

ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL - Winter Semester 2006

Topic: The Life of Peter

Lesson #8 – “Working Things Out or Not”

Texts: Acts 15:1-35 & Galatians 2:1-15

Some background considerations: In last week’s lesson Peter was instrumental (or at least played a role) in “opening the door” for the Gentile people to experience Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the same way that the Jews had in Jerusalem at Pentecost. We saw how cautious and yet bold Peter was in affirming this new development. But the tension between the Gentile and Jewish Christians would remain among those early Christians and flare up at times. Today’s story is about the early church leaders grappling with this challenge and then later how this issue caused Paul to directly confront Peter.

1. It wasn’t long after the coming of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the Gospel to other parts of the Roman Empire that factions arose among those early Christians. In particular were those who were Jews and those who were Gentile – all Christians but not all convinced as to what was essential and what was optional re “true faith in Christ”.

- In 15:1-5 there are details about one group of Christians: “some men” Luke calls them: what do we learn about them?

2. From verses 6 to 30 we have the description of a “church council” in Jerusalem that includes the following groups or individuals: see verses 6, 7 and 12.

The issue under discussion is stated in verse 5:

3. The first to speak to the issue is Peter. What does he say? (vv. 8-11)

4. The second to speak on this issue are Paul and Barnabas. What do they say? (v. 12)

5. The 3rd to speak to this issue is James. What does he give as further evidence? (v. 13b – 18)

6. James then makes a decision: vv. 19- 21.

7. Next comes the implementation of that decision (vv 22-25):

Step 1: v. 22 - delegates

Step 2: v. 23 - letter

- details:

Step 3: v. 30 – result

8. This decision and action made by the “apostles and elders” re Gentile Christians seems to be resolved but of course it comes up again. In Galatians Paul talks about this.

- Galatians 2: 1-5. Paul describes the issue as he sees it. What does he emphasize?

- Galatians 2: 6-10. Here Paul seems to be saying two things:

a. He identifies a group (“they”/”those”/”those men”) – what does he say about them?

b. He basically affirms the decision of the “Jerusalem Council” which is:

9. Then in Galatians 2:11-16 Paul confronts Peter.

- What did Peter do that bothers Paul?

- Why does Paul say that he confronted Peter?

10. So what are we to make of this confrontation? What appears to be the issue for Paul? Why might he feel the need to initiate such a public confrontation?

11. There is so much we don’t know about this situation of course. We have Paul’s view of this only – not Peter’s. We don’t know if Peter responded at that time and if so whether he did so in private or in public.

12. Peter makes a comment re Paul and his ministry in one of his letters: II Peter 3:14-16. Is he perhaps thinking about the time Paul confronted him?

“Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, ¹⁶speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.”

13. Larry Helyer concluding comments about this story are these:

- both Peter and Paul write about the need to keep “striving to follow Jesus” –

Peter, for example writes in I Peter 2:2 – “grow into salvation” and II Peter 1:5 he says “make every effort”.

Paul in Phil 3:12 writes: “I have not yet reached the goal”.

So in this case, says Helyer: "Peter behaved inappropriately and Paul was harsh in correcting him. What saves the day is Peter's willingness to accept rebuke and move on without bitterness or recrimination."

ACTS 15: 1-35 "The Council at Jerusalem"

¹Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²This 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. ³The 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 brothers very glad. ⁴When 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.

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

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After 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. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon^[a] has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶" 'After this I will return & rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild & I will restore it, ¹⁷that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, & all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' ¹⁸that have been known for ages.

¹⁹"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead 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. ²¹For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

²²Then 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, two men who were leaders among the brothers. ²³With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵So we all agreed to choose some men

and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You 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.

³⁰The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ... ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Galatians 2:1-15

¹Fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. ²I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did this privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain. ³Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. ⁴This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. ⁵We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.

⁶As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message. ⁷On the contrary, they saw that I had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles,^[a] just as Peter had been to the Jews.^[b] ⁸For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. ⁹James, Peter^[c] and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. ¹⁰All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Paul Opposes Peter

¹¹When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹²Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? ¹⁵"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.