

Valley Bible Church
Sermon Notes for August 9, 2015

The Instruction by James
Acts 15:12-21

Acts 15 records the debate regarding the role of the Old Testament Law for the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas opposed the men of Judea who came to Antioch and taught that circumcision and the Law of Moses were obligations for the Gentile believers. This led to the meeting at the church in Jerusalem (15:1-5). Peter agreed with Paul by exhorting the church not to burden the Gentiles (15:6-11).

1. The support from Barnabas and Paul (15:12)

Barnabas is listed first because of his prominence in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27).

2. The support for Peter (15:13-14)

James was the brother of Jesus (Galatians 1:19) and the spokesman on behalf of the elders.

James used Peter's Jewish name (Simeon). He also used a messianic term when noting that God visited the Gentiles. In addition, he used the term "people" (LAOS) to refer to the Gentiles, which was a common Old Testament term for Israel. These words showed that the Gentile inclusion was built upon a Jewish foundation.

3. The support from the Scriptures (15:15-18)

The phrase "the prophets agree" shows that Gentile acceptance by God was found in other Old Testament texts (Zechariah 2:11; 8:22; Isaiah 2:2; 45:20-23; Hosea 3:4-5; Jeremiah 12:15-16).

James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to make the point that since the Gentiles can be saved without becoming proselytes to Judaism in the future kingdom, then what was occurring was consistent with Old Testament teaching.

4. The support for the Jews (15:19-21)

James' conclusion began with a direct reaffirmation of Peter's words from 15:10, that to require the Gentiles to observe the Law of Moses would trouble them in their turning to God.

James suggested that they write a letter to the church in Antioch to ask them to abstain from four practices: (1) things contaminated by idols; (2) fornication; (3) what is strangled; and (4) blood. Once the conclusion that Gentiles were not under the Law was established, there remained the practical challenge of how the freedom from the Law would affect the ministry to the Jews.

The reason why James listed these four practices was because the Law was being taught in synagogues in every city (15:21). The Jews viewed these four practices as being the most particularly offensive Gentile practices.

The focus of James' reasoning was the ministry to the unbelieving Jews. The primary ministry to unbelievers is the gospel; the primary ministry to believers is teaching. The first concern for the Jerusalem church was their mission.

Paul taught to the need for Gentiles to be sensitive to the perception of things contaminated by idols in 1 Corinthians 11:23-33.

Paul taught against the widespread practice of immorality in 1 Corinthians 6:12-18 (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:1).

Paul confirmed the teaching of Christ in Mark 7:19, declaring all foods clean (Romans 14:14; Colossians 2:16; 1 Timothy 4:1-4). Furthermore, he altered his practice for the sake of reaching the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-20).

May we be willing to adjust our practices for the sake of the gospel so those we seek to serve will be in the best position to listen.