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A0908 – February 22, 2009 – Acts 15:1-5 – The Dispensational Transition

I want to take a few minutes for some questions that fell out of Acts 14. A couple of people posited the same kinds of questions, they're very good questions, so let me state the questions and deal with them. The questions revolve around Luke's statement in Acts 14:23, "**Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**" Doesn't that refer to our personal strife, our personal trials? No, not directly, but in a secondary sense yes, you're right, but let me expound on what Paul was getting at. If a person must go through personal tribulation to enter the kingdom of God then that contradicts John 3, which says a person has to be born again to enter the kingdom of God and that would contradict the gospel. Because the gospel is by faith alone in Christ alone, not faith in Christ plus tribulation. That's not the gospel so Paul can't possibly be talking about that. What is he saying then? Remember, Luke is quoting Paul directly; this was sort of Paul's campaign slogan. Every time he would conclude his training sessions he would make this remark, "**Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.**" What this is is Paul's view of history. He's stating where their location is in the plan of God that he gleaned from the OT. Remember, we're in a transitional period and Paul doesn't have the NT books yet. The corpus of revelation he's working with is the OT plus the events surrounding Jesus that have been passed on to him orally. So he's building his understanding of the sequence of history out of that. And so what you have to do is forget this thing you know about called the church. That's not a part of Paul's bible. If it helps you, take the chronology in your head of history that you have from the Old and New Testament and wipe out the New Testament. Just forget it. What picture would you have of history with only the OT and some oral tradition about Jesus the Messiah? Well the first thing you would have is the OT nation Israel waiting on her Messiah. The

Messiah came, His name was Jesus, the nation rejects Jesus as the Messiah and the nation goes into the Tribulation and then the nation accepts Jesus as the Messiah and the kingdom of God comes on earth. Now where was the Church in any of that? It wasn't there. Why wasn't it there? Because it wasn't revealed yet. So Paul's view of history doesn't include the church truths you and I know. So, in this statement he's simply expressing his view of history. But he's also doing a second thing and that is he's placing himself and his converts in that history, he's getting stoned, he's getting persecuted and all this he's interpreting as part of the tribulations that lead to the kingdom of God. What else do you expect the guy to do? He didn't know any better. So he's interpreting his trials in the context of the information he had, which was that the tribulation was the next event. And he thought he was experiencing the beginnings of what you and I consider the future tribulation. Only later does God the Holy Spirit in Ephesians come in and say, "Paul, way back there in Acts 2 I was actually starting a new entity called the church, the body of Christ. I didn't tell you that back there, but I tell you that now." And only then does he get all this revelation about this thing called the Church. That's why Paul calls the Church a "mystery" in Ephesians and there's a whole corpus of mystery truths, they all somehow relate to the Church, this strange new thing in the plan of God that started on Pentecost. But Paul didn't know that yet, he thought he was in the Tribulation and then they would enter the kingdom of God. So he's stating his view of history. And just remember, one of the most important things about this verse is that Paul did not think they were already in the kingdom. If the world has to go through the tribulational period first then they could not possibly have been in the kingdom of God yet. And of course, you and I are not in the kingdom of God yet either, we're in the Church. The NT keeps separate the kingdom and the Church, two different dispensations of history and not the same thing at all. Yes, if you are a believer today you will enter the kingdom. Yes, you already have your citizenship there, but you are not there yet, it can't come until Jesus Christ returns and ushers it in. So don't forget as we study, as you read the Book of Acts that this is a transition period and transitions by definition are not normal.

All right, today in Acts 15 we want to alleviate some more of these difficulties that come with the transitional period. In Acts 15, we face the first ecumenical council of the Church. It's called ecumenical in the right sense of the word ecumenical, not in the wrong sense. The modern sense is the wrong

sense. If you hear someone is having an ecumenical Bible study you better run the other way because what ecumenical means today is we're going to hold hands with every heretic on the block and actually you might want to attend just to find out how little people know about the Bible and just to see first hand all the hoopla that passes under the name Christian. What you will not find is a tremendous amount of content. Content is out and emotion is in. But Acts 15 is ecumenical in the right sense because this represented an attempt by the entire Church to clarify content.

Acts 15 is very obviously an important chapter. It's important for many reasons. Church councils have been held from time to time in church history, at least in the early centuries, before the church departed so far from its roots and started allegorizing everything. In the early days of the Church it was the Church councils where the great doctrinal issues were discussed and articulated. When there was a difference of opinion among believers it wasn't settled by two people saying, "Well this is my interpretation and that is your interpretation and all interpretations are valid and we can all believe whatever we want to believe." They did not do that; they settled differences by going into deep theological discussion of the text of Scripture. Take, for example, the great theological dissension over the nature of Jesus Christ. Was Jesus Christ merely a man or was he a man and a god but not the one true God, or was He a man and the one true God. Three opinions. This was the nature of the discussion at the Council of Nicea in AD325. It's heady stuff, not for the faint of heart. The debate literally came down to one letter in the Greek language. The debate for these Greek scholars was whether Jesus Christ was *homo-ousias*, of the same nature of God. Jesus was God, He shared the same essence. Or was Jesus Christ *homoi-ousias*, of like nature with God, he was like God, and thankfully, the *homo-ousiast's* won the day at the council, and it won the day because men of God who had great divergence on the question got the Bible and went to work exegeting the Bible. So these were important councils where men articulated what the Bible taught and what was to be held by all those who claimed orthodoxy. And the first council in the church was the Council of Jerusalem, AD49, then you have the Council of Nicea, AD325, the nature of Christ, the Council of Constantinople, AD381, where they dealt with the Holy Spirit and the Council of Chalcedon, AD451, where they worked out the Trinity. These Councils are important for several reasons. For one they show the method the early Christians used to solve their differences. It was a method of solving differences decently and in order,

no riot, no breaking of fellowship, but a reference back to the ultimate standard of truth and on the basis of that ultimate standard of truth the issue would be decided. So that's the first thing we can learn from Acts 15 - is how to solve doctrinal differences and the answer we'll get is watching how they did it in the early days. The second thing they show is how much emphasis they placed on content. They were concerned that there be a definite creed that said, this is the truth, we've thought about the text, we've considered the text, we've discussed the text and this is true and that is false and this is why. They did not just walk away and say, "Well, that's your interpretation," which is a naïve cop-out. They worked it out and it did not take five minutes, it often took five months of day in day out study and discussion of deep theological issues.

So let's look at Acts 15:1, **Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."** Now these men were the self-appointed experts and if you glance down at verse 24, when they finally get things worked out down in Jerusalem, the apostles write a letter back and say, "we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words," they were the people of verse 1. And the people of v 1, whom the apostles did not instruct to go up there, were teaching you had to be physically circumcised to be saved. So this group, instead of going through the appropriate channels of approaching the apostles and elders, did what most people do. They disagree with something that is taught, they get mad and they start a gossip campaign and they organize a little group and go up themselves and start agitating things. They are lawless types who do not believe in doing things decently and in order, and that's the people in v 1.

Now the issue being raised in v 1 is that of circumcision and salvation. The self-appointed claim you must be circumcised in order to be saved. If you're not you're plain and simple going to hell. Now why is this issue raised at this time? The reason this issue is raised is because of what Paul and Barnabas have done in chapters 13 and 14, the first missionary expedition. What's happened on that expedition? Two things have happened. The first thing that happened is suddenly a mass of Gentiles have responded to the word of God such that now the majority has shifted from Jewish believers to Gentile believers. The second and related item is that the Gentiles have been allowed

to enter the ranks of the Church without going through Judaism first. In other words they let them in without circumcising them first. And that really bugged a lot of the orthodox Jewish people because in the OT to join yourself to the assembly as a proselyte to Judaism you had to be circumcised. Granted you could remain on the fringe as a God-fearer without being circumcised but Paul was putting Jew and Gentile on an equal plain, the circumcised and the uncircumcised and the orthodox Jews didn't like that.

Now, to understand what's going on here we have to talk about what many consider to be a cuss word in theological circles, but we're going to say it nonetheless; dispensationalism. That is a word we have to explain because that's the issue here. These people in Acts 15 are having a hard time understanding where they are in God's plan for history. We're in a transitional phase of history and so it's understandable why there would be confusion. On one hand you have these men who say to be a Christian you have to come through Judaism and on the other hand Paul and Barnabas say you do not. And this confusion is worked out in this first church council as they recognize some parts of the new dispensation.

So what is a dispensation? Just this week I was called by a student at Wheaton College asking to interview a dispensationalist. And he asked point blank, "Are you a dispensationalist?" And, of course, I know this is a dirty word I was being labeled with, but I'm not ashamed of it because most people don't understand it anyway and our conversation proved that. As I talked and he listened I could tell he didn't know much of what the Bible taught and I'm not surprised because dispensationalists tend to be more textual while non-dispensationalists have simply memorized a system of theology. So what is a dispensation? Dr Charles Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary has written the definitive book on *Dispensationalism* in the 60's and it's been updated in the 90's to include the modern question of Progressive Dispensationalism, so if you really want to know what these things are then I suggest his book. And in his book he defines a dispensation as "a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose." If that word economy bothers you it just means "an administration." We lived under the Bush administration now we live under the Obama administration, and all it's saying is that there are different administrations in history and you can distinguish these, it's not that hard. Under both administrations there are some things that remain the same and there are things that differ. But we

can certainly distinguish two administrations in our government and in the same way God administers history in different ways at different times. Some things remain the same, some things differ.

Now when we say some things differ we do not mean there are different ways of salvation. Yes, different dispensations, not different ways of salvation. I have read a lot of dispensational materials and I have never read anywhere a dispensationalist saying there is more than one way of salvation. But this has been the incessant charge by non-dispensationalists and I can only conclude it's because they're not reading what we're saying and therefore they don't understand what we're saying and they have this knee-jerk reaction that we teach more than one way of salvation. And that is absolutely absurd. So what does a dispensationalist say about the way of salvation?

Well, the first thing he says is that the **basis** of salvation in every age has remained the same. Were Adam and Eve saved because they kept the Law of Moses? Of course not, they didn't even have the Law of Moses so they certainly couldn't be saved on that basis. How then were Adam and Eve saved? They were saved because they looked forward to God's solution on the cross. God planned to send His own Son to the cross and OT saints were saved on the basis of looking forward to the cross of Christ. How is the NT person saved? He looks back to the cross of Christ. Now that God's plan on the cross has occurred we simply look back. The OT saint looked forward, the NT saint looked back. But the basis is the same in both Old and New Testaments, it's the cross of Christ.

The second thing the dispensationalist says is that the **human requirement** is faith. God saves by grace through faith. It's not by any human works, any human merit, it's by grace through faith at which moment God's provision is applied to the believers account.

The third thing the dispensationalist says about salvation is that the **object** of our faith is God. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Do you believe what God has said about salvation, that the basis of salvation is what Christ did on the cross, do you believe that? If you do then the object of your faith is God. You're believing what God has said. Has anything changed with respect to the object throughout the Old and New

Testaments? No, not a thing has changed. How dare someone say we teach different ways of salvation.

The fourth thing the dispensationalist says about salvation is that the **content** of revelation has changed. And everybody finally has to agree that this has changed. In the OT there was less; in the NT there was more. Now who's going to debate that subject? Did Joshua have as much revelation about Christ as you and I do? Obviously he did not. Did Moses know as much about the second coming of Christ as you and I do. Of course not. It's simply impossible because these things hadn't been revealed to Moses in the detail you and I have. And so in the OT what revelation did the people have about salvation? Well they had the picture of blood sacrifice, they had that as early as the garden, they got it again in the Exodus, they eventually had the picture of Christ in the sacrificial system, the typology of the furniture in the Tabernacle and so forth and with that revelation they looked forward and trusted God that He was going to solve the problem. And then He did solve it in His Son on the cross. So these four elements you always want to keep in mind with respect to salvation: the basis of salvation is the cross, some people call that grace, obviously God didn't have to provide the cross, so therefore it is gracious. The human requirement is faith in that gracious provision, the object of the faith is God and the content, yes, it has changed, that just has to do with how much people knew as the Bible was still being given. Yet as obvious as that may seem, the idea that the content has changed is a point of difference with Covenant Theology, they're the polar opposites of Dispensational Theology. They say the content has never changed and that's just ridiculous, it hardly merits interaction. Anyone in third grade Bible class can tell you the Bible didn't drop down out of heaven complete, it came piecemeal over time, God spoke and the prophets recorded, and then God went silent, then He opened His mouth some more and they wrote and then He went silent. Now we have the completed canon of Scripture but Adam didn't have that. It's silly to think He knew the name Jesus Christ and about the Roman cross and what Jesus was doing on the cross and so forth.

Another point of difference with Covenant Theology has to do with the purpose of God in history? What's the ultimate purpose of God? They say the ultimate purpose is redemption, to save men. That's their theory, but it's only a theory. What they say is that God made a covenant with Adam called the Covenant of Grace and in the Covenant of Grace God promised to save all the

elect and that to save them He would send His Son to die for the elect and only the elect on the cross. And that's what history is all about. That's the chief purpose of God. And so they are called Covenant Theologians. The very name, when you hear it, you think of the Noahic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant. Don't think of that, that's not what they're talking about, they're talking about a theological covenant someone imagined up in a back room somewhere, in their view the Noahic and Abrahamic are just outworkings of this greater covenant they see that brings about a salvific unity to history and so they see everything through that lens.

Dispensationalism says there is a far greater theme to history, God's ultimate purpose includes redemption but doesn't center on redemption. Redemption is just one part of a much greater purpose of God, and that is doxology. The purpose of history is the glory of God. Now notice one thing as we compare and contrast. Covenant Theology, for all its talk about the sovereignty of God, where do they place the emphasis in God's purpose? Human redemption, its man centered. Yet where does the dispensationalist put the emphasis? The very opposite place, on God, the glory of God. We believe that redemption plays a role in bringing praise and glory to Him, but that's incomplete. Why is that incomplete? Because whether a person ends up in heaven or in hell, he will bow the knee to worship the Lord Jesus Christ for all eternity. Even a person in hell must worship Jesus Christ, they may not like it but they will have to frankly admit that He is worthy of their worship, and they will worship Him.

Now, we're already beginning to answer a fundamental question. Just what is it that makes a person a dispensationalist? Is it because I wear a big D on my socks? Is it because I see a difference between law and grace? No, it may surprise you but that does not make you a dispensationalist. And the first distinguishing mark we've already said is that he says God's purpose in history is not just to save men, it is for His own glory, **and history has a doxological purpose**. The second point that simply must be held to demarcate one as a dispensationalist is that he must **interpret all of Scripture literally, including prophecy**. You say, "Oh, but there's figures of speech, there's metaphor, there's symbols, Jesus said 'I am the door,' now do you mean to tell me Jesus was a piece of cedar with two hinges and a doorknob?" Of course that is not the literal interpretation that is a caricature of literal interpretation. What we mean and has always been meant by literal

interpretation until the last few generations is simply that when I come to a piece of literature I read it as the author intended it to be read. I'm not adding my thoughts in there. What did Jesus mean, "I am the door?" He meant "I am the way." When figurative language is used there is still always a literal truth or else it's meaningless. Just as when I read a letter someone wrote me I read it as if they intended to communicate something. They may use figures of speech but if I'm familiar with the figures I know the literal truths. And so I do grow tired of the dimwits who sit around and play the, "Well, that's your interpretation of Paul," game. Now why is it that we can sit together all day long and read the newspaper and discuss the sports section and then all of a sudden when the topic shifts to the Bible, "Well, that's your interpretation?" Why the shift? All of a sudden we have a change of rules? We're still reading the English language. The rules of grammar are the same. But this is the game that is being played. And we are looked upon as the oddballs, they're the oddballs, they're spaced out somewhere on another planet. If you tell them they're crazy I guarantee you they'll get the point. No problems there. So all we mean by literal is we're just taking the author at face value. And if you follow literal interpretation of the whole Bible then you come to what Dr Ryrie called the touchstone of Dispensationalism, the third mark, and that is that Israel and the Church are not the same things. They are two distinct entities and God has two distinct programs for those entities. It's no different than the idea that God has a program for the angels and God has a program for man. Obviously, we're not angels, and obviously in the same way the Church is not Israel. Covenant Theology likes to use the terminology, the Church in the OT or spiritual Israel in the NT. But there's not a shred of evidence for either of those ideas. That's their theology and it's a strong element in their theology. But it's a dream theology; it didn't come from the Bible.

If you go to the OT and you interpret Israel there's only one conclusion you can come to and it's a person who has the genes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those are the Jewish people. It doesn't mean Gentile people, it means Jewish people. That's the broad meaning. The narrow meaning in the OT is that there are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who were born again. In other words, there was a subset of Jews who believed and the term Israel can be used of either of those two entities. It can mean the physical Jews or the subset of born again physical Jews. But never in the OT is it used of

Egyptians, it's never used of the Babylonians, it's never used that way. It's only used of the Jewish people.

So what right do you have to come to the NT and rip off the word Israel and suddenly it becomes this new word that refers to all Christians? There are lots of believers in the OT that were not in the nation Israel; there was Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute, there was possibly Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. And when they believed they didn't become Israelites. Israel was not used as a synonym for believers. It was used as a label for physical Jews and believing physical Jews period, no other meaning.

Aha, they will say, but what about Gal 6:16, Gal 6:16 refers to all believers as the "Israel of God." So let's go over to Gal 6:16. This by the way, when I still lived in Lubbock I would call churches and do a survey on this question, "Is the Church the new Israel?" And they would always take me to this verse, every church I called, Church of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, it didn't matter, Gal 6:16 they said. Any explanation? No, no explanation, just the verse. So let's look at the verse that apparently overturns every other usage in the whole Bible. "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God." Now there are some complexities we have to walk through here. Notice the very difficult word *a-n-d*, near the end of the verse, that is a conjunction in the English language, and a conjunction divided the sentence into two parts. And there is the part that precedes the conjunction and there is the part that follows the conjunction. And if we read it now, "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them," group one, "and upon the Israel of God," group two. Two groups: the "them" and "the Israel of God." Okay, who's the "them?" Gentile believers in Galatia; who's "the Israel of God?" The subset of born again Jews that are incorporated into the Church, so Galatians 6:16 does not violate the principle of literal interpretation, Israel still means Israel here. So the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism, the without which not, simply means you hold to three things: a doxological purpose of history, a literal interpretation of the whole Bible and a programmatic distinction between Israel and the Church. If you believe that you are a dispensationalist.

So let's come back to Acts 15 and see why dispensationalism is so important to understand this chapter. In Acts 15 you've got the Church not yet realizing what's happened. We've said time and time again that Acts is a transitional

book. Forget what you know today. Sure, 2,000 years later you're Monday morning quarterbacking, you can see all the additional details, but forget that for a minute and try to put yourself in their shoes. You plop off the time machine and you're dropped in the middle of these events. What would not be obvious to you then that is obvious to you now? Well, for one the Church. You would have no clue that the Church had begun. All you knew about that Greek word was it's an assembly of people, no special connotations. All you know is the OT, build your timeline for history strictly from the OT. What would it look like? Well, you have OT Israel expecting their Messiah, the Messiah comes, His name is Jesus, He's rejected and killed, He comes back to life, and then you have the period of Messianic Woes, what we call the Tribulation and then the Kingdom Comes. There's nothing in there about the Church. Paul says later that was a mystery, in other words it wasn't revealed, they knew nothing about it, God kept it a secret. So if you were there you would have a very hard time realizing the Church. The Church had begun, it began on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2, but the realization of that had not occurred yet because God hadn't revealed what He was up to. So one of the things that *fades out* through the Book of Acts is the kingdom offer to the nation Israel, and the thing that *fades in* through the Book of Acts is the Church. And by that I don't mean to say that suddenly the Church begins as it fades in, I mean the realization fades in gradually in the Book of Acts as more revelation is coming such that when you get to the epistles it's all Church.

Now, you're a Jew, you're in Acts 15, Paul has been running around Asia Minor converting all these Gentiles and laying upon them none of the Law of Moses, no circumcision, nothing. They're just becoming Christians without having to go through Judaism. But isn't Christianity a Jewish movement? Isn't Christianity a sect within Judaism? That was the thinking. See, they're confused over a question. The question they're struggling with is now that Messiah has come, "Are we here in the Mosaic dispensation or are we here in a new dispensation? Because if we're back here, then these Judaizers are right, you come to Christianity through Judaism. But if we're in a new administration then there are new rules that come with the new administration. So this is why the issue in Acts 15 is the issue of dispensations. You can't even enter into the discussion till you understand what dispensation we're in. And so they're going to gather to discuss what has been revealed and you'll notice when we get into it next week they're

going to base their decision on past revelation. They're going to discuss what has been revealed and by that they're going to discern the will of God. They are not going to do what some people think Paul should have done. Paul was a prophet therefore Paul could just get a word from God and declare this is the will of God. They didn't do that, they worked with past revelation, past content and by that discerned a part of what was going on with the dispensations.

Now let's look at Acts 15 and look at the two arguments that are being used against Paul. One in verse 1 and one in verse 5. They are two different arguments so be careful. There are two questions here, not one, Acts 15:1 and Acts 15:5. In Acts 15:1 the people come down from Judea and what do they do? They claim unless you are circumcised you can't be what? Sanctified or saved? You can't be saved. So the position of the enemies in verse 1 is that you are saved by circumcision. Now when they get down to Jerusalem and have an argument again, in verse 5, there's a little different argument used. Here it's used by some of the Pharisees who had believed and they claim that "it was needful to circumcise believers, and to command them to keep the Law of Moses." Now what is that? Is that salvation by the Law or sanctification by the Law? That is sanctification by the Law of Moses. So there are two issues being fought over here.

One of those issues is invalid. Look carefully at the argument in verse 1 and look carefully at the argument in verse 5. One of those two arguments is wrong even on the basis of the OT. The other argument is a little more difficult to meet. The argument that is wrong is the argument in verse 1; even on an OT basis this is wrong. Take for example Abraham. From the standpoint of Abraham was it possible to be saved by circumcision? Every Jew would agree that Abraham was saved in Gen 12 years before circumcision was given as a rite in Gen 17. So the people of verse 1 were out to lunch even from the standpoint of Abraham.

But the argument in verse 5 is not out to lunch, and there's no way you can meet this argument on the basis of the Law, and that's what the council was all about. When they finally got down to Jerusalem, this surfaces as the issue. Is the Law of Moses written in the handbook of the OT God's will for the Christian? Or do Christians have another handbook to tell them how to live after salvation? Remember, the issue now is sanctification and

sanctification requires law and grace. Law is the standard, grace is the means to live according to the standard. Are the believers in Acts held to Moses Law or Jesus' Law? Well, the problem was that Jesus' Law wasn't written yet; only Moses' Law was actually physically there; you could pull out a scroll and say here's Moses' Law, right here, just roll it out and you can read the verses, but where's Jesus' Law? Well, Jesus' Law was slowly being developed and that's what 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 are all about. So let's turn there and we'll conclude with this. Jesus' Law had to be written down and at this time it was in the process of being written. Paul explains later this strange transition of how it was being written down. Verse 8, "Love never fails;" love is the thing that is actually emphasized in these chapters, not the gifts; everyone makes a big to do about the gifts, what about love? "Love never fails, but if *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are tongues*, they will cease; if *there is knowledge*, it will be done away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away." Three gifts in v 8 are going to go away, prophecy, receiving direct verbal revelation from God, tongues, ability to speak foreign languages without study, and knowledge, the gift of knowledge means you know something without study, you didn't open a book, God just inserted a knowledge set. Verse 9, for we know in part and we prophesy in part. Now strictly translated what that's saying is that we know piece by piece, and we prophesy part by part. The picture is something incomplete and we're getting a little bit here, a little bit there, a little bit more and so forth as you build something, and then he says in verse 10, "but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away."

What Paul is saying, picture it like your building a house, you have the concrete crew, they lay the foundation, then a crew comes in and erects the frame, the electric crew comes in and so forth till the house is built. All the crews are necessary and part by part they're adding on to the house till the whole thing is built. When it's done, when the house is perfect do you still need the crew around? And that's what verse 10 is saying, "when the perfect comes," when the NT Law of Christ is written, "the partial will be done away." The prophets, the tongues guys, the knowledge people are unnecessary because the Law of Christ is complete. But in Acts 15 very little of the Law of Christ is complete, they're in the middle of the part by part process. So the question is raised in Acts 15 about Moses and Christ. Do Gentiles have to come to Christ through Moses via circumcision or are we in a

new dispensation and they come directly to Christ through faith? And once they are Christians do they grow by coming under the Law of Moses or is there a Law of Christ? If you don't understand dispensational differences you can't unravel the council debate.

Now let's look at the sequence, starting in v 2. The unauthorized crew from Jerusalem have already arrived and been teaching v 1. V 2, **And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them**, that's a nice way of saying they had an all out fight about this and to see some of the all out turn to Galatians 2, this is the epistle written to the very churches that caused the dispute. Now there is some scholarly disagreement as to whether Galatians 2 refers to Acts 15 or Acts 11; we're not interested in answering that problem right at the moment. All we're interested to show you is the general turmoil that was involved in the early church.

In Galatians 2:1 Paul says, "then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also." Now Titus was a Christian but he was a Gentile; he was not a Jew, and he was uncircumcised. So this is where the mud really hits the fan. ²It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but *I did so* in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. ³But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised." In other words, Paul says isn't it strange that when I went to the apostles they didn't demand that Titus be circumcised. So not only can circumcision not have anything to do with salvation, apparently it has nothing to do with sanctification, because if these guys are interested in Titus spiritually, they would have said hey Titus, you know, if you want to grow spiritually the next things you have to do is be circumcised... but they didn't.

So therefore that is an admission that Titus, as a Christian was not to be under the Law of Moses. "But *it was* because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage."

And notice the attitude of verse 5, it shows you how the apostle Paul handled these types, "But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you." He was dogmatic that he

was not going to allow these legalists to mess up the new converts. Verse 7, ⁷But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised,” verse 9, “and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.” There was no problem, Paul solved it. But a little incident happened shortly thereafter.

To show you there were still problems with the new truth, verse 11, “But when Cephas came to Antioch,” remember, last time we saw Peter he had been broken out of prison and was running from Herod. Herod was trying to kill him; well, Peter ran up to Antioch, and that’s when Peter and Paul have this argument, “I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned.” You’ve heard of Peter being the first Pope and how the Pope is infallible? Not according to Paul. Paul recognized no Papal authority, he recognized God’s truth as the authority and he’d take you to task in public. ¹²For prior to the coming of certain men from James,” that’s the group that came up in Acts 15:1 apparently, “he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he *began* to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.” Now everything was going along fine until these legalists arrive and then what’s the problem? You guys are uncircumcised, you’re unclean. Apparently everybody didn’t buy the whole thing that happened at Cornelius’ house, so now we’ve got a clean, unclean division. How in the world can you have Christian unity and fellowship in this situation? What about communion service? Can a clean Jew get together with an unclean Gentile and eat that meal? Now the whole communion table is broken up. That’s what this group of legalists did to the early church. And Paul and Barnabas are in on the thing, they’re causing all these problems. Verse 14, here’s some more of Paul’s feistiness, “But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how *is it that* you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” In other words, he said Peter, what were you doing yesterday before these guys showed up? Tell them Peter. And Peter didn’t have a thing to say. Gratefully Peter received the rebuke with grace, he knew he was in the wrong and he got back in line. But this is how Paul solved the theological problem.

Now come back to Acts 15 and you get appreciation more in depth for this dissension, great dissension. And so, **the brethren** who were mostly uncircumcised Gentiles, **determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.** But why does Paul need to go to the apostles? I thought Paul was an apostle. Why couldn't he just pronounce this is the way it is and this is the way it's going to be and that's it, I'm an apostle! Yes, he was an apostle, but not of the twelve, so the church thinks it's wise he go up to the twelve apostles. And so **Paul, Barnabas** as well as **some others** were sent by the church of Antioch to the church at Jerusalem to speak with **the apostles and elders.** Had they run in vain? Was their work null and void? Verse 3, **Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria,** these are the areas along the Levantine trade route, they'd already been visited by Jewish believers who scattered out after Stephen was martyred. Many of them came up this way and established churches along here. So Paul, Barnabas and others were passing through these churches, continuing verse 3, **describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.** They pass on the report of what happened in Asia Minor, "We went to Lystra and we preached the good news and Gentiles came to faith in the Messiah, do you see any problem with that? And then we went over to Derbe and we preached the good news to them and more Gentiles came to faith in Jesus, what do you think about that?" And they went into all the detail just to make sure there weren't issues. And it brought them **great joy,** they didn't see a problem with it at all. And so this is them sort of trying out their theology with these believers, most if not all of whom were Jewish, so they don't go into Jerusalem looking like a bunch of idiots they try this stuff out with other groups, "Are there any objections with this? Do we have our stuff together?" And apparently they did, they all agreed with Paul and Barnabas, and by so doing they were gathering a coalition. Verse 4, **When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.** So they go through the reports again, the same ones they'd sharpened up in Phoenicia and Samaria and they seem to have had a good hearing, but verse 5 introduces the conflict. It comes from the believing element of the Pharisees, **But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had**

believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

All right, let's summarize what we've said. Today the first ecumenical Church council gets underway. And you see these men solved theological problems, they didn't just split up over things like children and you get your gang on one side of the neighborhood and we get our gang on our side of the neighborhood and when we meet on the street we throw rocks at one another. They worked it out and defined very carefully what the truth was. The problem of deciphering the truth was that they were in a transition period, a dispensational transition and so now that we've broached that discussion we've got the tools to go forward and enter into the details of the discussion. God does not work the same way in all epochs of history, there are distinctions in His unfolding plan for history but the way of salvation is always the same, on the basis of the cross, the human requirement being faith, the object being God. The content of course varies from the Old to New Testaments.

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