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Defending the Faith

Acts 15:1-31

Intro: What is the most difficult idea for human beings to grasp – not necessarily to understand, but to accept as a fact of truth? There are quite a bit of subjects that are difficult to understand – quantum physics, genetics, nuclear science, trigonometry, electrical engineering...these are heady topics that are difficult for most people to understand but even in our confusion or ignorance, we still accept them to be true because the practical applications of these theories are currently at work in the world around us. But, what is the most difficult idea for humans to accept? I will posit that the most difficult idea for us to grasp is the doctrine of salvation by grace alone.

You might say, “Well, that’s easy. I can understand that.” But I’m not talking about understanding it but accepting it. I say it’s the most difficult because we humans almost always try to add something to salvation. Most folks claiming to be Christians will say, “Yes, you need God’s grace to be saved because you can’t save yourself. But, you still need to do something.” Some believe that something is baptism. Some believe that something is to belong to a certain church or denomination. Some want to include good works as being necessary for salvation or certain religious rites or even ecstatic spiritual experience. But, if a person believes they must add anything to the completed work of Jesus Christ for salvation, that person is not truly saved and is functioning under a fatal misunderstanding.

This controversy has been around since the beginning but while the issue is the same, the details are quite different.

1 – The first Christians were Jews. They were raised in Judaism and were very attached to their religious traditions. Naturally, they thought there were certain things you just had to do to be saved. They would have agreed that it was wonderful that Jesus, the Messiah, had come. It’s what the Jews had been waiting on for centuries. They would have even confessed that Jesus died for their sin. Still, they would also have said that no one could be saved without becoming a Jew first. Plus, they believed that the door to Judaism is circumcision.

This would have been a normal, natural conviction of a Jewish traditionalist. In the early days, these convictions were not such a big problem as there weren't many Gentiles in the church and most Christian Jews still adhered to the traditions to some extent. But, as the number of Gentiles in the church began to grow it became very problematic for those traditional Jews to see that the Gentiles weren't rejecting their Gentile background to become Jews but were continuing in the church as Gentiles. And nobody was telling them they had to keep the law of Moses to be saved! As this was a growing problem in the minds of some Jewish believers, they took it upon themselves to rectify it.

Understand, these were the strongly held convictions of certain people in the Jerusalem church. It's one thing to hold your own convictions about certain things – these convictions can spring from your understanding of God and His Word, or even your own misunderstanding of the same. The problem here is not that these individuals held to these convictions, even though they are misguided and dangerous. The problem is they felt compelled to travel to other churches and force their convictions on other believers. You may hold certain convictions of your own and these may stem from your own understanding and application of certain principles from Scripture. But, those are your convictions and, if they happen to be correct, share them with others but never try to force your convictions on others and certainly never attempt to make your convictions a prerequisite for salvation.

2-3 – Another one of Luke's understatement. If you read Paul's letter to the Galatians, you'll get the gist of what Paul thought of their teaching. Of course, Paul and Barnabas disputed with them! They had just returned from a year of missionary work, travelling from town to town declaring the Gospel to Jews and Gentiles and seeing many come to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior. What these men from Judea were teaching cast a negative judgment on all of their evangelistic endeavors. They had started several churches among the Gentiles without bringing them under the Law of Moses. These men were implying that Paul and Barnabas were all wrong in doing this!

Who had lead Paul and Barnabas to make this journey? Who had blessed their efforts with great success? Who had selected them, protected them, guided and directed them? Who was glorified by them? Jesus Christ was glorified by their efforts through the power of the Holy Spirit. In his sermon in

Pisidian Antioch, Paul declared that, “And by Him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses” (13:39). These men would have objected to that saying, “Jesus saves us, but only after we’ve done all we can do to keep the law.” But Paul taught that man can only be right with God on the basis of what Jesus had done.

This was not a side issue, as so much of church disputes tend to be. This had to do with salvation itself – how one is made right with God. This was not a subject that believers could afford to agree to disagree. This was an issue that went to the core of Christianity itself and it had to be resolved! Just think of how Satan could have taken advantage of this situation. On the one hand, he wanted the false doctrine of righteousness by works to take precedent in the church. If that didn’t happen, he would have settled for a costly, bitter doctrinal war to completely split and sour the church. This may be the greatest threat to the work of the Gospel seen in the Book of Acts so far.

That’s why Paul and Barnabas refused to back down even an inch. They had seen God work so powerfully among the Gentiles and they weren’t about to abandon that work so easily. This shows the heart that these 2 men had for their flock, the hearts of true shepherds who were willing to confront and dispute with those who insist on promoting false doctrine in the church. Since they felt so passionate about defending the faith of the Gentile believers, the church at Antioch thought it best to send Paul and Barnabas back to Jerusalem to settle this issue once and for all.

Along the way, they stopped at churches along the way and gave a report that brought joy to all those believers.

4-6 – Paul and Barnabas arrive at the Jerusalem church and gave the same missionary report but instead of joy, the most noticeable reaction was muted consternation! “It is necessary to circumcise them!” Naturally, this would come from believers who were from the sect of the Pharisees. The issue wasn’t whether Gentiles could be saved. The focal point of the controversy before the Jerusalem council was circumcision: the rite that signified acceptance into the covenant people of Israel and included the observance of the law. Every Jew understood the keeping of the law to be his divine responsibility.

No doubt, many of these were honest and spiritual men. Paul didn’t think so

when he wrote about them in Galatians. He saw their view as *heresy—it is*—and considered those advancing it to be subverters of the church and God’s enemies. But this does not mean that they were all consciously trying to harm the church. If asked if they believed that Jesus died for their sin they would have said, “Of course! That is why He came.” But then they would have asked, “Don’t you believe God has given the law and that it’s essential for everyone to keep it? We believe God gave a special revelation through Moses and what God says in the law is true and eternally binding. God said that we must be circumcised. If you disobey the commandment of God on that point, how can you say that you are saved?”

Their conviction on this point stems from their reading and understanding of Scripture. Sadly, their understanding is sorely limited by their own traditions, not the truth of Scripture. Circumcision predates the Law. In fact, goes all the way to Abraham. But, God’s covenant with Abraham was always based on belief in God’s promises – faith. God didn’t choose Abraham because he was a good rule-keeper. Salvation isn’t based on behavior. We can’t earn our salvation. If we could then God would be indebted to us because of our performance. He’d owe us something for our achievement. How silly is that? Instead, Abe and his children showed their faith in God’s promises by participating in the sign of the covenant—circumcision. It was an outward expression of their inward loyalty, evidence of their faith!

Consider the ramifications if the doctrine of these certain men had prevailed. 1) It’d mean Paul and Barnabas were false teachers. Certainly, they believed that those who profess the name of Christ must live a righteous life but they also insisted that nothing—absolutely nothing—is a prerequisite to faith. If they were false teachers then they were not apostles. If Paul wasn’t an apostle then his letters were not divinely inspired. The NT would be much thinner! 2) It’d mean justification by faith is not enough. Only when we submit to the Jewish legal system can we be saved. 3) It’d mean that all the Gentiles through the entire church age, past and present, who don’t follow the Law of Moses are not saved. There not Christians.

But again, what happened in all those places Paul and Barnabas had just visited? Were they propagating a false belief system? If so, how could it have been “certified fresh” with all those miracles? Clearly, the leaders in the Jerusalem church realized they were dealing with an important matter. They refrained from giving a definitive opinion and recognized the need to

discuss the matter with great care and to pray about it and seek the mind of God.

7-19 – Luke only records for us the public proceedings of this council but if you read Paul’s letter to the Galatians, you’ll see there was some weakness, some waffling and some heated discussions behind closed doors. But, in spite of this, after discussing the matter and praying for God’s guidance and blessing on their deliberations, God led them to stand together and preserve the simplicity of the Gospel.

After the open discussion, Peter was the first voice of authority to speak. Now notice, Peter doesn’t pull rank here. He’s not standing up and saying, “Listen up! This is the way it’s going to be!” He definitely could have but he didn’t. All he did was simply rehearse what God had already done! God had previously chosen Peter to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. When he responded in obedience, the Gentiles responded in faith and God gave them the Holy Spirit to bear witness that they were truly born again. God removed the difference between Jews and Gentiles. If God saved Cornelius and family without circumcision and gave them the Holy Spirit just as He did the Jews, then Gentiles can clearly be saved without becoming Jews!

But, Peter didn’t stop there. He went on to make his strongest point yet – that the Law was a yoke that not even the Jews had been able to carry successfully. They had tried, some more than others, but they all failed and they failed miserably. Thus, even Jews, if they were to be saved, it must be by grace and not by law keeping. Peter’s last words are the most gracious of all. He implicates the necessity of Jews being saved in the same manner as Gentiles. As a Jew, Peter would normally have said it the other way- that Gentiles can be saved by grace through faith, just like us. Meaning, they can be like us. But that was exactly the issue here. Did they have to become like Jews or not? So Peter graciously turned it around and stated that the Jews can only be saved in the same manner as the Gentiles.

Next, it’s Paul’s turn to speak. It must have been difficult for him to keep silent through all of this. Paul thought in terms of ideas and concepts but he knew the council didn’t think that way. They thought in terms of God’s great acts and deeds. Paul was a wise man and he knew his audience. While he was ready to argue theology with them, he realized he couldn’t do that in this particular venue. Peter had shown how God had worked through him.

Paul picked up on that and did the same thing. He told them about all the miraculous signs God had done among the Gentiles through them. His implied point was simply this: “God is working! Who are we to stand against God and His work?”

Finally, James, the leader of the council, speaks up. He didn't think like Paul. He was the most Jewish of all the Jewish leaders. He was wise too. He knew that the people to be won over to the right position were not the Gentiles. It was the Jews who needed to be persuaded. So James began by referring not to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles—but to Peter. He refers to him not as Peter (Greek name) but by his Jewish name, Simon. “Simon's told us how God visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.” Then James did what hadn't been done thus far in the debate: he quoted Scripture, from Amos, a book of judgment. There are only a few verses at the very end of Amos that speak of blessing in the last days and these are the verses James chose (16-17)

James was, in effect, saying, “God has spoken on this matter. God said he would save the Gentiles. Now he has done it. Therefore, in my judgment we must not oppose God or the Scriptures by making it difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God.” James' phrasing implies he held a position of high authority in the church. Everyone else either argued their position or stated their opinion but James alone pronounced the definitive conclusion. His decision reflected the mutual decision of all attendees because his leadership was supported by everyone present.

20-31 – The doctrinal conclusion was simply this – that all Jews and Gentiles are sinners before God and can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. There is only one need (sin) and only one Gospel to meet that need. God only has one program today: He's calling out a people for his name. Israel has been set aside but not cast away. When God's program for the church is completed, He will begin to fulfill His kingdom promises to the Jews. But, all doctrine must lead to duty. It's not enough for us to just accept a biblical truth; we must apply it personally in everyday life. Church problems aren't solved by passing resolutions but by practicing the revelations God's given us in His Word.

James directed the church to write to the Gentile believers and share the decision of the council. The letter asked for obedience to 2 commands and

a willingness to agree to 2 personal concessions. The 2 commands were to abstain from things polluted by idols (idolatry) and sexual immorality. Both of which have always been wrong in God's eyes and were especially prevalent among unbelieving Gentiles. The 2 concessions were a willing abstinence from eating blood or meat from animals that had been strangled. The commands were a no-brainer but what about the other 2?

The prohibition against eating blood predates the Law ([Gen 9:4](#)) and when an animal is strangled, its blood remains in the body, rendering the meat unfit for Jewish consumption. The early church did quite a bit of eating together and practicing hospitality. Most churches met in homes and held "love feasts" similar to our modern day potlucks dinners. If Gentile believers thoughtlessly ate food that Jewish believers considered to be unclean, it would cause a division in the church. Furthermore, if Gentiles abused their freedom in Christ and insisted on eating meat with the blood, not only would it offend their Jewish brothers in Christ, it would greatly offend any unsaved Jewish friends they were trying to reach for Christ. It was simply a matter of not being a stumbling block to the weak or the lost.

We should note that those who were pushing so hard for the Gentiles to submit to circumcision also accepted the decision of the council. Luke implies in [vs22](#) that the whole church agreed! It appears that these certain men allowed themselves to be convinced by the evidence of Scripture and the confirmation of the Holy Spirit. They had boldly stated their convictions, as wrong as they were, but they were also willing to be taught and shown that they were wrong. A teachable spirit is a precious thing.

Of course, as the letter was delivered, it brought joy and encouragement to all the churches, as well it should! Gentiles were not compelled to be circumcised. In this decision, the council achieved 5 important things: 1) Gospel of divine grace was reaffirmed. 2) Unity of the church was preserved. 3) Evangelism of Gentiles could continue unhindered. Great for Paul; most of the churches he started were after this and were Gentile. 4) Gentile churches already planted were encouraged. 5) The future of the church as a whole was guaranteed!

Problems and differences in the church are opportunities for growth just as much as temptations for dissension and division. The key is to seek the Lord and let His Spirit take control of our hearts first and then our decisions

will reflect all the time we commit to listen to one another, love one another and learn from one another. True unity is based on love not law. Loving unity produces spiritual maturity, which is required to accomplish the task God has given us. 😊