

Encouragement for the Gentiles.

Acts 15:22-35.

Sunday morning, February 27, 2011.

I. Blessing in the Assembly.

- A. The assembly of the Church in Jerusalem faced a difficult task.
 - 1. There had been a sharp division in the Church over the necessity for Christians to observe the law of Moses; especially for Gentile converts.
 - 2. The problem had led to what is called “no small dissension and dispute” (15:2)
 - 3. Neither side would give in, and so the matter came before a general assembly of the apostles and elders of the church, meeting in Jerusalem.
- B. The assembly works through the problem.
 - 1. No supernatural intervention from the Lord is given so that this problem may be resolved quickly.
 - 2. Rather, the assembly is forced to work through the problem so that the Church might have an inspired account in Scripture as to resolving problems that would arise in later generations.
 - First, time is given for much discussion; even heated discussion, for the text uses the word “dispute.” The Jewish brothers, loyal to Moses, are given an opportunity to press their case, and they do so vigorously. Acts 15:7
 - Next Peter, Barnabas and Paul present anecdotal material about God’s work among the Gentiles, casting doubt on the assertions of these Jewish brothers. Acts 15:7-12.
 - Finally, James gets up and presents a Biblical framework from the prophet Amos to understand and handle this problem. Acts 15:13-21.
- C. God adds His blessing.
 - 1. Our text says: “then it pleased the apostles and elders with the whole Church”
 - Note the timing: It was after James’ presentation from the Word of God.
 - Note the remarkable unity: “...with the whole Church.” See verse 25 also: The letter was sent to the Gentile churches “with one accord.”
 - 2. There was a supernatural work of God in that assembly after all. Only God could have created this remarkable degree of unity. He subdued the hearts of these Jewish brethren, loyal to Moses, and did so by His Word; He re-arranged the furniture of their hearts, showing them how the furniture belonged and should be arranged, and they humbly obliged.
 - 3. We do not owe the change in these Jewish brethren to the flexibility of human nature, for “a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” Human nature is stubborn and resistant to change. Here hearts were changed, and that is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit working with His Word.

Application:

There are lessons for us to learn from these Jewish brothers who were loyal to Moses.

- 1. Although we owe the change in these brothers to the work of the Holy Spirit, there is a human side to this change that took place. At some point these brothers became willing to entertain the notion that they might have had it all wrong. Do you ever entertain such a notion, or are you always right?

2. At some point these brothers became pliable and willing to change with regards to their most prized possession, Moses. Have you ever known such pliability, and are you willing to return to that place, even doing so often?
3. In doing so they willingly incur great shame for themselves, for in the letter they agree to send, they are labeled as those having troubled the Gentiles with words, and unsettling their souls. Acts 15:24. Perhaps the presence of Paul was of encouragement here. (Had he offered encouragement from his own experience to these brothers?)
Are you willing to incur the shame that sometimes comes along with having been wrong?

II. Encouragement for the Gentiles.

- A. The letter the assembly wrote was addressed to “The brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.” This comprised a large area East of the Mediterranean Sea, and south of modern day Turkey, involving many churches.
- B. How this word “brethren” must have encouraged their hearts. The Jews used this term with their fellow Jews for they were all the children of Abraham, making them brethren in relation to each other.
Now they too, as Gentiles, without becoming Jewish, were included in the household of God, by faith in Christ alone, and making them “brethren” together with the Jewish believers.
- C. The Greek word translated “encouragement” also carries the idea of “exhortation.” Both words carry the idea of helping or nudging someone along in the right direction. The assembly made it clear that freedom from the law of Moses did not mean freedom to engage in idolatry. They did not have to become Jewish, but they could not remain pagans.
- D. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, would enlarge on this directive of the Jerusalem assembly. This directive was not a bare prohibition against eating of meat from animals who had been strangled and the blood of which had not been drained out of them. It was a directive against idolatry. The alternative would have been a return to Mosaic law which the assembly argues against.
- E. In 1 Cor. 10:14-33 Paul draws two important applications from Psalm 24:1 “The earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness.”
 1. Because all things belong to God you need not worry when you buy a piece of meat whether the animal was strangled or not; you need not even worry if the animal had been killed in a pagan temple as a sacrifice. Don’t even question it!
 2. There is a second implication in the truth that all things belong to God. This truth also means that all things should be used in a godly manner and for a godly purpose. This means you don’t eat such meat to honor a pagan idol, and you don’t eat such meat if it is going to harm the cause of Christ’s kingdom. Give no offense to the Jew: They have sensitivities here; cultural baggage. To the Greek: By raising what are non-issues; eat what is given you!
To the church of God: by giving the impression that it’s OK to honor idols.

Application:

Paul applies this text saying it means “do all to the glory of God.” Is this your desire, or does your life constitute a sacrificing on the altar of your idols, and an honoring of your idols? It also shows why the Lord destroys our idols. The earth is His; not ours.