

## The Big Question

Paul and Barnabas finished preaching to the churches East of Pisidian Antioch, which is in the Roman province of Galatia. *"They passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples"* (Acts 14:24-28).

And there, in Antioch of Syria, men came from Judea teaching a false commandment. They taught, *"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1). The heated discussions that followed resulted in a decision to ask the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem about the subject. Paul and Barnabas responded to this error by describing what the Holy Spirit accomplished and approved of during their journey. *"Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren"* (Acts 15:3). Every sermon and lesson recorded, from Peter's first sermon until now, did not mention circumcision. In all cases presented by the Holy Spirit, lessons gave the truth of Jesus and resulted in belief and baptism by the people.

At the time, Paul did not exert his apostolic authority. Instead, he and Barnabas argued the logic of their experience and the revelations of the Holy Spirit through them. The fact that the false teachers came from Judea where Peter and John had been teaching would demand the issue be settled there. Years later, Paul wrote this to the Galatians, *"It 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"* (Galatians 2:2). Paul found it necessary to compare the revelation given to him and the original apostles. So when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, *"they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them"* (Acts 15:4).

There is a lesson for us in how this meeting in Jerusalem was conducted and in the conclusions reached. Jesus had taught the disciples, and the Holy Spirit had guided the apostles, providing demonstrations of what was acceptable. The evidence was clear. The elders of the church could judge right from wrong. *"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter"* (Acts 15:6). The Hebrew writer reminds us of the elder's work this way. *"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you"* (Hebrews 13:17). The Holy Spirit could have taken vengeance on the false teachers and ended their heresy. The church's organization allows the elders to confront problems with the revealed word of God and draw scriptural conclusions.

As the one through whom the Gentiles first received the gospel, Peter testified everything the Spirit revealed and taught. *"After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe' (Acts 15:7). He made two fundamental points in the discussion. 'He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:9). And, 'We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are' (Acts 15:11). Peter's statements indicate that God did not require any portion of Moses' Law to be performed by the Gentiles and does not make it a requirement for the Jews. Jesus said, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit' (Matthew 28:19).*

Some of the Pharisees were holding to their traditions rather than the gospel (Acts 15:5). They mentioned Moses and circumcision together as though Moses' Law had instituted that action as a condition of atonement. But circumcision was a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, 600

years before Moses's time. Abraham's covenant was a family covenant and not a salvation promise (Genesis 17:10-11). Circumcision only applied to Abraham and his descendants. One outside that family, and wanting to participate with that family, had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). This passage seems to be what the erring Pharisees tried to bind on Gentiles wanting to obey the gospel. However, the church is not of the family of Abraham but the family of God. Both Peter and Paul emphasize that to enter Abraham's family requires circumcision, but to enter God's family through Christ requires belief and baptism. Are you a baptized believer?