

'GOD WILL JUSTIFY THE GENTILES BY FAITH'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

by Ron Ritchie

A headline in the May 10, 1987 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle read, "Pope's Visit Complicates Bible Belt Bishop's Life." In preparation for his visit to the Bible Belt later this year, the Pope asked the Bishop of South Carolina (where only 2% of the population are Catholic and most are Baptists), "What do Baptists teach?" The bishop replied that although the majority are called Baptists, "their idea of baptism is much different than ours. It has nothing to do with salvation. Their salvation depends on saying, 'I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.' That's salvation." The paper reported, "It was a difficult concept for the Pope to understand."

There has always been confusion about how an individual comes into a personal relationship with God by having his sins forgiven. That certainly is true today, as is evident in the article I just quoted from. It was also true in the first century. Then, as now, many were asking, "Can I receive salvation by placing my faith in Jesus Christ and in his work on the cross in dying for my sins, or is there something I need to do, some religious work or ritual in addition to what Jesus has done?" That is the question that dogged the apostle Paul's heels all through his ministry.

In our studies in the life of Paul, we discovered in Acts 15:1-12 that "certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed" made their way down from Jerusalem to the mostly Gentile church in the city of Antioch and began to say to the new believers there, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved." In other words, unless they became Jews first they could not become Christians. This disagreement could quite easily have resulted in a split in the young church. Thus Paul, encouraged by a revelation from the Lord, in company with Barnabas, the uncircumcised Titus and others, headed for Jerusalem. There they met with the apostles James, Peter and John, the elders of the church, together with the body, to discuss this serious matter.

This meeting, which we have come to call the Jerusalem Council, was held in 49 A.D. After much debate, Peter addressed the council. His remarks quickly silenced opposition to Paul's gospel. Peter's question, "...why do you put God to the test by placing upon the necks of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are" (Acts 15:10,11) was especially relevant to the matter under discussion. Then Barnabas and Paul shared with the Jerusalem church how God had used them among the Gentiles, performing signs and wonders through them, so that many came to faith in Jesus Christ.

We resume our studies in Paul's life and ministry today by looking at James' word to the council following Peter's remarks. James' statement, as we will see, was a summary of all that had been said at the meeting. He, too, agreed with the gospel of Paul and Peter as it has been expressed--that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and nothing besides. With his remarks, any evidence of a split in the young and growing church was laid to rest. There was unanimity among the council and the body at Jerusalem that faith only, to the exclusion of circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses, was what was required to attain salvation. Let us look therefore at what James said when he stood up to address the council.

I. The Prophets agree Acts 15:13-21

And after they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. And with this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 'After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen,

and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord, Who makes these things known from of old.' Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was not one of the original apostles (Matt.10:2-4), nor was he one of the followers of Jesus during his ministry (John 7:5). The resurrection of Jesus, however, cured his skepticism, as he was one of those to whom the Lord appeared. Thus, James later received the title of apostle, just like Peter and the others. He was recognized by the Jewish Zealots as the leader of the church of Jerusalem (Acts 2:12), and was named the President of the Jerusalem Council. He wrote the letter of James; and was called "James the Just" by the ancients.

James' opening words in verse 14 contain the key to the age of the Spirit in which we live and also the key to our lives while we are here on earth. Quoting Peter, James says that what God was doing was "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." That is what God was doing with the Gentiles in Antioch. And what God began doing in that first century day he has continued doing for the past two thousand years, and will continue to do until Jesus returns again.

Who are the Gentiles? According to the apostle Paul in Ephesians, they were those who were "...separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus," Paul continues in his letter, "you who were formerly far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall..." (Eph.2:12,13). There was a time when God used the Jews to be his witness to the world. But when they rejected his Messiah, he set them aside for a period, although at a future date they will again come into prominence in his salvation plan. Now, however, God is using the church of Jesus Christ, his spiritual body, to offer the good news to the Gentiles.

God was concerned, as our text says, with "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name." The word means, "to visit with help, to provide." That is what history is all about really. That is how God is pursuing his plan of redemption. Every day, in all seasons good and bad, that is the business of God. It is true on an international, national, community and personal level. Every event you read about, whether abstract or personal, good news or bad, is being used by God to call out a people who will glorify him and bless his name. He is able to open and close doors, both to nations and individuals. He is using all of our personal histories, everyone around us, all the crime and violence, terrorism, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, everything, so as to accomplish his purpose of taking out a people for himself. At a conference in Mt. Hermon last week, someone asked a young Central American woman named Elizabeth, one of speakers at a question and answer time on missions, if she was fearful about living in Guatemala, her home. "Afraid of the terrorists?" she asked, "afraid of the Communists? You have no idea of how much all the violence down there is strengthening the church. God is very much at work among his people in Guatemala. We are not afraid." God is using fearful circumstances to add to the numbers of those he is saving.

Thus, James is saying in his summary of what Peter had shared earlier, that the door of faith had been opened to the Gentiles. It had first been opened by the Spirit-filled preaching of Peter in Caesarea, and kept open by the Spirit through the church in Antioch and the ministry of Paul and Barnabas there. That door was not about to be slammed shut by the "party of the circumcised."

Last evening I got a phone call from a man in Seattle who said he had been at a conference in which I spoke at Mt. Hermon recently. He told me that he heard me preach the gospel but that he had resisted what he had heard. "I went home and had the most miserable few days in my life," he said, "and finally, on Wednesday, I remembered what you said about receiving Jesus Christ by faith as my Lord and Savior. Well, I have invited him into my heart and I wanted you to know about it." We are the ones who can tell people of God's salvation plan. The Spirit of God then uses the word of God to draw men and women, in ways we know nothing about,

into his kingdom. I thanked him for his graciousness in calling me to let me know about his salvation. He was another Gentile who had walked through the door of faith in the age of the Spirit.

James goes on to say that the prophets agreed with Peter and Paul. This was not new news, but old good news. The prophets had foretold it for hundreds of years. They agreed with the apostles, James declares. They were in harmony with them, in other words. There is a great spiritual principle here. In order to be valid, present spiritual experiences must be in harmony with the word of God in every generation. Paul warned the Corinthians to be on guard for other spirits, for another gospel, for "Satan is an angel of light." We should be careful to check what is happening in the spiritual realm in our own day and see if it harmonizes with the timeless Word of God.

Much of what passes for Christianity today, however, is quite out of harmony with what the Scripture declares. I read an interview of one of the television evangelists in a national magazine last week in which he said that if his board of directors did not agree with what he wanted to do, he just brought on another board of directors. As the spiritual leader of his ministry, he said, he set the vision for what he wanted done. But the New Testament says that Christians are a body. We are brothers and sisters, not bosses and masters. We don't just fire people if they don't agree with us. That is not in harmony with the Scriptures. It's out of tune with how God wants us to act and live within the body of Christ.

Continuing, James appeals to the prophet Amos to prove his point that Peter and Paul were in harmony with the prophets. James could have chosen from among Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah, for they also had written of these things. But the rabbis, unfortunately, failed to understand the prophets, as Jesus declared in Luke 24. Amos, who lived in the period 767-740 B.C., served in the Northern Kingdom under Uzziah and Jeroboam II. He spoke out against the ten tribes of Israel for their apostasy and idolatry, calling for national repentance and a return to God. He wanted God's people to seek justice and righteousness. For Amos, a people in a covenant relationship with God were under obligation to pursue equitable social as well as spiritual behavior. If Israel persisted in divorcing herself from God by failing to remove the many serious blemishes on her national life, she would quickly go into oblivion. That did occur, in the Assyrian captivity.

The prophecy of Amos had a future earthly fulfillment for the nation of Israel, as well as an immediate spiritual fulfillment for all who would place their faith in Jesus as their personal Savior since the day of Pentecost and the beginning of the age of the Spirit. James goes on to refer to three promises contained in the prophecy of Amos. First, he quotes Amos' words, "After these things I will return." James is using this quote, not in the sense that he is looking forward to a great political kingdom on earth, over which Messiah will reign, but in the sense that it was being fulfilled on a spiritual level right at that moment. It was true that the prophets Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah all prophesied of the future kingdom on earth--and that would one day come to pass--but here James is saying that the advent of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God was the spiritual fulfillment of the prophecy of Amos. That is what these words, "I will return.," mean.

And what would happen then? That is the second promise referred to by James, again using Amos as his source: "I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen..." Spiritually, the "tabernacle" referred to in this verse was made up of the Jews and Gentiles who were even then receiving new life in Christ. James was speaking to the body of Christ, the new church, assembled before him. Thirdly, he says this was occurring "in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who makes these things known from of old." Here in the Old Testament is clear evidence that the salvation of the Gentiles was something that was always close to the heart of God. In the gospel of John, Jesus himself made reference to that fact:

"I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock and one shepherd...." (John 15:14-16).

In his summary, James is saying that while the prophecies of Amos would one day be fulfilled in a physical way in the nation of Israel, they were being fulfilled on a spiritual level right there in Jerusalem on the very day

they were meeting together.

In verses 19 through 21, James will now go on to make a historical decision. He begins by saying, "...it is my judgment..." He is not saying that what he is about to say is his personal opinion, nor will it be a final word of authority, as if all present were waiting for him to speak. Rather, what is going on here is similar to what happens in our board of elders meeting, when one elder is appointed to wrap up all debate on an issue and make a proposal for the rest of the elders to consider. As they all have sought the mind of the Lord concerning the issue, the moderator seeks to see if there is unity in the Spirit among the elders.

First, James says that it is his judgment "...that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles." The Gentiles had been troubled by the Judiazers over the issue of circumcision. But the central issue was, were they saved, based on faith alone? If so, they did not have to be circumcised, and, furthermore, they were freed from the law of Moses. In other words, Gentiles did not have to become Jews in order to be saved. They were justified by grace through faith, plus nothing. As Paul wrote later to the Galatians, "...not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised" (2:3).

Secondly, James does something which teaches an extremely valuable lesson for those present--and it will be profitable too for us today. In his request of the Gentile Christians in Antioch to abstain from certain things, James makes his appeal, not to the law of Moses, but to the law of love. The new and untaught Gentile Christians were involved in certain activities which were sin in the sight of God and offensive to the Jewish mind; and which, if they were persisted in, could be a cause of disunity in the young church.

The first thing which James mentions should be abstained from is, as he says in verse 20, "things contaminated by idols." The apostle is referring to animals which were sacrificed to idols (Rom.14:1; 1 Cor.8). The Gentile Christians in Antioch had formerly been involved in idol worship in which animals were sacrificed to the idols and, later, the leftover meat was sold. This was a matter of economics. Only parts of the animal which was sacrificed were actually used in the ritual; the rest was sold in the local meat market at a bargain price. But the Jews regarded that practice as participating in "things contaminated by idols." In asking them to abstain from these, James is encouraging these young believers to avoid all contact with their old lifestyle, "the old gang of idol worshipers," so as not to cause their Jewish brethren to stumble. This is the law of love.

Perhaps I can illustrate. A couple of weeks ago, I met a brother from Kenya, David Kitonga, who told me that after a number of natives in one Kenyan village came to faith in Christ, they arrived in church carrying their drums, ready to participate in the services. Now there is nothing morally wrong with bringing drums to church, but in this case, these villages had been accustomed in the past to calling forth evil spirits by means of their drums. David had to tell them that now that they had come to know who the living God was, and were committed to worshiping him, they would no longer need to involve themselves in their old practices. Paul offered these words of counsel later to the Corinthians, "...the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor.10:20,21). Paul is echoing the word of Leviticus 17, which instructs the Jews to not sacrifice to the "goat demons."

Secondly, James suggests that the Jerusalem Council write to the Christians in Antioch and ask them to "abstain from fornication." That is because the pagan temples which they used to frequent were dedicated to idols, having both male and female prostitutes involved in worship rituals. But now that these believers in Antioch had become Christians, this was no longer an acceptable practice. This is also Paul's word to the Thessalonians, "This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is that you abstain from sexual immorality." It might seem strange to us today to discover that the apostles had to remind Christians back then to abstain from these things, but we must remember that these believers were accustomed to sexual immorality as part of their old ways of worship in the Greek temples. Society was sold out to sexual immorality, which was destroying the soul of the individual. We can see the same results today in our permissive society which regards people as sexual objects to be used for our gratification. But this practice causes the breakdown of our emotional and psychological health. Our pastors frequently discover, however, in some marriage counseling situations, that young couples are often living together before marriage and they don't realize that this is a sin against God. They are quite ready to admit to what they are doing because they just don't know it's wrong. Often they are

new believers and they are still participating in their former ways of living. We gently show them what this will do to their relationship if it is not stopped, and what damage it will do to their witness to Jesus Christ. This is what James is asking here in his second request of the Christians in Antioch, that they "abstain from fornication."

Thirdly, James requests that they abstain "from what is strangled." Although this reference is not included in the better Greek texts of the book of Acts, it is included in the dietary laws of Leviticus: "For as for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off.'" (Lev.17:14). Pagan rituals frequently called for strangling the animals sacrificed so the blood would not be drained. Thus, if the meat were later purchased and eaten, it would symbolize for the Christian Jew that he was being cut off from the covenant of God.

Finally, James asks that they abstain "from blood"; in other words, abstain from killing. "No murderer," the apostle John wrote, "has eternal life abiding within him." Apparently James found it necessary to remind those in the church at Antioch that murderers had no part in the Kingdom of God. They needed to know this, and that is why James mentions it. Again, he includes this because they probably did not realize how wrong murder was. I once met a man in a Columbian prison who told me he had murdered nineteen people. He just slashed the throats of people he didn't like. Before he became a Christian he didn't know any other way to live. But when I talked with him, his brothers in the prison had taught him that that kind of behavior was no longer acceptable in the sight of God. In the same way, James is here saying that all thoughts of murder must be put away now that these people in Antioch have to to faith in Christ.

Next, James gives his reasons for exhorting the new Gentile believers to abstain from the four things we have discussed. He says, "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath." What James is saying is, "Let us encourage the Gentiles to be tender and loving toward their Christian Jewish family who were in the process of shedding parts of their two thousand-year old religious and social system." In other words, let them practice the law of love, he is saying, not the law of Moses. "It was for freedom that Christ has set us free," says Paul to the Galatians. Yes, free to be like Jesus.

The decision against imposing circumcision on the Gentile Christians must have been very satisfying to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Galatia, and also to Paul and Barnabas. Even if the decision had gone the other way, however, Paul would still have continued to preach the gospel of grace through faith alone. How we should thank God that that spiritual decision made at the Council of Jerusalem has stood the test of time over the past two thousand years, the age of the Spirit.

In the next section we will discover that,

II. The Apostles and Elders agree

Acts 15:22-29

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas--Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them,

"The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

There are five things here which have helped the church of Jesus Christ function in the age of the Spirit. First, notice the unity demonstrated in the words, "It seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men..." There was unity in the Holy Spirit among the leaders and the whole body in choosing two Jewish prophets, Judas and Silas, who would travel to Antioch, together with Paul and Barnabas, to confirm that the Gentiles were in fact justified by faith and nothing besides. Thus, the believers there would have the benefit of the written word and the spoken word of reliable witnesses who were not part of the local church in Antioch. These men would negate the teaching of the Judaizers who had come among the church.

Then, we see that this letter was addressed to "the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia"--churches which had been founded through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. All of these bodies would hear restated the good news of salvation by grace through faith, this time from the mother church in Jerusalem. No more would they be troubled by intruders from Jerusalem. There was unity between the Jews and Gentiles who had come to faith in Christ.

Third, in verse 25, we see that the leadership in Jerusalem had "become of one mind..." This is how elders should function, striving to seek the mind of Christ, and thus coming to unity of action. What a model for church leadership in every age--especially today! Fourth, verse 28, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." The Holy Spirit is the power behind the church in the age of the Spirit. Finally, James writes in verse 29, giving his instructions to the churches, "...that you abstain from [these] things..." So as to preserve their unity in the Holy Spirit, Christians from the various cultures ought to be diligent to apply the law of love rather than the law of Moses so as not to cause each other to stumble. Love would overcome legalism.

The Council of Jerusalem, therefore, agreed with the teaching of Paul and Barnabas that God would justify the Gentiles by faith. As we have seen, the Old Testament prophets agreed with that teaching, and so did the apostles and elders of the young church in Jerusalem. How did the Gentiles respond to this affirmation of Paul's teaching?

III. The Gentiles rejoice

Acts 15:30-35

So, when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. And Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. And after they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching, with many others also, the word of the Lord.

On hearing the letter read to them, the congregation in Antioch "rejoiced because of its encouragement." They were encouraged because the good news which they had been taught by Paul and Barnabas was still good news, having been confirmed as such by the Council of Jerusalem. Judas and Silas remained on for a period to confirm the truth of what they were teaching; and then, having come in peace, they departed in peace. Paul and Barnabas remained on in Antioch, faithful shepherds, teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Writing in an introduction to a new edition of Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, Dr. Richard Halverson, Chaplain to the United States Senate, says this:

When I was called to the Fourth Presbyterian Church in 1958, I had an agreement with the officers that there would be no pressure to increase the membership. It was understood that our responsibility was to care for the people, nurture them in the Word of God, strengthen their fellowship with Christ and one another, and help them grow in love. The conviction was

that numerical growth, as it occurred in the New Testament, was the spontaneous and normal result of a healthy community of faith.

That is the responsibility of good and faithful pastor-teachers; and that is what occupied Paul and Barnabas in their ministry to the church at Antioch.

Writing a few years later to the churches in Galatia, which were growing but still being troubled by the Judaizers, Paul would say,

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you." (Gal.3:8)

Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "The righteous man shall live by faith." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "He who practices them shall live by them." (3:11, 12)

The point, of course, is that we cannot live by the law. To try to do so is to invite certain failure. "No one is justified by the Law before God." God will justify us by faith, through grace, not by circumcision and by obedience to the law of Moses, as the Judaizers demanded; not by baptism, as a pope would direct; not by some form of legalism, as some Christian groups teach, and as all of the cults preach. The Old Testament prophets, the apostles and elders of the early Jerusalem church, and the Gentiles in Antioch agreed and rejoiced, that man is justified by grace through faith.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast (Eph.2:8, 9).

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