

## **“The brothers...to the brothers”**

**Acts 15:22-16:5**

The letter written to Gentile Christians to communicate the decisions reached by the Jewish leaders in the church in Jerusalem, regarding Gentile salvation and how to avoid division between Gentiles and Jews who are believers, begins “the brothers...to the brothers.” This greeting reflects the fact that Jews and Gentiles who are trusting in the grace of Christ for salvation are each other’s brothers (and sisters). But, how could Jews and Gentiles be and live as brothers? Two brothers entered first grade and one said he was born on January 1, 1984. The other said he was born on April 4, 1984. The teacher responded, you can’t be brothers, it’s impossible. One of the brothers said, “No, we are brothers. One of us was adopted.” The teacher asked, “Which one?”. The same brother said, “We asked Dad once. He kissed us both and said, ‘I forgot’”. It seemed impossible to believe that Jews and Gentiles could be and live as brothers, but they were and could live as brothers because both were loved and adopted by the same God in the same way.

In this letter to Gentile Christians, the Jewish leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem denied instructing those who had come and taught them that Gentiles believers had to be circumcised to be saved. They also affirmed their affection and admiration for Paul and Barnabas. In this way the message preached by Paul and Barnabas was endorsed by the leaders in Jerusalem. This meant Gentiles did not need to be circumcised to be saved. This decision preserved the truth of the gospel that people are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The other decisions communicated in this letter would serve the unity of the church composed of Jews and Gentiles. The other decisions required Gentiles to abstain from four things for the sake of unity. The first three were a part of the Jewish ceremonial law and were commanded by the Jewish Scriptures. Gentiles abstaining from these things would be necessary for Jewish believers to live as brothers with Gentile believers. The fourth thing in the letter that Gentiles were to abstain from, sexual immorality, was a part of God’s moral law. It was therefore necessary for Gentile believers to abstain from sexual immorality in order to obey God’s will as Gentile believers, even though it was common in Gentiles culture. It would also, like the others, drive a wedge between them and Jewish believers.

After this letter had been delivered in Antioch, and its message confirmed in person by two leading brothers from Jerusalem, Judas and Silas, it was very well received. Paul then suggested to Barnabas that they revisit the churches they had started. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark, who had left them on their previous missionary journey and so Paul was not willing to take him. Because of their disagreement the missionary partnership of Paul and Barnabas was ended. As a result, Mark joined Barnabas and they went to Cyprus, while Paul teamed up with Silas and they went to the other churches previously started. Later Timothy joined Paul and Silas. Because Timothy had a Gentile father, though his mother was a Jew, he was not circumcised, and this was public knowledge. So, Paul had him circumcised. Some suggest this is Paul doing something contradictory to the big decision of the Jerusalem Conference. But was it? The issue before was circumcision for salvation. The issue now is circumcision to remove a barrier to ministry and evangelism. Paul’s answer was “No” in regard to circumcision for salvation, but it was “Yes” regarding circumcision for the sake of preaching the gospel to Jews. He later wrote, “To the Jews I became a Jew to win the Jews...I have become all things to all people, that by all means, I might save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” When Paul said “No” to circumcision it was for the sake of the gospel and when he said “Yes” to circumcision it was for the sake of the gospel. He said “No” to preserve the gospel from the Judaizers and “Yes” to propagate the gospel among the Jews.

In Antioch and then later in the other cities where churches had been planted, this letter was distributed. Notice the response in Antioch, “they rejoiced because of its encouragement”. Also, notice the results in the other churches, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increase in numbers daily.” These were the results that followed these decisions being delivered. During the Great Awakening, in the church in Northampton, Massachusetts, there were over 300 conversions in six months. That would be an average of more than one conversion each day. This was like what happened in the churches that received this letter, “they increased in numbers daily.” Should we be so bold as to pray that for our church and the churches throughout our region and nation would be strengthened in the faith, and increase in numbers daily? This daily increase was the result of people hearing and believing the good news that they could be forgiven and transformed because of the undeserved kindness of Jesus in dying for us as sinners. Have you put the full weight of your hope to be saved from eternal death and have eternal life on Jesus’ grace? Is your hope built on Jesus and his grace?