

# THE CHURCH BECOMES MORE INCLUSIVE

13 September, 2009

By Rev. Lonny R. Bower (LRB)

Scripture Reference – Acts 15:1-35

**Unit Theme:** The Expanding Church

**Central Truth:** Through Christ, God makes salvation available to all people.

**Key Verse:** Romans 1:16

## **Introduction:**

In today's lesson we will look at the doctrinal challenges that the church at Antioch faced. We'll explore the need for godly counsel when confronted with well intended albeit misguided doctrine. As we seen last week from our study of Acts 13 the residents of Antioch we're eagerly receiving the Gospel message. As a result the church was expanding rapidly; many Jews and Gentiles were turning to Jesus and accepting Him as their Lord and Savior. Wherever the Gospel is readily received (especially by those who have not heard the message before) there is the potential for false doctrine to be promulgated. This would have been exceptionally difficult for the 1<sup>st</sup> century converts to challenge or verify, as they did not have available to them (as we do) the word of God. Therefore all of their doctrine was passed on verbally. We should determine to always prayerfully consider the instruction (doctrine) we receive. We should always line it up with the word of God, if it doesn't fit, throw it out. I can think of many doctrines within the protestant community that simply don't line up with God's word, yet people still believe them. Usually it is because they do not know God's word and as a result have settled for a form of godliness instead of genuine godliness. This is the enemy's doing, he does not anyone to embrace the fullness of the Gospel, because he knows that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Once we receive the full Gospel we are empowered with the authority of Jesus himself to be more than conquerors and to triumph over all the power of the enemy. When one embraces false doctrine either knowingly or unknowingly this authority is fortified.

## **I. Dissention in the Church – Acts 15:1-12**

It is a sad commentary that from the very beginning of Christianity men have had trouble recognizing the sufficiency of the work of Christ. There is nothing we could ever do to earn or deserve our salvation. It is by faith and faith alone that we are saved, we don't have to work for it, we don't have to try and be "a good person" we must simply believe. Those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation are empowered by His Spirit to live a good life and also as a result of their transformation they find it easy to do kingdom work. As I once heard it said, *"though we don't work for our salvation, those who are saved will work"* (**Ephesians 2:4-10**). What a burden this false teaching must have been to the new Gentile converts. Certainly it brought sharp division and may have even caused some to leave the fellowship. There are times

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in our walk when we may be confronted with doctrine that just don't sound right – it is during these times that we need to turn to the elders in our body, but not aside from prayer. We must always remember that God and His word are the source of all truth. Therefore, it is through prayer, study of His word and discipleship from someone who may be more mature in the faith that we are able to guard against false doctrines. Read **1 Timothy 4:16** and see what Paul told Timothy about doctrine.

➤ **Think about it:**

How do you know that the doctrine you hold to is biblically sound?

How do you confront those who are living in false doctrine and do not know it?


*The spread of the Gospel must not be restricted by traditions even if those traditions are good - LRB*

## **II. Wise Counsel Brings Resolution – Acts 15:13-21**

The greater purpose behind the decision that James set forth was unity. If indeed the Gentiles turned to Christ and continued to live as they did prior to their conversion it certainly would have caused disunity with their Jewish brothers. Therefore, James stops short of requiring circumcision or even compliance with the entire Mosaic law. He instead outlines some very practical rules for them to follow, not only would this help them be at unity with the Christian Jews, but it would also serve as a testimony to the world that they were no longer the same (**2 Corinthians 5:17**). In all we do as Christians we should always keep unity in mind. Unity is so important that Jesus himself prayed that we would be in unity (John 17:21). It is through unity that we experience the fullness of God's power in our lives and it is through God's power that we have the maximum impact on the lost – power to witness. Look at Acts 2:1...they were in unity and subsequently experienced the power of God, which resulted in the lost being saved. Whenever the church gets out of unity, it's not just her members that pay the price, but countless souls are lost because the citizens of the church have missed the mark and are too occupied by dissension to demonstrate the power of the Gospel to them.

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➤ **Think about it:**

What has changed in your life since accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

How does your testimony impact those around you – do they know you have changed?


*“The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate. It is an announcement.” – Paul Rees*

### **III. Affirming Acceptance in Christ – Acts 15:22-35**

It would have been a simple thing for the Jewish Christians to impose the tradition of circumcision on the newly converted Gentiles. However, God directed their decision and protected the new Christians allowing them to experience freedom in their new found faith. Think of the tragedy it would have been if the command of circumcision was upheld. How many would have been driven from the kingdom, how many would have turned back? We need to be careful that we do not require like things of our generation of converts. Yes, they will change, but only as God deals with them and only in His time and according to their obedience. We cannot require this generation of converts to come in and conform to our music, our dress, and our language. We must love them enough to meet them where they are without compromising our own faith, in doing so we will only bolster their faith. Howbeit the church today is dying because her citizens impose the restrictions of religion on any who would presume to come in. It would do us good to stand back and reevaluate our motive and purpose – is it to please God, and win the lost? The letter that the council at Jerusalem sent to the Gentile converts was one of great encouragement that was well received. This certainly facilitated unity and brought glory to the Lord and perhaps supercharged an awakening within Antioch and the surrounding region.

➤ **Think about it:**

How has the Christian leadership in your life encouraged you in the faith?

Have you ever been discouraged by traditions or religious restrictions?


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*“The inclusive Gospel cannot be shared by an exclusive people.” – George Sweeting*

**Conclusion:**

Our scripture theme comes from Romans 1:16.... Have you ever considered I mean really considered the power of the Gospel? There is nothing in this world or universe that can compare to the Gospel’s power. Through it we receive salvation – FOR FREE! Through it we receive healing – FOR FREE! Through it we are delivered – FOR FREE! Through it we are empowered to live as more than conquerors – FOR FREE! Why would anyone who is the least bit familiar with the wonderful Gospel of Jesus ever be ashamed of it? Those who are have simply been deceived by the enemy, they have received false doctrine and have been led astray by it. To know the Gospel is to live the Gospel, to live the Gospel is to not be ashamed of the Gospel, to not be ashamed of the Gospel is to share the Gospel! It is only through the Gospel that we are empowered to reach the lost so that they too can know of this wonderful power. Many in the world today are looking for change, however any change brought about without the application of the Gospel is temporal at best. The change the Gospel brings is powerful and effective, living and definitive. Knowing the change the power of the Gospel brought about in Paul’s life it is not surprising at all that he would later stand and proclaim – I am not ashamed of the Gospel....


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