

The purity of the gospel must constantly be defended from the perversion of sinful human ideas and “doctrines of devils” (1 Tim. 4:1). The early church had to defend the gospel from being perverted by those who taught that, in addition to faith in Christ, believers must be circumcised and keep of the law of Moses in order to be saved.

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, *and said*, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

“And certain men which came down from Judaea” – Commentators call these certain men “Judaizers” because they were teaching that the path to salvation through Christ led through Judaism. The content of their teaching and the fact that they came from Judea tells us that they were Jews. Paul calls them “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4) because they taught that salvation came through works. The church at Antioch apparently had grown enough to draw the attention of these men from Judea who felt the need to come and “correct” the theology of this church.

“taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” – Circumcision was the token (sign) of the covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:10-11) as well as a component of the Mosaic law. These men were teaching that, in addition to faith in Christ, the Gentiles also had to become Jews and practice Judaism in order to be saved. This teaching is a perversion of the gospel, since the circumcision that God is interested in is that of the heart, which can only come through Jesus Christ. **Rom. 2:28-29** *“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”*

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

“When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them” – Paul and Barnabas immediately opposed the teaching that faith in the blood of Jesus Christ alone was not enough for salvation. Paul felt strongly enough that he called this teaching “another gospel” and a perversion of the true gospel (Gal. 1:6-7). He also said that those who taught this doctrine were “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4) and that they should be accursed (excommunicated) (Gal. 1:8-9).

“they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question” – The church at Antioch decided that a question causing this much disagreement in the church should be answered definitively, so they chose men representing both sides of the issue to travel to Jerusalem. There they would submit this question to the apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church, who were the foremost authorities concerning the gospel of Christ.

3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

“And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria” – The church sent the group on their way. Without cars and planes, traveling to Jerusalem was a multi-day journey, requiring overnight stops in various places along the way as they traveled south through Phenice and Samaria.

“declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren” – At each of these stops, they apparently spent the night with fellow believers and shared with the local church how that God was saving Gentiles. This news brought joy to all who heard it.

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

“And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders” – The group from Antioch were welcomed by the apostles and the entire church at Jerusalem.

“and they declared all things that God had done with them” – Paul and Barnabas share how that God had blessed their missionary journey through Cyprus and on into Asia Minor (Acts 13-14). They no doubt emphasized the salvation of the Gentiles during their presentation as they did at each stop during their journey to Jerusalem (v. 3).

5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.

“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed” – Upon hearing of the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles, those who believed that circumcision was necessary spoke up in apparent protest. The Pharisees were the sect that believed that righteousness came through keeping of the law of Moses. These particular Pharisees also believed that Jesus was the Christ but they had apparently not given up on the idea that circumcision and the law of Moses was integral to salvation.

“saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses” – These Pharisees believed that Gentiles could not be right with God simply through faith in Jesus Christ. They also had to be circumcised (thereby becoming Jews) and keep the law of Moses. These Pharisees were advocating salvation by works and not by faith alone.

6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

The apostles and elders recognize that this question needed to be answered and call a meeting to discuss it. Obviously there were more people present at this meeting than the apostles and elders. Representatives of both sides of the question were certainly there since there was much disputing (discussion) being done (v. 7).

7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men *and* brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

“And when there had been much disputing [discussion; debate], Peter rose up” – Both sides had expressed their viewpoint multiple times. After hearing all of this discussion without arriving at an answer, Peter stands up and addresses the assembly to call attention to the fact that God had already been granting salvation to Gentiles even without them being circumcised or keeping the law of Moses.

“and said unto them, Men *and* brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us” – Peter is referring to the time when God used him to preach the gospel to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his household (Acts 10). “A good while ago” may have been as much as 14 years prior, using Paul’s statement of elapsed time between his conversion (which may have happened around the same time as Cornelius’ conversion) and the meeting in this chapter (Gal. 2:1-4).

“that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe” – God chose to use Peter to open the door to the salvation of Gentiles (Acts 10). Perhaps He chose to use Peter to give legitimacy to the event with Cornelius. God also insured that the Jews understood that the conversion was genuine by having these Gentiles speak with tongues as evidence that they also had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-46; 11:17-18).

8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us; 9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

“And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness” – God saw the faith that was in the hearts of these Gentiles and acknowledged that their faith was genuine by responding to that faith by giving them salvation.

“giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us” – God gave the Gentiles the same gift as He gave to the Jewish believers on the day of Pentecost. They received the same new birth and infilling of the Holy Ghost as the Jews had been given.

“And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” – God did not treat these Gentile believers any differently than He did Jewish believers. He responded to the faith in their hearts, independently of the keeping of the law of Moses, and purified their hearts the same way He purified the hearts of Jewish believers.

10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

“Now therefore why tempt [put to a test] ye God” – Tempting God is to attempt to provoke Him to act, either in accordance to your will or in response to your sin. Since God had already shown His will concerning Gentiles by saving them and giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, why do these Judaizers want to bend God’s will to their own preferences by insisting that Gentiles first become Jews?

“to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” – The Judaizers would be tempting God by wanting to put a “yoke” (a burden to bear) upon the neck of the disciples (the Gentile believers). It was common with the Jews to refer to the law as a yoke, speaking frequently of “the yoke of the law” or “the yoke of the commandments.” However, Peter is pointing out that neither they (the Jews) or their ancestors have been able to keep the law since it was first given by Moses. Throughout their history, Israel had either broken the law through outright rebellion or by merely being imperfect in their keeping of it even when they were trying to be faithful to God. If there was no hope that the Jews could keep the law well enough for salvation, why would they think that it would be necessary to subject Gentile believers to the same impossible task?

“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” – Seeing that the Jews could only keep the law imperfectly at best, Peter states their only hope of salvation: the grace that comes through the Lord Jesus Christ. If the Jews with the law can only be saved by grace, then the Gentiles, who do not have the law, must also be saved by grace. The purpose of the law was never for salvation; it was to be our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ: **Gal. 3:23-25** “*But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.*”

12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

After Peter finished speaking, the group listened to Barnabas and Paul tell what God did through them during their missionary journey among the Gentiles. They apparently wanted to give further proof that God was indeed saving Gentiles without requiring them to be circumcised or to keep the law of Moses.

Verses 13-31: Once Barnabas and Paul had finished speaking, James, as leader of the church, addresses the assembly. He refers back to Peter’s statement of God first saving the Gentiles under his ministry and adds that the OT prophets predicted the salvation of Gentiles. James recommends sending a letter to the Gentile believers stating that no commandment came from them requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised or to keep the law. The only requirements they would make of the Gentile believers is that they do not eat meat that had been offered to idols, that they avoid fornication (sexual sin), and that do not eat blood or anything strangled (which retained blood in the animal carcass). They send this letter by the hands of Barnabas and Paul, who were accompanied by men from the Jerusalem church, including Silas and Judas. The church in Antioch rejoiced when they received this letter.

Verses 32-41: While at Antioch, Judas and Silas preached encouragement to the church before Judas returned to Jerusalem. However, Silas decided to stay at Antioch. After a while Barnabas and Paul decided to revisit the churches they had planted during their first missionary journey but end up parting ways after a disagreement over whether or not John Mark should go with them.