

Lesson 14

Acts 15: 1-35

Don't close the doors!

Memory Verse: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us." (Acts 15:8 NIV)

The writer of Acts has already shown that many of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are not happy that Gentiles are to be received into the church as equal with Jews, but without having to follow the Jewish laws, especially dietary laws (see 11:1-3). Peter may have silenced them once (see 11:18), but many still retain their old Jewish attitudes, ideas, biases and prejudices.

The increasing number of Gentiles who were becoming Christians raised a problem within the church. What was the relationship of the church to Judaism? Some Christians, especially the more conservative Jewish believers, argued that Christianity was a party within Judaism, the party of true believers. They assumed that Gentile Christians, therefore, needed to become Jewish proselytes, which involved being circumcised and obeying the Mosaic Law.

Other Christians, the more broad-minded Jewish believers and the Gentile converts, saw no need for these restrictions. They viewed the church not as a party within Judaism, but as a distinct group—separate from Judaism—that incorporated both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. This difference of viewpoint led to the meeting Luke recorded in this section. He described it at length, in order to explain the issues involved, and to clarify their importance. Therefore not a few students of Acts believe that chapter 15 is the most crucial chapter in the entire book. It is both structurally and theologically central to Acts.

Soon after correcting the trouble in Antioch, Paul hears that the Judaisers have spread their teachings to the newly planted churches of Galatia (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) and some of the new Christians are being led astray. Angered at this, Paul immediately sends off a sharply worded letter, known to us as the Letter to the Galatians (Gal 1:6; 3:1) in which Paul points out that there is only one gospel, the one he preaches, and that the law of Moses has no authority over Christians. They are justified by faith in Christ and live by the same faith. Though free from the law of Moses, they are not lawless, but under the direction of the indwelling Spirit of Christ (Gal 3:3; 5:1,13,16,18).

The progress of the gospel has often been hindered by people with closed minds who stand in front of open doors and block the way for others. In 1786, when William Carey laid the burden of world missions before a ministerial meeting in Northampton, England, the eminent Dr. Ryland said to him, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" More than one Spirit-filled servant of God has had to enter open doors of opportunity without the support of churches and religious leaders.

Paul and his associates faced this same challenge at the Jerusalem Conference about twenty years after Pentecost. Courageously, they defended both the truth of the gospel and the missionary outreach of the church.

Scriptural Reading: Acts 15:1-35

Things to learn: 1) Disputes and Challenges 2) The doors of Grace 3) Commands and Concessions

Read the introduction to this study and Acts 15:1-35

Questions

Q1. Conflict and disagreement between Christians is one of the most difficult things we have to face. What is the underlying cause for this conflict within the Jerusalem church and what was at stake here (referring to Acts 15:1-5)?

Q2. In the public discussion described in Acts 15:6ff, how did the four key leaders (Peter in Acts 15:6-11); (Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:12); and (James in Acts 15:13-18) presented the case for keeping the doors of grace open to the lost Gentiles?

Q3. What value is there for us today in the recommendation James makes? (Acts 15:19-35.)