Study of Acts – Discussion Notes Chapter 15

Introduction

Chapter 15 stands at the very center of the book of Acts. Not only is this true of its position in the text but also in the early spread of the gospel. The first half of Acts focuses on the Jewish Christian community and the Jerusalem church. The final half of Acts focuses on Paul’s missionary work to the Gentiles which began with Peter’s witness to Cornelius and the establishment of the church at Antioch.

Chapter 15 teaches us much about how to handle church conflict as we see a very dynamic issue being addressed. It also teaches about the real meaning of salvation and what constitutes genuine faith as opposed to ritualism. It this chapter we see men of God having to listen to God as they realize the error in their way of thinking and must give way to God’s plan for the church.

Content

1. The dangers of ritualism (vs. 1-5).

What was causing the controversy in the church at Antioch?

These were most likely Pharisees who were not comfortable with Gentiles receiving the gospel. They were outsiders from the actual local church trying to push their beliefs on the church. All churches should be very skeptical of such people who come in and try to shove their agenda on the church.

What do you think were some motives behind their demands?

They could have been motivated by sincere beliefs that Christian Gentiles should conform to circumcision and the Jewish rules. They could have been simply trying to impose the impossible on the Gentiles in order to maintain their own exclusivity.

Either way, their motives and actions were misguided and not of God. Notice how they are referenced in the letter to the church in verse 24. These were trouble makers trying to stir up things. The word translated “troubled” is actually a military term meaning “to plunder”. They were stirring up things they had no business stirring up.

How does this happen in churches today?

People often have their own agenda and ideas and they try to impose them and push them on the church. Some people will go to great lengths to get their way. These men were more interested in their rituals than they were in the hearts of people.

2. The proper way of dealing with controversy (vs. 6-21).

How would you describe the manner in which the apostles and elders handled this dispute?

They addressed it openly. They discussed and listened to each other with respect and then made appropriate decisions. They relied heavily on the elders and leaders.

This was a very touchy matter and a difficult pill for some Jews to swallow. The idea that the Gentiles could receive all the rewards of knowing the Messiah (Jesus who was a Jew himself) without abiding by the Jewish traditions and rituals was not easy for many of them.

What were some factors that helped them come to their conclusion?

a. The evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit.
b. The testimony of Paul and Barnabas.

c. The testimony of Peter.

d. The wisdom of James (brother of Jesus).

e. The leadership of the Holy Spirit.

f. The understanding of the importance of the mission.

**What are some things that strike you about the letter to the Gentile believers?**

Personally, I love the fact that they referred to them as brothers. This must have meant the world to the Gentiles. Secondly they rejected the prior message from the trouble makers and outlined their acceptance of the Gentiles in the Christian faith.

It is important to note that they exempted the Gentiles from their rituals but not from the moral laws of the Ten Commandments or from sexual purity. In other words, Christianity is not obtained by rituals but it does inspire morality. Too many people try to use Christianity to justify immorality but it inspires morality and negates ritualism.

We should also notice the power of the spoken word by Peter and James speaking under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. We always need men in our churches who are willing to listen to God and observe what He is doing and therefore stand up for the right thing. We need men willing to put their personal agenda aside and give way to God’s plan.

**3. The truth about salvation (vs. 22-29).**

Notice that we can sometimes be sincere in our beliefs but we can also be wrong. The Pharisees had to recognize the real discovery of salvation did not rest in their rituals but rather in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

**What are some truths we can learn about salvation from Acts 15?**

a. It is God’s decision (vs. 7).

b. God knows each person’s heart (vs. 8).

c. God makes no distinction based on race, etc. (vs. 9).

d. Salvation cleanses even the worst among us (vs. 9).

e. Salvation is through graces alone and it is the only way (vs. 11).

f. Salvation joins us in brotherhood so we become a single people (vs. 23).

**Conclusion**

In the end, the apostle’s decree is evidence that we can overcome our differences when we listen to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. One might ask what would have happened if the council in Jerusalem had not come to the correct conclusion. While I do not know how it would have affected them, I do know this; God’s plan would have proceeded.

God’s determined plan was to bring salvation to the Gentiles and that was going to happen with or without the blessing of the Jewish believers. How reassuring it is to know they were able to look past their human beliefs and see God working.

In the end, they did two remarkable things. First, they recognized the work of the Holy Spirit and listened to the leading of God. Secondly, they became genuinely supportive of the mission of sharing the gospel. May we be able to say the same of ourselves?