

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 35, Chapter 15 continued 2

As we continue our examination of Acts chapter 15, I'll remind you that we are spending an inordinate amount of time here because this chapter is so crucial to a correct understanding of our faith. But this chapter is also divisive because there are perhaps more differing Church doctrines derived from this chapter than most any other chapter in the New Testament. And since there are a number of opposing Church doctrines about the topics that are addressed here, then obviously they can't all be correct. But on the other hand could it be that none of those differing doctrines are right? That is, that not a single mainstream institutional Church doctrine has it right concerning the meaning of the outcome of Acts 15? You can be the judge of that once we've concluded this study of chapter 15.

We've worked diligently to establish the proper context for dissecting this chapter, which is all about the famous Jerusalem Council meeting to decide on what basis gentiles could be included in this Hebrew faith of Believers in Yeshua of Nazareth. To put a finer point on it: what does this chapter tell gentiles, especially, our obligation is to the Law of Moses? To ascertain this we've gone on a few detours to flesh out various of the main characters in this chapter, the true meaning and ultimate effect of circumcision, what the social and political circumstances of the day were, who Paul is and why he thinks as he does, and now I want to spend a moment explaining the organization and methodology of the Jerusalem Council itself.

I've said on a few occasions that it is a fundamental error to read this Jewish document, constructed within the confines of a Jewish society, and to this point played out mostly by Jewish people, as though Jewish cultural and historical contexts play no role when interpreting it. When we read and interpret these words through a 21st century Western gentile mindset, we distort the situation and the meaning of what actually occurred. Thus notice in Acts 15 how religious doctrinal decisions were made: it was done by means of a leadership council. The leadership council consisted of some unspecified number of men (but it was probably 12). And when for whatever reason there was a vacancy on the council, the remaining members nominated a replacement and then voted on a majority-rules basis (we saw this exact thing happen in the opening chapter of Acts). What we see happening in Acts 15 is that the leadership council of The Way is meeting in private session, and after those leaders have had their chance to contribute to the discussion, then a decision is rendered based on majority-rules (meaning the majority of the council). Of course it is typical that the supreme leader's opinion (in this case, James) carries much weight as to what the others will ultimately decide.

Why did the leaders of The Way organize themselves in such a manner? Because it is precisely how the Sanhedrin operated and also how the various leadership councils of each of the sects of Judaism operated. We must go forward understanding that what is happening with this Jerusalem Council is in no way a repudiation of Judaism, or how Judaism was governed, or was it an attempt to establish an organizational structure that was entirely new and unique. And it is critical to understand that the issues that this Jerusalem Council of Believers was

dealing with in Acts 15 were quite narrow in scope, specific and targeted, and the manner in which they dealt with them was customary for Jewish culture of the 1st century A.D.

The mindset of the Jerusalem Council members was much like it is today in the mainstream Church in America. All but the oldest established Church systems in America operate quite democratically. Even though there is inevitably a leadership council, most serious matters are brought before the membership at large and voted upon with a majority decision settling the matter. Some Churches even choose their pastor in this way. A couple of years ago a member of this congregation came to me and told me that he was quite upset because the membership didn't get to "vote". He reminded me that we live in America, and America is a democracy; in America average citizens vote. And unless the way this body is governed is changed to something more democratic, he was leaving. I explained that Seed of Abraham is ruled by an elder board; and that we have 5 members who decide policy and financial matters, and who vote with a majority-rules outcome. And that if he will look at the New Testament he will see that this is precisely the way it was done in Yeshua's day with the early Church. He did not see that as acceptable within the mold of American-style democracy and society and followed through with his threat. It seemed unthinkable to him (un-American, if you would) to do it any other way. He had fought for America in the Korean War and felt that democracy belonged as the governing method of the Church as well as for American government. I tell you this not as a criticism of this person, but rather to say that members of groups often expect to organize and come to decisions based on the norms and customs of whatever society we are part of; it is simply an unconscious assumption, a knee-jerk reaction. To do what is always done in our particular society seems "right", and to do otherwise can feel like it is "wrong".

Point being that everything we see happening at this Jerusalem Council was normal and customary within Judaism in the Holy Land for that day so there was no controversy over their governing body and its protocols. There is no attempt by the leadership to declare the standard way of Jewish religious institutions doing business and coming to decisions as wrong and thus a new way was being created. There is no thought by the leadership of The Way to separate themselves from mainstream Judaism; quite the contrary. The only part of mainstream 2nd Temple Judaism that they wished to challenge was the part that denied Yeshua and so was still waiting for the Messiah to come. The remaining laws and observances such as continuing to sacrifice at the Temple, tithing, kosher eating, participating in the festivals, and honoring Shabbat went on uninterrupted and unchanged among the Believers. In fact in Acts 21 a demonstration of Paul's continuing allegiance to normative Judaism was arranged by James so that those Jewish skeptics who accused Paul of abandoning the principles of Judaism and denouncing the Law of Moses could be publically refuted. Paul gladly accepted the challenge and went to the Temple to conduct a standard vow offering sacrifice done in accordance with the strictest rules of *Halakhah* of his day.

So with that in mind, let's re-read part of Acts chapter 15.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 15:19 – 29

After listening to the various viewpoints on the issue of admitting gentiles to the congregation of Believers, James, the supreme leader, sums up how he believes the council ought to rule.

Let's be clear on the core issue that the council was debating:

Acts 15:5-6 CJB

⁵ But some of those who had come to trust were from the party of the P'rushim; and they stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Torah of Moshe."

⁶ The emissaries and the elders met to look into this matter.

What is the stated matter that Luke says is why the council in Jerusalem was convened? It was the thorny issue of circumcision for gentile Believers. But what have we learned is the result when a gentile is circumcised? He becomes an official Jew; he ceases being a gentile. And what is it that fundamentally changes when he becomes an official Jew? Since he is no longer a gentile, then he is no longer considered inherently ritually unclean.... **provided** he follows all the laws of Jewish **Halakhah** (that all Jews are required to follow) regarding ritual purity. So James's recommendation, and what was ultimately decided, actually concerns the bottom line issue of ritual purity. And for mainstream Judaism circumcision was the solution for the inherent ritual defilement that was the "natural" lot of gentiles. Why is ritual purity so important to Judaism? Because ritual defilement is shameful, it can be most inconvenient to go through the process of returning oneself to a state of ritual purity, and one person's defilement can be transmitted to others by physical contact. So if uncircumcised gentile Believers are still inherently unclean, then they certainly can't be allowed near to Jewish Believers (the circumcised) let alone can they be allowed into a synagogue.

To backtrack just a bit so we don't get lost in a forest of facts: after Peter's vision/experience in Acts 10 of the sheet full of animals being let down from Heaven, and then watching as the gentile Roman army officer Cornelius and all his household had the Holy Spirit fall upon them, Peter came to realize the folly of the Jewish manmade tradition that gentiles were inherently unclean.

Acts 10:34-35 CJB

³⁴ Then Kefa addressed them: "I now understand that God does not play favorites,

³⁵ but that whoever fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what people he belongs to.

Please notice that God didn't change anything; rather God demanded that Judaism (beginning with the Believers) changed to reflect His will. Some months and years later, Peter brought that same message to the Jerusalem Council. So when it became his turn to speak on the matter of circumcision for gentile Believers he said to his fellow leaders:

Acts 15:6-9 CJB

⁶ The emissaries and the elders met to look into this matter.

⁷ *After lengthy debate, Kefa got up and said to them, "Brothers, you yourselves know that a good while back, God chose me from among you to be the one by whose mouth the Goyim should hear the message of the Good News and come to trust.*

⁸ *And God, who knows the heart, bore them witness by giving the Ruach HaKodesh to them, just as he did to us;*

⁹ *that is, he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their heart by trust.*

Then as the debate in Jerusalem draws to a close, James stands up and concludes:

Acts 15:19-20 CJB

¹⁹ *"Therefore, my opinion is that we should not put obstacles in the way of the Goyim who are turning to God.*

²⁰ *Instead, we should write them a letter telling them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from fornication, from what is strangled and from blood.*

Notice how it says, the "**Goyim** who **are turning** to God". Is this referring to God-fearers; Gentiles who had already accepted Judaism and the Jewish God but are now becoming Believers in Yeshua as well? No. This is referring instead to pagan gentiles; those who had been worshipping one of the many false gods but due to the message of the Apostles they are now in the **process** of turning to the God of Israel. In a sense, they have begun the process but they are not all the way there yet. They understand very little; however in some miraculous way they do understand just enough so that they know they need salvation and that the Jewish Messiah Yeshua is the answer. In today's vernacular we would call them Seekers. Using the wonderful New Testament metaphor of being born again, they have only just exited the birth canal.

So James agrees with Peter (and of course with Paul and Barnabas) that it would be a counter-productive impediment to require very much from gentiles who only recently accepted Christ after lifetimes of worshipping false gods. For one reason, they know nothing of the Holy Scriptures. They have no familiarity with the Prophets or the Torah. They have not been attending a synagogue. This entire thing was new to them. They didn't know the concepts, the words, the history, nothing. Yet the witness of the Holy Spirit confirms that their trust and belief in Yeshua is real and sincere. But even more, these gentiles lived in foreign lands, a long way from Jerusalem. So what should The Way require of them? The important thing was to get them trained in the ways of Yehoveh. But mainstream Jewish **Halakhah** said that gentiles (the uncircumcised) can't get too near to Jews, and of course shouldn't enter a synagogue lest they pollute everyone and everything with their inherent gentile uncleanness. Why is entering a synagogue going to be so important for these new gentile Believers? Because it is in synagogues where they will learn God's Word. Thus deduces James:

Acts 15:21 CJB

21 For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with his words being read in the synagogues every Shabbat."

In other words, the Council will immediately require of them only that they do the 4 listed things as a sort of basic allowable minimum. However, because there are synagogues everywhere in foreign lands where Moses has his words (the Torah) read and taught every Shabbat, then there are plenty of resources available for these gentiles to learn about Holy Scripture in order to obey God and live the redeemed life; it doesn't have to occur practically overnight, all at once, because if it was even demanded of the gentiles it is physically impossible.

But why those particular 4 things that James chose? Because with the new understanding that Peter brought to the Council that contrary to Jewish Tradition God says that gentiles are NOT inherently unclean, that still doesn't mean that gentiles are immune from **becoming** unclean through wrong behavior (just like Jews can become unclean by wrong behavior). That is, these new Believing gentiles must meet some required minimum standard of ritual purity so that they can be considered ritually clean by Jewish standards, otherwise they cannot enter into the synagogues where they can be assimilated into the Believing community and (most importantly) they can be taught the Torah.

The 4 things that gentiles must not do (notice that these are all negative commandments, that is these are things they must **not** do as opposed to things that they **must** do) are 1) abstain from things polluted by idols; 2) refrain from fornication; 3) do not eat animals that have been strangled to death; and 4) refrain from blood. So did James just kind of make these rules up? Did he figure it out on his own that foreign gentiles must not do these 4 things if they wanted to be associated with Israel? No! He took it directly from the Torah.

In Leviticus we read this:

Leviticus 17:8-14 CJB

8 "Also tell them, 'When someone from the community of Isra'el or one of the foreigners living with you offers a burnt offering or sacrifice

9 without bringing it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to sacrifice it to ADONAI, that person is to be cut off from his people.

10 When someone from the community of Isra'el or one of the foreigners living with you eats any kind of blood, I will set myself against that person who eats blood and cut him off from his people.

11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for yourselves; for it is the blood that makes atonement because of the life.'

12 This is why I told the people of Isra'el, 'None of you is to eat blood, nor is any foreigner living with you to eat blood.'

13 "When someone from the community of Isra'el or one of the foreigners living with you hunts and catches game, whether animal or bird that may be eaten, he is to pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

14 For the life of every creature- its blood is its life. Therefore I said to the people of Isra'el, 'You are not to eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it will be cut off.'

First this says that only meat offered before the altar of God can be eaten. The logical conclusion being that meat offered to idols cannot be eaten, because meat offered to idols cannot also be offered to God.

Second, the slaughter of animals according to Torah Law must be quick, humane, and done in such a way as to completely drain the creature of blood. The reason that pagans strangled animals to death to eat them was not to be exceptionally cruel; rather it was precisely so that the blood would remain in the animal. Then the animal would be "aged" by hanging (that is the animal flesh would be allowed to decay a little with the blood still in the animal) and only after a few days was the animal taken down, skinned and butchered. This produced a particularly desirable flavor that pleased the palette of many cultures; however it violated the Law of Moses.

But for our purposes, what is the result of disobeying these 4 particular Laws of Moses? The offender becomes rendered ritually unclean. And notice that this applies not only to the community of Israel but also to "the foreigners living with you". Gentiles.

As to the prohibition against fornication; immediately Leviticus chapter 18 deals with sexual immorality (and remember, when the Scriptures were originally written, there were no such things as chapters and verses; they have been artificially added many centuries later by scholars to make study and reference easier). So there is no break between chapters 17 and 18. Leviticus 18 begins:

Leviticus 18:1-7 CJB

1 ADONAI said to Moshe, 2 "Speak to the people of Isra'el; tell them, 'I am ADONAI your God.

3 You are not to engage in the activities found in the land of Egypt, where you used to live; and you are not to engage in the activities found in the land of Kena'an, where I am bringing you; nor are you to live by their laws.

4 You are to obey my rulings and laws and live accordingly; I am ADONAI your God.

5 You are to observe my laws and rulings; if a person does them, he will have life through them; I am ADONAI.

6 "None of you is to approach anyone who is a close relative in order to have sexual

relations; I am ADONAI.

⁷ You are not to have sexual relations with your father, and you are not to have sexual relations with your mother. She is your mother- do not have sexual relations with her.

And the next several verses list more prohibited sexual activities. The term fornication in the New Testament was used in two ways: one that was meant in its technical sense, which is to have unlawful sexual intimacy between unmarried people. But the second way is that it became a general catch-all term that referred to all prohibited immoral sexual activity between humans, married or unmarried. That is the sense it is meant here; it was a general instruction prohibiting immoral sexual activity of any kind (and of course what was deemed immoral was to be defined by the Torah, not by the social norms of these former pagans' cultures).

The point is this: far from James abolishing the Law for gentile Believers (and sort of manufacturing his own rules, as he saw fit, for gentile Believers), he pronounced that the Law as found in Leviticus applies also to these gentile Believers...circumcised or not. And what are the common traits regarding these 4 rules? One, they were for Israel and for the foreign gentiles that attached themselves to Israel to obey. And two, violating any of these 4 named laws resulted in ritual defilement.

But now let's address this matter from a merely common sense perspective. Sadly, it has been the institutional Church's position for many centuries that 1) James abolished the Law for gentiles and established a new set of rules for Christians, and 2) that these 4 things represent the sum total that gentile Believers are obligated to obey. Ask yourself a simple question: if that is the case, then I suppose that murder and manslaughter are now OK for gentile Believers, right? Stealing and fraud is OK because James says nothing about it. Coveting must be OK as is drunkenness, assault and battery, homosexuality, abortion, polygamous marriage (or no marriage at all), and on and on because none of these are mentioned here. Our common sense says that cannot possibly be the case. But the standard response to this rhetorical question is always: 'well, if Christ instructed us about something, then we have to add that to James's list, but if He doesn't say it then that's all we are obligated to do'. Let's think that through for a minute. If that is so, then how about this famous instruction from the lips of Our Savior?

Matthew 5:17-19 CJB

¹⁷ "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete.

¹⁸ Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened.

¹⁹ So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Did Yeshua not just instruct all of His followers to obey the Law? Just as it was formulated long before He came, and with no changes at all? If we are only to go by the 4 things that James instructed, and then we add whatever Christ instructed, we find ourselves right back at square one because Christ's instruction is that He did NOT abolish any minor or major element of the Law, and that if **anyone** (not any JEW, but any ONE), teaches that it's OK to disobey the Law, or she or he purposely does NOT obey the Law because they have decided it doesn't apply to them, then they shall be considered the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. Considered the least by whom? By Jesus Christ. I readily admit that Yeshua does NOT say that disobeying the Law excludes you from the Kingdom of Heaven. So obeying the Law is not a requirement to become saved, nor within certain boundaries is it required to stay saved. We are saved by grace and grace alone. Disobeying the Law is called sin (and this is re-emphasized as such in 1John 3:4) and Messiah atoned for our sins. However, if you'd like to receive any rewards in Heaven at all; if you want to hear our Lord and Savior greet you with the welcome words: "well done faithful servant, you've run a good race", then He says you must use the intended spirit of the Law of Moses as your standard of living and behavior. A Law He says during His Sermon on the Mount that He did not come to abolish or to change in the slightest way; a Law that He fully expects us to follow if we intend to enter Heaven with anything but the least status possible to be accepted there in the first place.

Everything that Yeshua said, His brother James is following and not undoing. First, James says that circumcision (which meant becoming a Jew) is not needed for these gentile seekers to be saved. It was trust that saved the Jews, and so it is the same trust that saves the gentiles. Second, even though these gentiles are now saved, and they remain as gentiles (uncircumcised), ritual purity still matters and it is still required of them starting with adhering to the 4 listed prohibitions (all of them taken directly from the Law of Moses). But later, since the entire word of Moses (the Torah) is taught in synagogues throughout the known world, these ritually clean foreign gentile Believers who begin their walk with Yeshua by following these 4 basic rules, can also now attend synagogues where they can be taught the rest of the Law of Moses and over time adhere to it more and more as they mature.

To better enable you to make a decision for yourself what all this means for modern Christians and Messianics, I will add this comment and then give you my opinion. These 4 rules are not only taken directly from Leviticus in the Law of Moses (as I showed you), they also represent 4 of the basic rules of natural law. And in Judeo-Christianity a traditional name for natural law is the Noachide Laws. Let me say clearly that you will not find the subject heading of "Noachide Laws" in the Bible, nor a specific organized listing of natural laws and/or Noachide Laws in the Bible. Rather they have been deduced by the great Jewish sages of old and by the early Church Fathers.

The impact of the natural law or the Noachide Law is that it was created before there was a division of humanity into Hebrews and gentiles. So these laws are universal. In the Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 56a, we get this statement on the subject:

"Our rabbis taught: 'The sons of Noah were given seven commandments: practicing justice and abstaining from blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery and eating flesh torn from a live animal.' Rabbi Chananyah ben Gamaliel said: 'Also not to

drink blood taken from a live animal'."

And of course as we read in Leviticus 17 and 18, these specific laws that James pronounced in Acts 15 were specifically said to be not only for Hebrews, but also for the foreign gentiles that have attached themselves to Israel. Have Christian gentiles attached themselves (ourselves) to Israel? Paul says we did, whether we realize it or not.

Romans 11:13-24 CJB

¹³ However, to those of you who are Gentiles I say this: since I myself am an emissary sent to the Gentiles, I make known the importance of my work

¹⁴ in the hope that somehow I may provoke some of my own people to jealousy and save some of them!

¹⁵ For if their casting Yeshua aside means reconciliation for the world, what will their accepting him mean? It will be life from the dead!

¹⁶ Now if the hallah offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf. And if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you- a wild olive- were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree,

¹⁸ then don't boast as if you were better than the branches! However, if you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, the root is supporting you.

¹⁹ So you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."

²⁰ True, but so what? They were broken off because of their lack of trust. However, you keep your place only because of your trust. So don't be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified!

²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he certainly won't spare you!

²² So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you- provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off!

²³ Moreover, the others, if they do not persist in their lack of trust, will be grafted in; because God is able to graft them back in.

²⁴ For if you were cut out of what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree!

My opinion then is this: what the Jerusalem Council decided is that circumcision of gentiles in order to attain ritual purity is not needed, and never was. Circumcision was not an issue of ritual; rather it was an issue of conversion from being a gentile to being a Jew. So the final decision was that one did not have to be a Jew to be saved by Yeshua, nor does one have to be a Jew to be ritually clean.

However: the Biblical ritual purity laws do matter for Christian gentiles from the standpoint of following God's Law and thus rightly affecting our behavior.

Did James go against his brother Yeshua's teaching that He did not come to abolish the Law? No. James merely chose 4 basic commandments from the Law of Moses that also reflected basic principles of natural law, which especially the newest and least indoctrinated of gentile Believers are to follow even if they don't understand why. However, as the new Believers mature over time, their maturity is to come primarily from learning God's Word, beginning with the Torah. And by definition, this is a lifelong learning process.

From the first days of Seed of Abraham Torah Class, my Board can tell you that our goal has not been to address Seekers (although, praise the Lord, we have indeed seen many come to Messiah here). Almost all modern Churches have decided to mold their messages and services around Seekers and I think they generally do a good job of it. Rather we are about maturing those who already believe in the God of Israel and love His Son Jesus Christ. But, that maturing in our faith necessarily involves learning God's Torah along with all of His Word....Old and New Testaments. And that also necessarily means obeying His laws and commandments as best we can, in whatever stage our journey with Him might be; and within our best understanding of how to live out the spirit of those laws in a modern Western culture and in the circumstances of our time in history.

We'll continue with Acts 15 next time.