

A controversy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 January 2025

Preacher: Mark Rayfield

[0 : 00] Good morning all, good to see you. Please turn to Acts chapter 15 if you haven't done so already.! Well this morning I want to segregate the congregation. So we have this half and that half, okay?

And I want you to put your imagination cap on, okay everyone? Put your cap on, okay? So this half of the congregation, all right? Imagine you are a Jewish believer. Your roots are steeped in the Jewish culture and the scriptures. You can recite verses from the Torah.

You go to synagogue every Saturday with mum and dad. You present sacrificial offerings to the priest. You eat only certain foods, kosher foods, and you abstain from others. And you never go to a pagan place like a Roman temple. You mix only with Jewish people and you partake of their feasts. Then, one day, you hear the good news of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You believe in the promised Messiah from the scriptures. You repent and you now see that they all point to him and you get baptized, okay? Take your cap off. You guys, put your cap on.

Now you, this half of the congregation, you are Gentile believers. You come from a pagan culture of widespread idol worship. You have carved images in your home. There's sexual immorality at the temple in your culture. There's temple worship to the local goddess. You have no qualms about eating meat with blood in it. You don't obey any of the rituals these guys do, the Jewish rituals. On the Sabbath, you like to gamble. You don't know the Hebrew language and you don't mind a bacon butty.

[2 : 45] You, too, have come into the kingdom of God through hearing the good news preached of sins being forgiven through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. And you are filled with joy as you see that Christ has come by the Holy Spirit into your life and he's revealed himself to you, Gentiles. You, too, repent of your sin and get baptized. Now, you're both in the same church.

Well, this is the reality when we come to Acts chapter 15, which we've just read. A lot of Jews have come to faith and now the Gentiles are coming to faith.

What happens next? Well, my first point is controversy. Controversy. As we see in verses 1 to 5. So from last week, we left the narrative with the apostles arriving back in Antioch. Over here, remember?

They have been around here preaching the good news to the Gentiles and they came back and they told the church in Antioch of the amazing things that God had done through them, signs, wonders, and a lot of Gentiles repenting and coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 19] So we're in Antioch here. Controversy. We hit a crossroads here in the book of Acts.

Look at verse 1 and verse 5. 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.

And look down at verse 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.

This was said actually later on in Jerusalem. But it's the same message. In essence, what they're saying, these Judaizers, is that to become true Christians, you need to now become a Jew as well. Imagine you're a Gentile like these guys. How would you feel? You must become a Jew to be saved.

[5 : 31] Now let's go into circumcision. Because this was an important pact, a covenant between God and Abraham in the foundation of God's redemption plan.

Notice it came after God choosing Abraham and Abraham believing in God. Every Jewish boy must go through this ritual when they are eight days old.

No doubt Jesus went through it himself. It signified that the Jews were set apart as a group of God's people. God's chosen possession, loved by him.

Circumcision was an everlasting covenant between God and his people. Males had to do it.

Otherwise, you were not a part of God's people. It had been performed for centuries.

This mark was an outward sign. However, Paul, a Jew himself, says in the book of Romans.

[6 : 44] It's quite a small text. You probably won't be able to read it. But if you want to go there, it's Romans 2. Yeah, Romans 2.

Verse 25. Let's go there. Romans 2. From verse 25.

Circumcision has value if you observe the law. But if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.

No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly.

[8 : 07] 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.

Paul's argument is that you can be a circumcised Jew and not observe the law.

So really, you're not a Jew, a true Jew. Conversely, if you're a Gentile, not circumcised, and observe the Jewish law, then you are living as if you had been circumcised and living like a Jew.

So in essence, you really are one. The key here is that God looks at the heart, brothers, sisters, friends. A circumcision of the heart is what matters.

You see, the Jewish law was there to help the people, but it was not the real deal. You could never fully keep the law. There are always more sacrifices, more repenting.

[9 : 11] It could never bring you truly right with God. There was a better way coming. Illustration is, when I lived in Cuba, for those that know me, I lived in Cuba.

I studied there some time ago. I tried to fit in. I grew a mustache. I spoke the lingo, Spanish. I hung out with Cubans. And if you looked at me in the street, you'd probably think, Mark, you're a Cuban.

But if you looked at my passport, I was British. I could not become a Cuban, no matter how much I tried. Friends, do you see?

No matter how much a Gentile tried or could try to become a Jew, keeping all their duties, he or she would never sort out their heart problem with sin.

Only Jesus could. So we see in the text, verses 1 to 5, we see that this brought a sharp dispute between Paul and Barnabas and the Jewish circumcises.

[10 : 20] So Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to discuss this argument. So from controversy, we go to correction.

Correction. Looking at verses 6 to 11. So we're now in Jerusalem. We've gone down south to discuss this important juncture in the church.

Should the Gentiles now be circumcised and adhere to Jewish rules or not? And now we see Peter, who makes his last appearance in Acts.

Paul takes over now. He confirms what has already taken place in verse 7. Let's read verse 7. After much discussion, Peter got up, addressed them.

Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles should hear from my lips the message of the gospel and belief.

[11 : 29] Remember, in chapters 10 and 11, Peter has a strange dream of unclean food coming down on a sheet. And he's instructed to kill it and eat it.

And then he's told to go to the house of a godly, unclean centurion man. Remember, the centurion gets a vision as well.

And after telling this man about Christ, his household believed in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is given to an uncircumcised Gentile and his family.

Peter realizes that the promises of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have now broadened and incorporate all peoples.

And he, Peter, was the first one to bring this message to Cornelius. Sorry, the centurion. Was it Cornelius? Yeah.

[12:36] What a privilege Peter had. Peter says in chapter 10, verse 34. I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

Brothers, sisters, friends, there is now no barrier for the Gentiles. They can come to Christ. It makes no sense to get them to do the things they will not be able to do. Unnecessary rules. Unnecessary rules. A heavy yoke on their backs.

Peter says, our ancestors, the Jews, could not keep the law fully. And nor can the Gentiles. Let's look at that in verse 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, the Jews, have been able to bear?

Verse 11 is key. No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are. It is through grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved.

[14:14] There is no other way by which we must be saved. His name is Jesus, the only Savior. No other sinless life.

No other sacrifice. In all creation. No other way. Correction.

You don't have to do anything, Gentile. What a relief. No outward mark or religious practices will make you well with God.

It's Jesus' blood. His life-giving blood to you that will make you well. The risen Christ has dealt with your sin.

What you need to do is accept this wonderful gift. Nothing but the blood of Jesus through faith. That's the correction.

[15:18] Let's move on. Conclusion. Verses 12 to 21. Verses 12 to 21. We now see James, another Jew in Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus, apparently a devout Jew, and a believer.

Who also speaks up at the council and confirms what Peter has said. He quotes their own prophet Amos.

Let's read verses 16 and 17. After this, I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it.

That the rest of the Lord. That the rest of mankind may seek the Lord. Even all the Gentiles who bear my name. Even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord. Who does these things. Things known from long ago. Brothers, brothers, sisters, friends. Christ has come and rebuilt David's fallen tent.

[16:32] He has come to restore the Jewish nation. He has come. He has come to restore the Jewish nation. Dying for them. And not just for the Jews, but the Gentiles also.

Other nations. Ethnos. This was his long stated plan years ago. And we are now seeing it being fulfilled.

Then in those times and today. Now look around you. Indeed, it was always God's plan. So the conclusion is that the Gentiles.

Do not need to get circumcised. And obey Jewish practices. But they should honor the Jews. And their laws.

And not cause them to stumble. Or cause unnecessary offense. Let's read verse 20. Instead.

[17:33] We should write to them. That's the Gentiles. Telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols. From sexual immorality.

From the meat of strangled animals. And from blood. Martin Salter, the commentator. Says that the apostles and elders.

Are encouraging the new Gentile believers. To avoid the pagan temples. The places where festivals. Food. Sexual immorality.

And idolatry. Often came together. Temple feasts. It would have been a cause of deep offense. For Jewish believers. To see Gentile believers.

Continuing to frequent such places. The apostles. And elders. Are addressing both sides.

[18:31] Jewish believers. Gentile believers. The Jewish believers. Should not impose customs. That would cause the Gentiles to stumble. And the Gentile believers.

Should abstain from customs. That would cause the Jewish believers. To stumble. That's the conclusion. Romans 14.

Helps us. Perhaps you would like to turn there. Verse 9. Romans 14. Verse 9. Let us therefore make every effort.

Let us therefore make every effort. To do what leads to peace. And to mutual edification.

Do not destroy the work of God. For the sake of food. All food is clean. But it's wrong. For a person to eat anything. That causes someone else to stumble.

[19 : 40] It is better not to eat meat. Or drink wine. Or to do anything else. That will cause your brother. Or sister to fall. We should be gracious.

With one another. Friends. If I know. That Betty. thinks it's wrong. To watch TV on Sundays. And does not do it.

But I have no qualms. About watching TV on Sundays. And she is round our house. Perhaps this afternoon. I do not let her stumble.

I don't watch the TV. If Bob. Cannot listen. To a particular musical artist. In his conscience.

He thinks. Their music is dubious. Heretical. Unsound. Etc. But I have no problem. Listening to that particular artist. What should I do?

[20 : 39] I curtail my freedoms. And I don't play that music. To live at peace. With my brother. Bob. What other examples.

Can you think of? Stott. States. That. This consultation. In Jerusalem.

Secured a double victory. For the church. A victory. Of truth. In confirming. The gospel of grace.

And a victory. Of love. In preserving.

The fellowship. By sensitive. Concession. To conscientious. Jewish. Scruples. A double victory.

And I think.

John Newton. Has a lovely. Illustration. His instruction. For the church. Is to be an iron. Pillar. In essentials. And a reed.

[21 : 35] In non-essentials. An iron. Pillar. In essentials. In essentials. And a reed. In non-essentials. So in application.

If you are a non-Christian here this morning. You don't believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Well what wonderful news. This morning. Jesus. Has come to give his life for you.

All you need to do. Is to say sorry to him. For all your wrongdoing. All the ways you've sinned. And sin against him. And you wrong others.

And your sin can be wiped away. Like snow. Repent. And you shall be saved. You don't need to do anything. And no work for your salvation.

Christ has done it for you. Accept. This wonderful gift. Wouldn't it be the best day. Of your life.

Tonight. If you could put your head.

[22 : 39] On your pillow. And say. How marvelous. How wonderful. This my song shall ever be. How marvelous. How wonderful.

Is my saviour's. Love for me. Do that. And if you want to hear more. Come back. Come along to our 321 course.

This week. And believers. Christians. Which is most of us. We can learn from this episode. There is a place.

Isn't there. To discuss disputes within the church. Our church business meeting. Is one of them. We are a community. Of different opinions. Tastes. Needs.

And aspirations. We need to listen to each other. And reach agreements. We are a city church.

Which is composed of Christians.

[23 : 33] From a mixture. Of backgrounds. Nations. Ethnicities. Cultural customs. Look around. We can celebrate this diversity.

Can't we. This is a wonderful testament. To the salvation. That Jesus brings. And it. Has nothing to do. With culture. It's Christ.

That unites us. But it does present. Its challenges. We ought to look out. For the weaker. Brother or sister. And curtail. Our freedoms.

To maintain peace. And unity. In the church. It's not easy. Some teaching. Like today's topic. Is non-negotiable. Salvation.

Is only. Through Christ alone. We have. To take this strong stand. Like the apostles. On doctrinal. Fundamentals. And stick up for them. It is now.

[24 : 31] Not necessary. To take on. Jewish customs. Anymore. For example. We don't need. To take the Passover. We don't need. To keep Jewish festivals. It won't make us. Better with God.

I'll end. By quoting. Salter. Sensitivity. Towards one another. While seeking. To grow. In understanding. Is crucial. To maintaining.

Both the unity. And the purity. Of the church. This. Is a difficult call. And requires. Much grace. And
patience. As we seek.
To honour God. And one another. Amen. Well let's sing.