

We just read most of Acts chapter 15.... One commentary I read says that this is **the most crucial chapter** in the whole of the book of Actsⁱ – Now **that's** a big call – After all, in chapter 2 the Holy Spirit is given to the church – that'd be a pretty crucial chapter you'd think.... And yet he reckons this one's **more** crucial...

Does anyone feel that maybe they've missed something? I know there's been times when I've read this chapter, and I haven't given it any more than a cursory glance – I mean isn't it just a disagreement over circumcision and stuff?... What did I miss???

Well if you missed it, this is one of the first, and probably **the most important debates** that the Christian church has ever had. And it was (to put it a nice way) “a passionate debate”. Probably a more accurate way to say it – “It was a heated debate.” “It was a **fiery** debate.”

The issue: Gentiles are becoming Christians (Yahoo!!) – but to become a Christian, do you also have to become a Jew? (Hmmm...) To become a Christian, do you **have** to be circumcised? Do you **have** to eat the right things? Do you **have** to follow the Jewish religious practices? Do you **have** to keep the Mosaic law???

In chapter 10, God shows Peter that God is bringing the Gentiles into His family. In chapter 14, the door is being opened wider, to not just the Gentiles who are on the fringes of the Jewish Synagogues, but to **all** Gentiles who put their faith in Jesus. And now in chapter 15, there are those who want to slam that door right back shut again, and say to the

Gentiles, “Yep, you can be Christians, but you also have to become like us Jews.”

And thus we have The grace vs. Law debate. And it was a debate that was settled in Jerusalem in this Chapter 15 of Acts. ... Unfortunately the grace vs. law debate has now moved on from its original issue, and it’s become a debate over something else, and it still rages todayⁱⁱ. I’m not going to get time to cover it today, but it’s important that we do (sometime), and that we do it soon.

You know, as we read Chapter 15, we probably fail to see the importance of it, because for many of us – it’s a non-issue. The battle has been fought. The battle has been won. And **there’s** the importance of Chapter 15 – the church has been able to move on. But if this debate had **not** been had, Christianity would be little more than a Jewish sect today.

But because the debate **was** had, and the decision **was** made, Christianity today, is **not** a Jewish sect – it is a new thing, that God has done, right across the globe – something that you and I are invited into... Because this debate was had a couple of thousand years ago, a bunch of disciples of Jesus Christ are meeting in this little hall today.

So today, we’re going to have a little bit of a look at what the debate was about, how it was handled, and the decisions that were reached...

Christianity had at its very roots, the Jewish faith – Jesus was a Jew. And Jesus said “You’re going to take the gospel **first** to the Jews, and **then** to the Gentiles. We must not forget, that

the Jews are God's chosen people, and the Jews had been entrusted with God's law.

And so you can probably understand that when these Gentiles (these non-Jews) started to fill the church, the Jews really didn't know what to do with them. They had had it drummed into them ever since they were little children on their parent's knee, that to be right with God, they had to be circumcised and they had to follow God's law. **And** they'd been told how Gentiles don't do these things, and so they're unclean and you can't mix with them...

So you can understand their dilemma,,, between what they'd been taught, and now "What do we do with these gentiles?" And you can probably understand how their upbringing and their traditions, were influencing what they were now expecting of the Gentiles, because sometimes we get stuck in **our** traditions, don't we? (haircut)

But you know what? Jesus talked about how you don't put new wine into an old wine skin... And that's what the Judaizers were attempting to do. God was doing a new thing by opening the door to the Gentiles, but some of the Jews were trying to push this **new** work of God, **back** into the old religious system. And the old system could **not** contain it, and this was something that could only make it burst.

^{V1} But some men came down from Judea (alright, that's full-on Jewish territory) and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Circumcision was a covenant that God had made with Abraham (Genesis 17). Cutting off the foreskin, was a sign that you were a part of God's covenant – you were one of God's people. And these agitators from Judea were saying “Unless you do this, you can't be saved.”

And Paul and Barnabas had a heated debate with them about it, and it wasn't resolved, and so the church at Antioch thought “Right, we've got to sort this out, and so the church sends them off to Jerusalem to take the question up with the Apostles and elders.

Alright, so at this stage, Jerusalem is still where most of the Apostles could be found. And **they** were the ones who had the authority to make this kind of decision. **They** were the ones who had known Jesus best, and had heard his teaching...

So, they headed off to Jerusalem, and on their way, they caught up with each of the churches as they passed through. And of course they couldn't keep quiet about the amazing work that God had been doing. We're told they described in **detail**, the conversion of the gentiles, and how it brought **great** joy to all the Brothers...

But that joy wasn't fully shared when they got to Jerusalem. It was very clear, that there was a great big **division** in the Jerusalem church (on this issue). And the particular divide, came from the Pharisees. Remember Paul himself, used to be a Pharisee... The Pharisees were known as “the separated ones”. They were the super-holy ones who used to separate themselves off from everything that was unclean. And it was

the Pharisees, that Jesus used to argue with over and over again, about their external show of righteousness, and yet their hearts weren't right.

And here we have a group of Pharisees who had become Christians. So presumably their hearts now **were** right with God, but they continued to cling to the old wine skin – they continued to cling to all of the religious requirements and cleanliness laws, that their tradition had built up around God's law. They said: ⁵ **"It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."**

And there was much debate that was had – it was like a free-for-all – one side arguing with the other. And they couldn't agree.

What's going on? Where's the unity of the church? You know, for most of us, getting involved in a theological argument about matters of the faith, is something that we would avoid like the plague. But you know what, it's also something that's absolutely necessary, to get to the truth, to uphold the truth, and to articulate the truth. When false teachings arise, they need to be dealt with.

If they'd just swept this issue under the carpet, there'd be a **mountain** under that carpet today, and the issue **still** wouldn't be resolved.... *And there's big issues that the church is grappling with today – issues that must be debated, so that error can be thrown out on its ear, and the truth upheld and articulated.*

In one week today, the Uniting Church Assembly meet. And they're going to continue the discussion on whether it's OK

*for a man to marry a man, or a woman to marry a woman...
So **there's** something for you to pray about – that the leaders
of that church would say “enough is enough” – let's get back
to the Bible on this, and understand that lawlessness comes
from the Devil – and this direction we're heading, comes from
the Father of Lies...*

*I can tell you, from a lot of years of experience, it's a tough
call, to stand up in a room filled with those who will not listen
to the truth, and to continue to speak out what God has said
on the matter. It's tough, and it takes a toll. And I hope you
thank God for Godly men and women who **won't** shy away
from arguing the truth, in the midst of a theological
argument... And that's what happened here.*

After much debate, Peter stood up. And he talked about the
call of God that he had received, to take the gospel to the
gentiles. So he talked about “1) direct revelation from God”.
He talked about 2) his call. He talked about his 3)
experience...

- God said “Go to the gentiles – don't call them unclean”
- And when he obeyed God and did that, the gentiles
turned to God, and received the Holy Spirit.

4) He then appealed to reason:

If God has accepted them as they,,, **whyyy** would you want to
put a burden on them, that **we** haven't been able to carry?

Basically what he says is “We believe we are saved through
the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ!” **We** couldn't keep the law
– **we** were incapable – and therefore **we** need the grace of
God,,, and so do they.

And everybody stopped arguing, and there was silence. Have you ever been in a meeting where nobody can agree, and then somebody speaks an inspired word of wisdom, and everyone is silent... maybe a few quietly nod their heads, as the wisdom of what was said, soaks in ... That's the spiritual gift of wisdom.

And then Paul and Barnabas shared **their** experience, of all that God had miraculously done in their ministry with the Gentiles...

And then the statesman of the apostles – James – takes them beyond reason – takes them beyond experience – and he takes them to the Scriptures.

You see:

- Peter's direct revelation from God – it needed to be tested. It **may** have been a revelation of God, or maybe he was getting deceived by the Devil. Remember one time Peter said something to Jesus, and Jesus said "Get behind me, Satan – these aren't God's words you're speaking..." And a supposed direct revelation from God, means very little, until it's confirmed with the Scriptures.
- Peter's **reasoning** would've been empty, if it was contrary to what the Scriptures taught.
- Peter's experience and Paul & Barnabas' experience of the miracles of God and the Holy Spirit, have to be

considered “suspect”, if they don’t line up with the Scriptures.

But they did!!! And so James speaks up, and says “The Scriptures agree with what we’ve just heard”. And he quotes from the Prophets Amos and Jeremiah... about how the Gentiles would be coming to be God’s people..

So, in making this decision, they considered:

- God’s call;
- Revelation from God;
- The **experiences** of Peter and Paul and Barnabas;
- And they considered Peter’s reasoning...

But the real test was “What do the Scriptures say?”

So James said, “The Scriptures agree with this, ¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the *Gentiles* who turn to *God*

All good – all settled – they **don’t** have to be circumcised. They **don’t** have to keep the Law.... Excellent...

But then he seems to backpedal. ²⁰ but (we) should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

What’s going on? They’ve just decided on freedom, and now they’re bringing in a whole bunch of rules.

There's 3 important principals at play here. In God's grace, in Jesus Christ, we are free from the Law, but **not** free to do whatever we like. Here we find three principals for how we exercise freedom:

The first principal is an issue of repentance.

These Gentiles, **used** to be idolaters. They would sacrifice to idols and to the gods, and they would the eat meat that had been dedicated them as worship to these gods. But they've been called away from this. They've been called to leave the idols behind, and to begin following Christ.

And repentance is **not** just a change of the mind (I've been hearing that a lot lately – that is unbiblical and untrue – that is a lie of the devil). Repentance is NOT just a change of mind – it is also a change in what we **do**. And so for them to repent, meant that they had to leave **behind** their old way of living, and they couldn't do that if they continued to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

And the principal is the same for us. When you become a Christian, there's certain things **you** need to repent of, and not return to.

- Angry
- Greedy
- Steal stuff from work
- Cheat on taxes
- Dishonour your parents
- A drunk

And so the first principle is “repentance”. A change of mind. A change of behaviour. A change of who we are, now in Christ. It’s an issue of the Lordship of Christ. If Jesus Christ is Lord – if He is **my** Lord, then I must obey Him. And the first step of obedience is repentance.

The second principal, is an issue of holiness.

They should abstain from sexual immorality. Does that mean it’s ok for them to lie, cheat, steal, or swindle??? Of course not – Sexual immorality is being used as an example of a moral choice that is made. It’s a **type** of choice representing the moral law.

Christian gentiles, would be distinct from **other** gentiles. Sexual immorality was **rife** in their culture (as it is in ours). But disciples of Jesus Christ, belong to a **different** culture – we belong to the Kingdom of God. What’s acceptable in the world, is **not** acceptable in the Kingdom of God.

And what we have to understand, is in Judaism, there was the religious law, **and** the moral law, and the two of them went together. One was about right and wrong (moral and immoral) – things that please God, and things that make God angry – it was about the condition of the heart...

And the other (the religious law) was about “How can we – an impure, sinful people – have a relationship with a Holy God?” And so, there was a whole system of rules and regulations, religious practices and traditions, temple sacrifice and shedding of blood, to atone for sin, to enable them to worship God.

But for us, Christ is the fulfilment of the Law. Jesus **is** that atonement. The blood of **Jesus** makes us pure and holy before God... But that doesn't mean it's OK for us to go on sinning... The religious law is finished – it's fulfilled in Jesus. But the moral law continues.

I read an article during the week, and in it Tim Keller is talking about how Christians get accused of ignoring some parts of the Bible, and insisting on others. And he says: *The New Testament gives us further guidance about how to read the Old Testament. Paul makes it clear in places like Romans 13:8ff that the apostles understood the Old Testament **moral** law to still be binding on us.*

In short, the coming of Christ changed how we worship, but not how we live. The moral law outlines God's own character---his integrity, love, and faithfulness. And so everything the Old Testament says about loving our neighbor, caring for the poor, generosity with our possessions, social relationships, and commitment to our family is still in force. The New Testament continues to forbid killing or committing adultery, and all the sex ethic of the Old Testament is re-stated throughout the New Testament (Matt. 5:27-30; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Tim. 1:8-11).ⁱⁱⁱ

If the New Testament has reaffirmed a commandment, then it is still in force for us today.

You see, it's to do with the Lordship of Christ. Because Jesus is our Lord, we yield to Him, and say "I will endeavour, with your help, to obey you." And so the second principle is holiness.

The third principal, is an issue of love for our Christian brother or sister.

Don't eat meat that's been strangled, and don't eat blood...

That actually **was** one of the religious laws. And he's saying "Keep doing it". Why? If they're free from those laws, why keep doing it? I'll tell you why – love for our Christian brother or sister. James explains it in V ²¹ **For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."**

Gentile Christians would be meeting and worshipping together with Jewish Christians. And a very important part of their fellowship, was sharing a meal together. *We do that sometimes don't we? Sometimes after church we all go down to the banks of the river together and share a meal together. Who enjoys that? Who loves to get together and eat together, and to just enjoy one-another's company in the Lord? It's wonderful, isn't it?*

I have a friend, who used to have a saying "It's as funny as a pork chop in a synagogue", which means it's not funny at all – it fact it's just downright offensive.

For the Jewish Christians, their culture was "Don't eat blood". And if they sat down to a meal at church, and strangled meat was served up, or blood pudding, they'd probably vomit. And so the principal at play here, is "Don't exercise your freedom, if you're going to hurt your Christian brother."

It's the same principle that we're going to see in the very next chapter. **Here**, Paul has stood **against** the need for

circumcision, and in the very next chapter, he circumcises Timothy Why? Because they were about to go in mission amongst the Jews, and he didn't want the Jews to be offended.

And so the third principal is love for our brother.

Let me give you an example:

*Christians are free to drink alcohol. We are **not** free to get drunk. But to have one drink without getting drunk, is not prohibited.*

*But if there was a reformed alcoholic amongst us, **none** of us should drink. Out of love for our brother, we shouldn't have any alcohol anywhere near him.*

*Also there may be those who, because of their upbringing and culture and beliefs, are **offended** by alcohol. Well, for their sake, rather than cause offence, we are free **not** to drink alcohol.*

Do you see the principal in play? We're free, but don't let your freedom be an offence, or a stumbling block to others.

And I think the church at Antioch understood this, because they rejoiced when they heard the decision.

So, here we are. We're free from the law. We are saved by grace – not by keeping the law. But we're **not** free to do whatever we like.

We should always consider issues of repentance; holiness; and love for our brother.

Questions.

ⁱ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles – A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1998. (p.439)

ⁱⁱ The modern controversy of grace vs. works (Lordship / non-lordship)

There's something about good works – they are self-describing – there's a word in there that lets us know what God thinks about good works – They are **good**. The angel said “*Acts 10:4*... **Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.**” These good deeds he was doing, were **good**...

The way some Christians rail against works, you'd think there was an epidemic of Judaizers, sharpening up their knives for circumcision, and teaching everyone to eat kosher foods and enforcing the hundreds or thousands of Pharisaic laws legislating every area of life... That's what the New Testament argument was over. The trouble is, in our zest to ensure that we understand the grace of God (that we are saved by the blood of Jesus and not by what we do), some will teach “Therefore, it doesn't matter what you do”. And they negate any requirement that we should submit to the Lordship of Christ and obey Christ....

See critique of non-lordship theology (very important)

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/letter-to-a-friend-concerning-the-so-called-lordship-salvation>

<http://www.christiantruth.com/articles/lordshipsalvation.html>

<http://www.gty.org/resources/articles/a100/a-15year-retrospective-on-the-lordship-controversy>

ⁱⁱⁱ ACC Catalyst Magazine June, 2015. It originally appeared in Redeemer Presbyterian Church's monthly Redeemer Report. (June 2012) and is available on-line at

<http://www.timothykeller.com/blog/2012/6/12/old-testament-law-and-the-charge-of-inconsistency> Tim Keller is the senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Manhattan, New York. He is also co-founder and vice president of The Gospel Coalition.