical of Paul's report. Notice that these were Pharisees who were believers and they had believed before this silly notion hit them. They were saved legalists. They will always be saved and nothing can change that. They are in the top circle and they are there to stay. Now there are two kinds of legalists--those who are truly saved and are badly mixed up (like the tongues crowd) or unbelievers who have never been saved and want to substitute works for grace. These Pharisees developed this idea of legalism after they were saved. They had no conception of doctrine. The force of the language is "They just kept on interrupting" and it means they almost broke up the meeting. So they said, "It was necessary to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses". One was a ritual and the other was a way of life. They were actually saying that ritual was necessary to salvation and keeping the law of Moses was the way to spirituality. So they were saying that ritual and morality were necessary for every Christian. But let us remember that morality is for the whole human race, not just for Christians. The survival of mankind depends on morality. The four divine institutions are dependent on morality. Volition, marriage the family and the nation are all dependent upon morality. So these legalistic Jews just stood there and braced Paul right to his face. Sheltered legalistic people want long sentences and obscure teachings that in sweet platitudes teach nothing.

THIS WAS THEN AND IS NOW THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM FACING CHRISTIANITY.

They were demanding ritual and morality and both are the enemies of genuine Christianity. Certainly Christians ought to be moral, but they ought not to substitute ritual and morality for the filling of the Holy Spirit. Morality is not Christianity. So many equate Christianity with keeping the golden rule, or living a good clean life, or being moral, or helping others. If these Pharisees had had their way then Christianity would have died right there. Christianity is based on what you think and morality is way on down the line. Ritual is designed to teach certain things and had no saving power in it at all. When you are put under the water in baptism, it is a picture of down with human good (Christ judged all your sins and they are dead and dead forever) and when you are raised up out of the water, it means that you are identified with the life and divine good. So baptism means down with human good and up with divine good. Baptism is a teaching exercise. It is the cranking up of the mental aspect of the Soul.

About this time James got up and dismissed the general meeting, as we would say, he pronounced the benediction. We know this from the study of Galatians 2. Now we are to see a private meeting and this meeting is described in verses 6-21. The apostles and elders came together for a careful consideration of this important problem. Therefore, it is necessary that we get clearly in mind who apostles were. They represented people of a temporary spiritual gift, and their gifts were given before the Canon of Scripture was completed. Now we also have permanent spiritual gifts, such as pastors, teachers, evangelists, and helps. At that time apostles had authority over the churches, but today a pastor has leadership over one church. There is no Biblical authority for Bishop or College of Cardinals, or Pope or anything like that. This is one reason so much of the church is in apostasy today. God's formula is one church and one pastor over that church. There is no such thing in the New Testament as one man controlling many churches.

Look At Apostles Under Five Points

1. AN APOSTLE WAS ELECTED BY GOD.

ROMANS 1:1 "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God". The apostles were elected by God the Father. The election of Matthias as the one to take the place of Judas was a farce and an error. Paul is the real 12th apostle and the one the Lord chose.

2. THEY WERE APPOINTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:11 and 28 "But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will." "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues."

3. THERE WERE NO APOSTLES UNTIL AFTER THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST.

EPHESIANS 4:8 and 11 "Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men." "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers" This was the gift of spiritual dictatorship.

4. THE APOSTLES WERE EYE WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTED CHRIST.

(Paul saw Christ on the road to Damascus)

5. THE APOSTLES WERE PROVIDED WITH MIRACULOUS POWERS.

They were to take up the slack until the Canon of Scripture was completed and then they passed away as an office. Then temporary gifts were over, like miracles of healing and tongues.

Elders Are Pastors

A pastor was identified in three ways.

1. A minister was known by his spiritual gifts and these gifts were pastor and teacher. This is the only hyphenated gift in the Bible. His primary job was teacher. He is the one man in charge of the church. It has to be this way. The primary authority in the church is this man, the pastor. Now there are other people with authority in the church, and they should have authority. But the final authority is the pastor, and he is to get his instruction from the Word of God.
2. Elder--it means "old man" but it is a title and is "Presbuteros" and it means "old man" not in age but "old man" in authority. In the army the boys call the Captain "old man" but it is a title of his authority. He might just be twenty five years old but he is called "old man".
3. Bishop--The translators of the King James Version were mainly from the Church of England, and they called the Bishop the "Episcopas". The original meaning was one who was the overseer of a plantation. He was the boss on the job. He was the senior man in charge of affairs. It described his function. So here you have it--Gift--Rank--and Function. These are three descriptive words.

So the issue was clearly drawn in the Jerusalem conference. Would salvation be by grace and grace alone, or would salvation be by grace plus ritual and morality? It was the greatest problem the church had ever faced and it must be settled right once and for all. Paul and Barnabas were there to see to it that divine viewpoint was clearly presented.