VCBC SLG 2022 Fall Term

The Book of Acts

Session #9: The Ultimate Break Away from Old Wine Skin—Chapter 15

I. Preface to Chapter 15

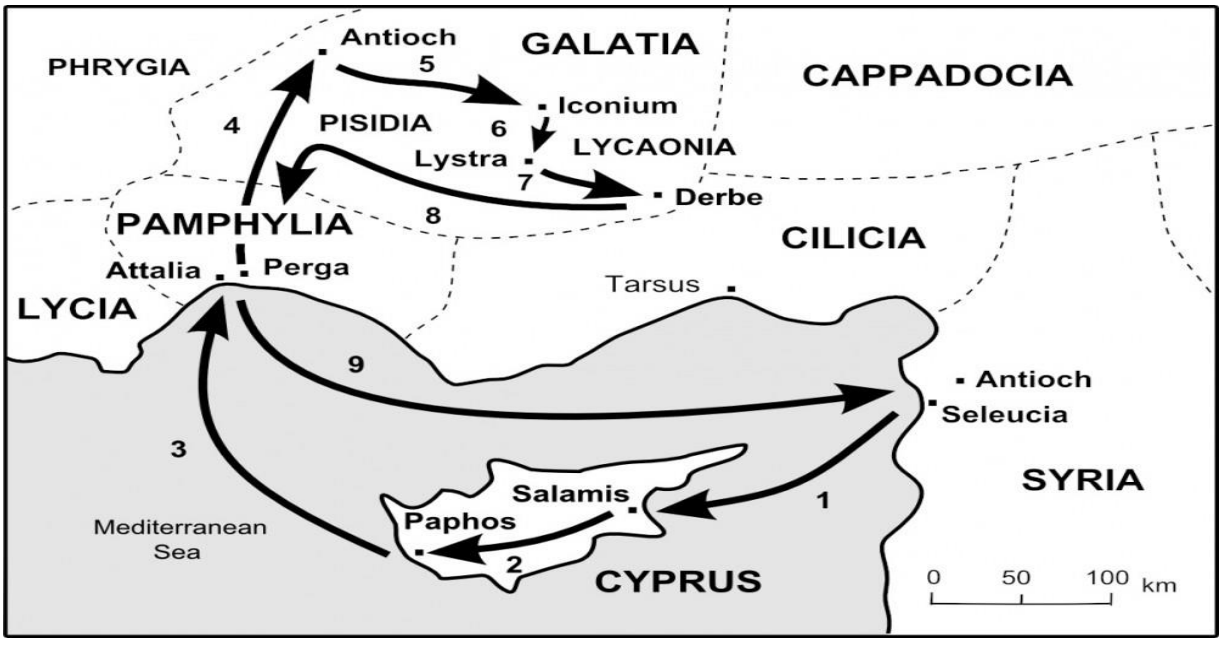
Last time, we were considering the truly multi-ethnic church in Antioch and were learning from how the Holy Spirit spoke to them in commissioning Barnabas and Paul to spread the gospel Middle-eastern region to the other parts of the Roman Empire and how they responded by further praying, fasting and waiting before laying their hands on the two, and we noted that the humility of Paul was. In particular, most remarkable.

Chapters 13-14 give us an account of first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (AD 51-52)

City	Results	Persecution/wonders	Remarks
Cyprus	Proconsul believed	(blinding sorcerer)	Barnabas hometown
Perga-Pamphylia			John Mark left
Antioch-Pisidia	Gospel spread in region-many believed	Expelled –Jews stirred up city	
Iconium	Great number of J&G believed	Did many miracles, but ended up fleeing	
Lystra-Lycaonia	Healing of cripple led to worship as gods	Jews from Iconium came to stir trouble	Paul almost stoned to death
Derbe-Lycaonia	Great number of disciples		

Remarks:

1. On return trip, they set up elders in new churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium & Antioch
2. Back in Syrian Antioch and gave report of God opening door of faith to Gentiles
3. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch "a long time". 1st trip took about 1 year (Bruce)



II. The Old Wine Skin Debate (chapter 15)

"Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

- Who were these "certain people"?
- Subsequent details given in ch.15 identified them likely as Pharisees who believed in Christ (15:5) or Jewish Christians influenced by their Pharisaic traditions
- They obviously heard of glowing reports of conversion of Gentile both in Antioch and the tremendous fruit born out of the 1st missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas
- Jewish Christians up till then were circumcised necessarily at birth as stipulated: in Genesis 17: 10-14--"**This is my covenant with you (Abraham) and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. 11 You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. 12 For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household *or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring*. 13 Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. 14 *Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant***."
- Such was again affirmed by Moses in Exodus 12: 49— "The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you."
- It appeared to be naturally applicable to Gentiles who now, by faith, are part of this everlasting covenant.
- So, their conclusion is: "Unless you are circumcised…you cannot be saved."

"2 **This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question**."

- Paul himself a former Pharisee made clear his opinion about circumcision throughout his many epistles, such as:

"No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God." (Romans 2:29)

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." (Galatians 5:6)

"Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished." (Galatians 5:11)

"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation." (Galatians 6:15)

"In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ." (Colossians 2:11)

- After some 17 or more years after his conversion and leadership, it is quite clear that Paul's apostleship had yet to be recognized as he did not have much association with the Apostles in Jerusalem and his authority was considered inferior to that of the leaders in Jerusalem, hence the need to secure a verdict from the authority in Jerusalem

"**3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them**."

- As much as Paul might not really like this idea of going to Jerusalem—reflected in these words to the Galatian church about his opinion about the leaders in Jerusalem: "**I did not consult any man, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me**…" (Galatians 1: 16-17)
- Their journey through Phoenicia and Samaria did edify and strengthen the churches there, "As the churches of Samaria and Phoenicia were themselves the fruit of the Hellenistic mission which followed the death of Stephen…they would naturally rejoice a the news, without being troubled by the misgivings which were felt by so many of the believers in Jerusalem." (Bruce, *Acts*, 288)
- Just as they did in Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the same to the church in Jerusalem and the response was rather different.

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

- It is interesting to note that like Paul, some of the Pharisees came to Christ, but unlike Paul, they did not leave the "party", or at least identified themselves as such.
- Now, they made their opinion clear, it was not just circumcision but the law of Moses that the Gentiles (and for that matter all Jewish Christians) are required to keep or else, though not spelled out here, "**they cannot be saved**" (Acts 15:1 above)
- When you think about their insistence, won't it be prudent for both Gentiles and Jewish Christians to observe the Law, and in particular, circumcision? Isn't that a double insurance, just in case?
- Let's see how the leaders in Jerusalem address this issue.

6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

- It appears that this "Chief" Apostle, Peter, remained rather quiet for the most part and allowed others to speak first—quite a change from his former self.
- What he said was essentially the same defense he gave to the opposing "circumcised believers" who criticized him after his mission to Cornelius household in Acts 11: 4-17), except that he now emphasized that:
    - God did not choose anyone of you, but me, through "my lips" to help them hear the gospel for a reason—the reason appears to be that "I am now a 1st-handed witness"—nothing was hearsay!
    - He used the word(s) "just as" twice to hammer home the equity of salvation
        - God knows their hearts (of belief) and gave them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us—in fact, the Holy spirit descended upon them even before Peter could ask them to receive;
        - As a result, "we are saved, just as they are"—the equity is being emphasized by Peter by putting the Gentiles before the Jews—not that they are saved just as we are, but rather, we are saved just as they are!
        - A powerful refutation of the arrogance and the sense of superiority of these Pharisaic Christians!
- It is interesting that Peter accused the Pharisaic Christians of trying to put a yoke on the Gentiles' neck, because, as Bruce points out, "a proselyte (to Judaism) by undertaking to keep the law of Moses, was said to "take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." (Bruce, Acts, 290) which even their ancestor have failed to do so. And now, Peter used a very strong word to warn them not to try to "test" God! (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7) With this solemn warning, as far as Luke's narrative is concerned, Peter faded out of the narrative oi "Gentile Mission".

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

- This solemn warning of Peter, naturally brought the assembly to complete silence, and now Barnabas and Paul (note whose name comes first), were given the chance to tell their stories
- I believe the Holy Spirit was guiding this important process in that had Barnabas and Paul told the story before Peter's speech, it might not have achieved the same effect.

13 When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. 14 Simeon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written (in Amos 9: 11-12)

16 "'After this (*In that day*) I will return
and rebuild David's fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
17 that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord
(*they main possess the remnants of Edom*),
even all the Gentiles (*nations*) who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things'[b]—
***18 things known from long ago*.[c]**

- Now, James, the earthly brother of our Lord, obviously has assumed the undisputed leader of the church in Jerusalem. [By the way, it is worth mentioning that he appeared to continue to participate in the temple service of prayers where he interceded for the city, and at his martyrdom in AD. 62, the Jews were gravely shocked and when temple was destroyed and the city was overtaken, its inhabitants attributed the calamity to the cessation of prayers by James (see Josephus, *Ant.* 20.200-201 and Bruce, *Acts*, 239)
- It is also interesting to note that James addressed Peter as "Symeon", the Hebrew or Aramaic form of his personal name. I believe James was tying to remind the Pharisaic Christians of who Peter was, not a Hellenistic Jew; and
- James went on to affirm Peter's first-handed testimony to the choosing of the Gentiles (not referring to Barnabas and Paul's testimonies), and was in agreement with the prophetic words in the Old Testament among which he quoted in particular from the words of Amos:
    - The quote from Amos was from the Greek version (LXX) which differs slightly from the Hebrew MSS (in blue italics are highlighted the main difference)
    - My own take is: while the Hebrew text was inspired to speak to Israel of the time, prophesying the restoration of Davidic kingdom, including the reclaiming what was taken from David, i.e. what's left of Edom, but all the nations who would bear God's name; with he LXX, it is made clear that it actually speaks to the inclusion of all Gentiles (which is the same word as nations in Greek) in God's salvation foretold long time ago and now fulfilled before their very eyes.
- Since this is the case, James now presents his verdict.

III. The Verdict

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

- James specified four things that all Gentile believers (including us today) should observe
    - Abstaining from good polluted by idols
    - Abstaining from sexual immorality
    - Abstaining from strangled animals and
    - From eating blood (of animals)
- They are not conditions of salvation in Christ
    - Then what are they?
    - They are the (main stipulations of) Law of Moses read in the synagogues on every Sabbath in every city from the earliest times (till now)
- Since circumcision was not included in his verdict, it is considered irrelevant as condition of salvation, since without circumcision, the Gentiles have been saved just as they are—that is settled once for all—no more trouble (or additional requirement) is needed.
- Then what are these "conditions" and why, of all other stipulations of the Law Moses preached since the earliest times, only these four were cited?
    - Apart from "sexual immorality" which was not only the most common temptations to all whether Gentiles and Jews, it was also almost a licensed practice in cultic rituals among idol-worshippers in pagan temples as part of their feast—such prohibition was especially important to Christians living in the Roman world;
    - the rest appears to aim as settling a very practical hurdle of communion and fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers in the same church:
        - If the Gentile Christians also observed these food-rules still practiced by basically all Jewish believers, the latter would have a free conscience to have fellowship with Gentile believer as food, in their culture and tradition as basis of fellowship and association, not to mention that the Lord's table was necessarily observed as part of the communion meal.
        - If it is to be practiced by all Gentile believers, the incident of Peter and Barnabas switching table in Antioch would not have occurred (Galatians 2:11ff).
- In other words, in James' wisdom, this verdict is really not aimed to appease the Pharisaic Jews, but for the promotion of perfect harmony among Jews and Gentile believers whose fellowship in Christ has much to do with they had obstinately committed to—the constant Breaking of Bread.

22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. 23 With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
Greetings.
24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.
Farewell.

- The letter was addressed to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
    - Since the trouble caused by these "circumcised believers" reached mainly the region covered by the three places, Silas and Judas needed not travel beyond these places;
- To label these trouble-makes as unauthorized serves to vindicate both Barnabas and Paul who were further addressed as "our dear friends" and as "men who have risked their lives for the same of our Lord Jesus Christ
    - Such is much needed to affirm the spiritual authority of the two men who, to a large extent, had founded these churches
- The decision for abstinence from the four things, according to the letter, was not just their opinion, but affirmed by the Holy Spirit—likely referring to their unanimous decision on the matter;

On the Apostle Paul's opinion on the three food-related prohibition, allow me to quote from F.F. Bruce:
"As for Paul, he took a different line. Where true religion and basic Christian ethics were involved, he was a peremptory as anyone would well be in directing his converts to avoid idolatry and fornication. But in matter (like food) which were religiously and ethnically neutral, he refused to lay down the law. No food, he maintained, was "common or unclean" per se—not even if it had been forbidden by the law of Moses, not even if it came from an animal that had been sacrificed to a pagan divinity. It was human being that mattered, not food, if a Christian was considering whether or not to eat this or that kind of good, the decision should depend on the effect which the taking or leaving it would have on the conscience of a fellow-Christian. When Paul was asked for a ruling on eating the flesh of animals which has been 'sacrificed to idols' (cf. I Cor. 8: 1-11:1) the last thing that would have occurred to him would be to quote a decision of the Jerusalem church as binding on Gentile Christians. When faced with such questions he argues from the order of creation and the ethical implications of a law-free gospel." (Bruce, Acts, 285)

Why then did he not oppose the verdict of James"?

- He is applying what he eventually taught: "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody" (Romans 12:17) and
- Based on loving consideration of the "weak in conscience", he says, "Therefore, if what I eat cause my brothers to fall into sin, "I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall." (I Corinthians, 8:13)
- Unlike circumcision, the prohibitions here have nothing to do with the basis of salvation. Paul does not want to "major in the minor."

IV. Unity Prevailed

30 So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message (or comfort). 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage (comfort) and strengthen the believers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. [34] [d] 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

- As Luke wraps up this "tense" council, his emphasis is obviously one of comfort and peace.
    - The dispute has undoubtedly great tension in the church in Antioch: one the one hand they were taught by Paul and Barnabas the way of "law-free' salvation through faith, but such was disputed by what seemed to be sent by the authority from Jerusalem—undoubtedly people would have taken sides—now peace is restored, and their prayers for unity have been answered—what comfort, great comfort indeed.
    - Whatever was being preached by Judas and Silas, Luke zeroed in again on the word, comfort—"through speech that much comforted (*parakalesan*) the brothers and strengthened"—indeed, disputes, a lack of peace and unity always weaken the spirit of believers and the church, but peace in unity always is the source of strength.
    - And in return, the church in Antioch "dismissed them with peace…to the ones having sent them"—what a beautiful picture of turning unity and peace in Christ.
    - Yes, in the face of formidable disputes, Paul and Barnabas learned the way of humility to seek consensus of the wider church community, instead of simply insisting that they were right (and they were). Of course, they took every opportunity to defend their cause, but ultimately they submitted to God-appointed leaders of the church and complied with their verdict which brought unity not only to the church in Antioch, but also to the entire body of Christ.