

# DEEP IN SCRIPTURE

*Verses & Notes January 17, 2007*

*Acts 15:1-31*

1: But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren,  
"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

2-4: And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

5: But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said,  
"It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

6-7: The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them,

"Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you,  
that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

8: And God who knows the heart bore witness to them,  
giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us;

9: and he made no distinction between us and them,  
but cleansed their hearts by faith.

10: Now therefore why do you make trial of God  
by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples  
which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?

11: But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus,  
just as they will."

12-13: And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied,

"Brethren, listen to me.

14: Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles,  
to take out of them a people for his name.

15: And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written,

16: 'After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up,

17: that the rest of men may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,

18: says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.'

19: "Therefore my judgment is that  
we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,

20: but should write to them to abstain  
from the pollutions of idols and  
from unchastity and  
from what is strangled and

from blood.  
21: For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him,  
for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues."

22-23: Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, with the following letter:

"The brethren, both the apostles and the elders,  
to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cili'cia,  
greeting.

24: Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words,  
unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions,

25: it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord,  
to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,  
26: men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27: We have therefore sent Judas and Silas,  
who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.

28: For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us  
to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:

29: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols  
and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.  
If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

30-31: So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

## Discussion Notes:

### Introduction:

- Scripture says that God hears the prayers of a righteous man. And who is more righteous than Jesus? Apparently, though, when Jesus prayed in his great Priestly prayer in John 17 for unity amongst his followers, it didn't prevent the occurrence of differences of opinion amongst the faithful. Major differences, some of which have led to schisms and apostasy throughout the centuries of the Church. How should we handle differences of opinion, especially over important doctrinal issues, and especially when it seems that the present position of the Church is different from what we've always believed? This is what we will discuss today on **Deep In Scripture**.

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- Broadcasting live from the CMN Conference in Birmingham
- Website; phone numbers... 1-800-585-9396.
- RTB&CIY brochure & discussion forum; download PDF
- **Preparing for our study of Ephesians:**
  - Looking at the background of why Paul wrote this letter to the believers in and around Ephesus.
  - Last two weeks: Acts 2:37-47 ... the First converts after Peter's Pentecost sermon & their first gathering as the First new Church.
  - Recognized the central importance of baptism as the means of entering into salvation by grace thru faith...entering into the Body of Christ, the Church.

○ **This week: Acts 15:1-31 ... the first Council of the Church**

- Aprox. 17 years later & much has happened:
  - Many more conversions in response to Apostolic preaching & miracles;
  - Several confrontations with rulers / priests / elders of Jerusalem;
  - Appointment of helpers / deacons to free apostles to do their work;
  - First martyrdom of Stephen ... at the feet of Saul;
  - Scattering of the believers except Apostles & persecution by Saul;
  - Conversion of some Samaritans, an Ethiopian eunuch, and a centurion named Cornelius.
  - In a vision Peter is told to baptize Cornelius: the Gospel is therefore also for non-Jews!
  - Conversion of Saul – Paul
  - Faith spread to Antioch where the disciples are first called Christians;
  - Paul & Barnabas' first missionary journey: after 1<sup>st</sup> preaching to Jews in synagogues, they go to the Gentiles!

**1. Problem: Differences of opinion arose amongst the believers: Acts 15:1-2**

*"But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them..."*

- **Two major problems:** When Jesus commanded his apostles to "go make disciples of all nations" and even after they had received the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost, it does not appear that they fully understood the "mystery" of the Gospel.
  - **1<sup>st</sup> Problem: Assumed the Gospel was for the children of Abraham only!**
    - St. Paul addresses this in Ephesians 3:4-6, *"When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."*
  - **2<sup>nd</sup> Problem: OK, if the Gospel is also for the Gentiles, then of course they need to follow the Tradition & become law-abiding Jews first?**
    - After Peter's 1<sup>st</sup> sermon, his audience asked, *"What must we do?"* He answered, Acts 2:38-39, *"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him."*
    - Significance here: all these were faithful Jews; baptism was all that was necessary. All "God-fearers" (Gentile converts to Judaism) who believed had already gone through the rituals to become Jews.
    - So now, what about pagan Gentile converts who had not already gone through the rituals to become Jews? Do they need to become "God-fearers" through circumcision & then baptism?
- **A problem not merely of long-standing Tradition but of inspired Scripture!**  
**Gen 17:1-14...**

*[1] When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. [2] And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." [3] Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, [4] "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. [5] No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. [6] I will*

*make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. [7] And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. [8] And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." [9] And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.[10] This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. [11] You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. [12] He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, [13] both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. [14] Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."*

- This requirement had never changed! The primary assumption had remained that the Messiah would come through the children of Abraham for the children of Abraham!
- But, it now had come to be understood that one becomes a child of Abraham, a member of the People of God, not by blood descent but by grace thru faith in Jesus Christ!
- Yet, given the eternal nature of the Covenantal sign in Scripture, shouldn't Gentile converts be required to be circumcised?
- A continuing problem throughout the history of Christianity!
  - The Trinity & divinity of Christ...contrary to Scripture & Tradition!
  - The liturgy, the structure of the Church, the priesthood;
  - The canon of Scripture!

## **2. The Solution: Consult the Church Authorities (Apostles and presbyters)**

*2-4: And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders [presbyters = priests] about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders [presbyters], and they declared all that God had done with them.*

- Following Jesus' instructions in Mt 18:15-18,
 

*"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*
- Therefore, these early Christians were not merely independent communities free to decide for themselves, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what was true; Rather they were connected under Apostolic authority.
- Paul will later confirm the authority of the Church to Timothy, 1 Tim 3:15 ...

### 3. The Underlying Problem of Authority

5: *But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."*

- Some convert Pharisees were demanding a stringent obedience to the Past; but not merely a resistance to change; rather a deep seated, sincere conviction that the Scriptures must be obeyed!
- Challenging the authority of Paul & Barnabas & even the Apostles & presbyters!
  - A continuous problem throughout history!
  - Very reminiscent of what happened after the Second Vatican Council!

### 4. The Church calls a Council to hear & debate the issue.

6: *The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.*

- This becomes the continual practice of the Church throughout history.

### 5. Peter speaks!

*And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them,*

*"Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.*

8: *And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us;*

9: *and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith.*

10: *Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?*

11: *But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

- First he states what they have already accepted: the Gospel is for the whole world;
- Peter follows Jesus' own critique of the Pharisees (Mt 23); the Pharisaical Christians have not left this baggage behind!
- Vs 11 makes important emphasis: Not that they shall be saved just as us, but that we shall be saved just as them! Even Jews are NOT saved just because they are children of Abraham but by faith in Christ! Therefore, the requirements need to be reconsidered!

### 6. The Council hears witnesses from the field:

12: *And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles*

- This has always been the case with future councils...
- Note that the word of Peter silenced the assembly!

### 7. The Council president summarizes and declares the judgement:

13: After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me.

14: Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. (15) And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written, (16)

*'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, (17) that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, (18) says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.'*

19: "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, (20) but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. (21) For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

- St. James affirms the authoritative witness of Simon Peter.
- Affirms the inclusion of the Gentiles;

- Then, following Peter's lead, makes a momentous decision: As an Apostle, he changes a long-standing Scriptural mandate, establishing a new more reasonable set of standards for new converts: in essence, though he doesn't state this directly, he establishes a new sign of the New Covenant: Baptism.

**8. The council confirmed James' decision & arranges for this to be communicated to all the churches, by letter and by mouth:**

*22-23: Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsab'bas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, with the following letter: "The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cili'cia, greeting. (24) Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, (25) it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, (26) men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. (27) We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. (28) For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: (29) that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."*

*30-31: So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.*