

Central Study Hour – Sabbath School Lesson Notes

“Book of Acts”: Lesson 8, “The Jerusalem Council”

SABBATH AFTERNOON

Intro: We know that the Jerusalem council removed circumcision as a requirement. Many have claimed that it also removed Sabbath-keeping and the distinction between clean and unclean meats. *How would you answer such claims?*

Background: Brief review of last week’s lesson on Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey.

Missionary Report: Read the first 2 sentences of the opening narrative.

Read Acts 14:26a, 27. *What was the object of the report?* All the Gentiles that came to Christ. Gentiles being saved caused worries among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem because Gentiles were steeped in idolatry and immorality. *Wouldn’t they corrupt the new Christian church?*

Read from the second paragraph of the narrative (“Since the episode....fellowship with them.”). *Why would they require circumcision?* That’s what we shall see.

SUNDAY: “The Point at Issue”

Read Acts 15:1-2. *How was the church in Antioch of Syria affected by these visitors from Judaea?* Major dissension; much disputing. *What was decided should be done to settle the dispute?* Send a delegation to Jerusalem to present the matter to the Apostles and elders.

Read Acts 15:4-6. *Besides circumcision, what did some want to require of the Gentile converts to Christ?* To keep the law of Moses.

Many Pharisees had accepted Christ. “The presence of Pharisees in the church should not surprise us, as Paul himself had been a Pharisee prior to his conversion (Phil. 3:5).”

What did the Pharisee Christians have in mind when they wanted the Gentiles to keep the law of Moses? Did they mean the 10 commandments or did they mean everything; sacrifices, ceremonies, customs, purification laws, circumcision, as well as the 10 commandments?

Read Acts of the Apostles, p. 189 (“The Jews had always prided....no longer binding”).

It was right to expect them to keep the 10 Commandments, but that wasn’t where they put the emphasis.

Read the 4th paragraph of the narrative (“Their point was....became Jewish proselytes.”).

Read the box at the bottom of the page. *Would you be able to prove circumcision was required from Scripture?* Apparently so.

MONDAY: “Circumcision”

Read Genesis 17:9-14. *What was the sign of the covenant that proved you had joined God’s people?* Circumcision. *What would happen to any male who was not circumcised?* They were cut off from God’s people. They were not in the covenant. “It had been commanded by God Himself as a sign of His covenant with Abraham’s descendants as His chosen people.”

At the time of the Exodus, the first Passover literally was salvation from the 10th plague.

Read Exodus 12:43-45. *What was required for any man to partake of the Passover meal?* They

must be circumcised.

Reads Ex. 12:48-49. *In addition to Israelite males, who else was supposed to be circumcised in order to partake of the Passover feast and be delivered from the 10th plague? Any foreigner or hired servant who chose to join Israel and keep the Passover.*

Share from the Teacher's Comments, p. 108, "The Debate" and "Consider This."

What were the Pharisee Christians missing or not seeing? They were wrong, but why?

It is true that with God, with truth, with the Bible; there are some things that never change. God's principles of moral truth never change. However, other things in the Bible have changed even though they were important for a time.

What can change and what can never change? What other things have changed in the Bible?

- 1.) Direct contact between God and man in Eden ended due to sin.
- 2.) Offering sacrifices on personally built altars (as done by Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham and Isaac) was replaced by only offering sacrifices on the altar at the temple.
- 3.) Ceasation of all temple sacrifices because the true lamb of God had been sacrificed.

Therefore, the "dropping of circumcision as a covenantal requirement for gentiles was not out of character in the light of salvation history" (Teacher's Comments, p. 107).

To better understand why circumcision could be dropped, we must understand that it was symbolic of cutting away sin from the life. *What replaced circumcision as the means of joining God's people? Baptism. What does baptism symbolize? Cutting away sin from the life by death to self and sin and being raised up to a new life in Christ. Baptism is a more complete symbol of a changed life than is circumcision, but it couldn't have been grasped until after the death and resurrection of Jesus.*

What principles from Acts 15 help us understand what is permanent versus what is temporary in Scripture? The 10 commandments are permanent. Moral principles can't change. Killing, stealing, idolatry, and lying will never suddenly be okay to do. On the other hand, ceremonies have had changes. Ceremonies, symbolic services, and sacrifices are not permanent. After Jesus comes again, moral principles will carry on even in heaven. Killing and stealing would still be seen as wrong, but symbolism, such as baptism will no longer be needed. Meanwhile, before the second coming, baptism is vitally important as it is how we show our full surrender to Jesus. It's no more optional than circumcision was in Old Testament times.

What was Paul's understanding of circumcision?

Read Romans 3:29-31. (Comment if needed.)

Read 1 Corinthians 7:18-19. *What does Paul say about both circumcision and uncircumcision?*

Both are nothing – not important. *What does Paul say is important? Keeping the commandments of God; living by God's moral principles of truth.*

Read Galatians 5:6. Paul understood that circumcision served a covenant purpose for the Jews in OT times, but that it never was a means of salvation. People are saved with or without circumcision in NT times to our time.

Read from the 4th paragraph (“By saying that no....not guarantee salvation”).

Moses understood this, and urged the Israelites to circumcise their hearts (**Deut. 10:16** and **30:6**). The real issue in salvation is spiritual and of the heart.

Read Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26. *How does Jeremiah show that circumcision cannot save rebellious disobedient people?* He says that God will punish the circumcised with the uncircumcised because they are not circumcised in heart.

One of Paul’s best points against requiring circumcision is found in **Romans 4:9-13** where he points out that Abraham was justified by faith (**Gen. 15**) before he was given the sign of circumcision in **Genesis 17**.

In OT times, circumcision made one a part of the covenant that God made with Israel, but it did not automatically save them. Yet, to refuse circumcision in OT times cut one off of Israel. Since NT times, baptism makes one a part of the covenant people, that is, a church member. Baptism doesn’t automatically save us, yet to refuse to be baptized is to remain lost. Jesus said, “**Except a man be born of the water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.**” **John 3:5**.

Ask the question in the box at the bottom of the page. That would be a delusion. Go to Friday “Discussion Questions” #1. There are at least 3 answers to this question.

- 1.) Fellowship/belonging with like believers brings one encouragement to continue in the truth.
- 2.) An accountability factor: We must follow the light that we have to be faithful (James 4:17).
- 3.) When we join the church there is a special connection with Christ as the head of the church. Each of us is a part of the body of Christ. **1 Cor. 12:13** makes clear that we are baptized into the body of Christ. Therefore, to refuse to be baptized is to refuse to be a part of the body of Christ and to refuse to have Christ as your head (see **John 3:5** again). Heaven recognizes the *membership* of true believers (**Matt. 18:17-18**).

TUESDAY: “The Debate”

At the Jerusalem Council, we are given powerful point in favor of not requiring circumcision. Share the highlights from Acts 15:7-11. The point is that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on uncircumcised Gentiles (Cornelius and his household) when they accepted Jesus and obviously experienced salvation. Peter said that that God “**put no difference between us and them purifying their hearts by faith**” (**vs. 9**). “Even if they lacked the purifying benefits of Old Covenant rules and regulations, the believing Gentiles could no longer be considered unclean, because God Himself had cleansed their hearts.”

Read Romans 2:25, 28-29. *What does Paul say makes one a true Jew?* Circumcision of the heart rather than of the flesh. That means one who lets God purify the heart is a spiritual Jew.

For what did Peter’s speech open the way? See **Acts 15:12.** Barnabas and Paul were able to share about all the Gentiles on Cyprus and the cities of Galatia that had become Christians.

Read Acts 15:13, 19. *What solution to the Gentile problem did James propose?* Since God had saved Gentiles while yet uncircumcised, they should not be troubled with circumcision as a requirement.

WEDNESDAY: "The Apostolic Decree"

Read Acts 15:28-29. *What four prohibitions did the council decide to require of the Gentile converts and why?* **1.)** Abstaining from food that had been offered to idols was important to continue their break away from any association with idolatry from their past. This was upholding specifically the 2nd commandment. **4.)** To abstain from all forms of sexual immorality was a clarification of the 7th commandment, and a reminder that all Christians were to live moral lives making a clean break from the hedonistic ways of paganism. **2.)** Abstaining from consumption of blood was a requirement of the Levitical code for health and spirituality. **3.)** Not eating meat from animals which had been strangled was also in the Levitical code. This would be very unhealthy because a strangled animal would have died in terror and the blood would have received much secreted adrenalin.

Special Response to the Introductory Question. There are people that claim that because the Sabbath and the unclean versus clean meat isn't mentioned in Acts 15 that these were done away. However, what we see in these four requirements are situations in which the Jewish Christian leaders felt that the new Gentile Christians needed to especially be circumspect. Two came from the 10 Commandments and two came from the Levitical health code. This shows that the 10 Commandments and the health code were not done away. Why not? Because the health code isn't symbolic or ceremonial. What was bad for a person's health 2 or 3,000 years ago is still bad today. And the 10 Commandments are not ceremonial or symbolic, but rather are moral principles for all time. Commandments such as not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, to honor parents, to put God first, and to keep the Sabbath were not mentioned because there was no fear about the Gentiles understanding them. The same is true about the distinction between clean and unclean meats. Nowhere in the NT is there ever controversy about these other principles. In fact, in **1 Cor. 7:19** where Paul said circumcision was nothing, he said what mattered was keeping the commandments of God.

Another good point about the Sabbath and the distinction between clean and unclean animals is that both of these commands of God came a long time before Moses. The Sabbath was established at Creation (**Gen. 2:1-3**) and points to God as the Almighty Creator. There will never be a time to stop seeing God as the Almighty Creator. It would never make sense to do away with the Sabbath. The first distinction between clean and unclean in the Bible is in the story of the flood (Gen. 7:2) where Noah was bring clean animals into the ark by sevens and the unclean by twos.

THURSDAY: "The Letter From Jerusalem"

Share highlights from **Acts 15:22-29.** *What additional measures were taken by the Jerusalem Council to ensure everyone would learn of their decision?* They wrote it in a letter to be taken and shared with the Gentile believers. It detailed what was decided and they sent it with official delegates; Silas and Judas Barsabas, along with Paul and Barnabas.

Conclusion:

Read Acts 15:30-33. *How did the church react to the letter?* They rejoiced. Note that no one

raised any objection to the requirements at all. This shows they respected the 10 Commandments and the Levitical health code. This is a very nice ending to a conflict. When we really look to the Lord and want His ways conflicts among the brethren can have happy endings. (Of course this doesn't mean everybody cooperated, but the leadership and the general body of the church were united.)