

# DEEP IN SCRIPTURE

*Verses & Notes January 24, 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,  
that the rest of men may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
- 17: says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.'
- 18: "Therefore my judgment is that  
we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,  
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 continue discussing today on **Deep In Scripture**.

\*\*\*\*\*

- We began this discussion of Act 15 last week in Birmingham;
- Continuing to explore this important event in the history of the Church;
- Website; phone numbers...
- 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.
  - 1st 2 weeks pf Jan: 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: Continue discussion of Acts 15:1-31 ... the first Council of the Church**

- Aprox. 17 years later & many things have happened, which we summarized last week;
- One of the most significant, which leads to the need for this first council:
  - Conversion of Gentiles, their reception of baptism & the Holy Spirit;
  - In a vision Peter was convinced to baptize Cornelius: the Gospel is, therefore, also for non-Jews!

**1. Problem: Paul & Barnabas in Antioch are challenged by Judaisers: Acts 15:1-2**

- **Two major problems:**
  - **1<sup>st</sup>: Rightly assumed the Gospel was for the children of Abraham only!**
    - **Not merely a long-standing Tradition but a command from God in Scripture! Gen 17:1-14...**

*[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...[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 ... [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 and accepted that the Gospel is for all people, Jew and Gentile.
    - 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."*
    - He also stressed it in Galatians 3:26-29,

*[F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.*
    - In other words, the "mystery of Christ" is that one becomes a child of Abraham, a member of the People of God, not by blood descent but through baptism and by grace thru faith in Jesus Christ!
  - **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 first converts were faithful Jews; baptism was all that was necessary.
    - So now, what about pagan Gentile converts who had not already gone

through the rituals to become Jews? Shouldn't they first become "proselytes" through circumcision & then receive baptism?

- **This will be a continuing problem throughout the early centuries of Christianity because the revelation of Jesus Christ challenges many long-standing seemingly unchangeable Jewish beliefs:**
  - 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) Acts 15:2-4

*"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 ... 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.

## 3. The Underlying Issue Behind the Confrontation: Authority, Acts 15:5

*"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!

## 4. The Church calls a Council to hear & debate the issue: Acts 15:6

*"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! Acts 15:7-11

*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."*

- 1<sup>st</sup>: Note the resemblance of this with Acts 1:15, "In those days, peter stood up among the brethren ... and said..."
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: Peter states what they have already accepted: the Gospel is for the whole world;
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: Confirms an important truth: God knows & responds to our hearts!
- 4<sup>th</sup>: He confronts the Pharisaical Christians with the same critique Jesus had given to

the Pharisees (Mt 23) who resisted his radical teaching & practices; They had not left this baggage behind!

- 5<sup>th</sup>: 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: Acts 15:12

*"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."*

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

#### 7. The Council president summarizes and declares the judgment: Acts 15:13-21

*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."*

- As President of the Church in Jerusalem, St. James draws conclusion:
  - He 1<sup>st</sup> affirms the authoritative witness of Simon Peter.
  - Then he confirms the inclusion of the Gentiles with Scripture: *Amos 9:11-12*
  - 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.
  - Why these 4 requirements? Note, parallel with Lev. 17:8, 10, 13, 18:5-26
    - 4 Similar prohibitions for Gentiles living within Jewish territories;  
*Lev 17: 8-9 "And you shall say to them, Any man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the door of the tent of meeting, to sacrifice it to the LORD; that man shall be cut off from his people.*  
  
*Lev 17:10, "If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people.*  
  
*Lev 17: 13 "Any man also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten shall pour out its blood and cover it with dust.*  
  
*Lev 18: 5-26, "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live: I am the LORD. None of you shall approach any one near of kin to him to uncover nakedness. I am the LORD..."*
    - James, therefore, was invoking & applying a longstanding Mosaic legal precedence providing basis for intercommunion of Jewish & Gentile Christians.

- Why vs 21? Bec. This will always be a problem wherever the Jewish Law has been preached, so this news must reach the entire Church.

**8. Therefore, accepting James' decision, following the witness of Peter & Scripture, the Council arranges for this to be communicated to all the churches, by letter and by mouth: Acts 15:22-31**

*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.*

- Authority of the decision based not just on witness of Paul & Barnabas, but upon representatives of the Council and an authoritative letter to make sure no misunderstandings!
- Note the positive acceptance by the Church at Antioch!

**9. Question: Did this end the issue?**

- No! The replacement of Baptism for circumcision as the sign of the Covenant became the accepted doctrine of the Church, but many were not comfortable with changing that which they had always believed!
  - Both Jews & Gentiles had difficulties breaking from their past
- Most of St. Paul's Letters are dealing with this, defending this truth & establishing standards;
  - *Gal 1:6-7, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."*
  - *Gal 5: 6-7, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?"*
- And this still remains a problem within Christianity, not necessarily in relation to circumcision or even these original four standards, but whenever the Church uses her authority to either change things Christians have always done or believed, or to impose things Christians have previously not been required to do or believe.
  - As mentioned earlier, with the Trinity, Divinity of Christ, the Canon of Scripture, etc.;
  - The Blessed Virgin Mary as the Mother of God;
  - The filioque clause concerning the proceeding of the HS from both the Father & the Son;
  - Like the original 4 standards, there have been many other practices imposed at specific times in the Church's life that could be / were changed later:
    - Sacramental regulations;
    - Indulgences;
    - Liturgical rites and rubrics;
    - Penitential practices.

- How are we to respond?
  - Some over the centuries have set up new standards for themselves (like those in Galatians): "Sola Scriptura" or "the First Ecumenical Councils" or "conscience";
  - Like those first recipients of the decision of the Church, "they rejoiced at the exhortation." In obedience to Christ, we are to follow the Church He established:

**CCC:**

**85** *"The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>47</sup> This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.*

**86** *"Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith."<sup>48</sup>*

**87** *Mindful of Christ's words to his apostles: "He who hears you, hears me",<sup>49</sup> the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms.*

**88** *The Church's Magisterium exercises the authority it holds from Christ to the fullest extent when it defines dogmas, that is, when it proposes, in a form obliging the Christian people to an irrevocable adherence of faith, truths contained in divine Revelation or also when it proposes, in a definitive way, truths having a necessary connection with these.*