

Acts 15:11

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.

For all of my life, Sunday has been my favourite day of the week

- I was born on a Sunday so I was off to a good start
- It wasn't so good that England lost 1-0 to the Soviet Union in the 1958 World Cup
- But as my Mum was busy my Dad could watch it in a shop window on Mutley Plain

Despite being quite a good student, I was not the keenest

- My parents believed that you should take a break from work on Sunday
- That was good because that meant no school work
- And this was a practice I kept up in my student days

As a student we loved being invited to church members' homes for Sunday dinner

- It was the highlight of the week
- The gift of Christian hospitality was very blessed and fruitful
- Some of my friends became Christians by a combination of hospitality and preaching

Eating together is one of the basic social activities that we do

- Many of us lament the demise of the family meal, all sat up at the table
- To be fair, there is a lot more eating out these days
- A simple trip out for young people is to go for a burger or a pizza

Most of us are vaguely aware of Jewish food laws

- 'kosher' food literally means 'proper food' – food that is properly prepared
- but many of the things we eat are not kosher food and not properly prepared
- if you are going home to roast pork, sausage and chips
- pizza, beef burgers or crab sandwiches, your food is definitely not kosher
- but even if it is chicken, it has not been properly prepared and not kosher

In the New Testament Church, preaching the gospel to the Gentiles was a novelty

- but now that Gentiles have become believers a number of questions have arisen
- the most fundamental of these is both simple and far-reaching
- 'Does a person have to become a Jew in order to be a Christian?'

Luke, the writer of the New Testament book that we call 'Acts'

- summarises the situation like this

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers. Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.

Now it might sound as if the issue was therefore simply about circumcision

- but that is to misunderstand the issue
- circumcision was the mark of initiation into Judaism
- but it was only the beginning
- the issue therefore affects a fundamental principle of faith

I PRINCIPLE OF FAITH

If to us the answer to the question

- ‘Does a person have to become a Jew in order to be a Christian?’
- seems pretty obvious
- the answer to the question
- ‘Why do Christians read the Old Testament and not do what it says?’
- is more difficult
- after all, the Old Testament teaches us not to do lots of things that we do
- eating non-kosher foods, wearing garments of mixed fibres
- and teaches us to do lots of things that we do not do
- including stoning to death people convicted of certain offences
- some of which we count as crimes – murder, kidnapping, rape
- and some we don’t count as crimes – adultery, pre-marital sex, homosexuality
- occultism, Sabbath breaking, slandering a parent, loving anything more than God

The sophisticated answer is that, with regard to Old Testament law

- the Christian distinguishes between moral/national/ceremonial law
- but these were early days in the New Testament Church
- and, whereas the first Christians were previously Jews
- now, through the leading of God, first Peter and then Paul have preached to Gentiles
- the Holy Spirit has come upon the Gentiles, confirming the work of grace
- but, although it is easy to be critical, it is really understandable that some Jews
- felt that it was right that the Gentiles needed to believe as Christians but live as Jews
- and the way to make a start was for Gentile converts to be circumcised

In Syrian Antioch some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were teaching

- that circumcision was essential to salvation (we call these the ‘Judaizers’)
- the New Testament letter that discusses this is Paul’s letter to the Galatians
- the relationship between Acts and Paul’s letter to the Galatians is interesting
- Galatians 2:1-10 speaks of a visit of Paul to Jerusalem
- And yet the letter to the Galatians does not mention the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)
- Suggesting that Paul did not know about the decision made at Jerusalem
- The matter is not easily resolved but perhaps Galatians 2 refers to Acts 11:30
- When Barnabas and Paul (still called Saul) went to Jerusalem with a gift
- Showing that the issues has been developing for a little while
- Now on this later visit (Acts 15) Paul and Barnabas have been sent
- With others from the congregation at Syrian Antioch to Jerusalem
- To resolve the issue of what to do with Gentiles who have become Christians

At Jerusalem, Christians belonging to the party of the Pharisees made their position clear:

The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.

(Acts 15:5)

And much discussion followed

It was down to Peter to reply to this contention (Acts 15:7-11)

- Peter himself had once felt that Gentiles would have to become Jews and Christians
- But now he saw things more clearly and was ready to agree with Paul's position
- That there is 'no difference' between Jews and Gentiles
- Peter's case is that he had been commissioned to preach the gospel to the Gentiles
- That God knows the heart and had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (Acts 15:8)
- And that the gift of the Holy Spirit confirmed the Gentiles' Christianity
- As much as the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost confirmed the Jews' Christianity
- The key thing was that their hearts had been purified by faith (Acts 15:9)
- The law of Moses was a 'yoke' – something related to work and burden
- God has broken all barriers separating Jews and Gentiles
- Purifying the Gentiles' hearts by faith – God made no distinction between them (15:9)
- Jews and Gentiles are both saved by grace through faith – in Jesus Christ
- This is the great climax of Peter's speech and the last we shall hear from him

Now it was time for Paul and Barnabas to speak, they reported how

- God had performed 'miraculous signs and wonders' among the Gentiles
- From Galatians we can easily deduce that the issue was circumcision
- But Paul preached that salvation occurs through no work of our own
- Only through the merits of the death of Christ – such a message was scandalous

There are some practical issues that arise even from this discussion

- Phrased another way, the Judaizers contention was
- You Gentiles are not saved unless you are circumcised
- It is what I call the 'Jesus and' heresy
- The Gentiles believed in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour
- But now people were telling them they needed something else
- Today, I don't know of people who teach 'Jesus and circumcision' for salvation
- But I do know that people teach Jesus and baptism by immersion
- Jesus and charismatic gifts, Jesus and good works
- Jesus and the nonconformist conscience (no drinking, smoking, gambling)
- Some people teach these things hardly knowing that is what they are teaching
- But the essence of the gospel is trusting in Jesus, which we show by obeying him

In Jerusalem, it appears that James (the Lord's brother) was a leader of the church

- It is James that gives the theological explanation of all that is happening
- First God called a people (Israel) from the Gentiles (Nations) for himself (his name)
- Now God himself had taken the initiative in Gentile ministry
- With a reference from Amos about the rebuilding of David's fallen tent
- God will supplement the remnant of Israel (David's fallen tent)
- With Gentiles who, even as people of faith, will continue as Gentiles (not Jews)
- For the essence of Old Testament teaching was not outward ritual but inward faith

So, Jews and Gentiles were no longer primarily Jews and Gentiles but Christians

- This was the principle of faith that had been established – neither Jew nor Greek
- But sharing around the table, what would they eat might divide, for until that time
- Commitment to Jesus as Israel's Messiah did not make Jews less Jewish

II PRACTICE OF FAITH

The business of the Jerusalem Council really falls into two parts

- The first part deals with the principle of faith
- Some Jews were claiming a theological necessity for Gentiles to be circumcised
- And to conform to the Jewish law in order to be saved – this was rejected
- Jews and Gentiles were all one in Christ Jesus, and saved through faith in him
- The second part considers how Gentiles should live in fellowship with Jews
- And advance the Jewish Christian mission across the Roman Empire
- After some debate James' (the Lord's brother) made a suggestion
- And this was formulated into a letter, which concludes

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

(Acts 15:28-29)

It is clear from the letter that the unity of the Christian community is important

- The letter basically takes a conciliatory tone
- And yet it is firm in its condemnation of the trouble caused by a particular group
- Again there is a contemporary application of this teaching
- Within every large church of which I have been minister there have been factions
- And the factions have differed in their opinions of one another and of me
- That is an occupational hazard for ministers, something we learn to live with
- Sometimes we allow trivial and unimportant issues to cloud the horizon
- Here the big issue is the principle of truth and how to put it into practice
- The principle of the truth is that Jews and Gentiles are made one in Christ
- But now a sticky issue is how to put that into practice
- And the answer was that they must do what they can to promote unity in the truth
- The letter from the Jerusalem Council to the Gentile believers records
- 'so we all agreed ...' (Acts 15:25) a great achievement in any meeting (unanimous)
- that is they were of one mind – the mind, of course, was the mind of Christ
- they realise that their decision has been divinely guided
- 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28)
- it was their unity in the Holy Spirit and in the mind of Christ that kept them together

Nevertheless the letter reflects the decision of the Jerusalem Council with four prohibitions

- three of the four prohibitions relate to food and one to sexual immorality
- you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols
- from blood
- from the meat of strangled animals
- from sexual immorality
- adding a rather interesting comment, 'you will do well to avoid these things'
- the four prohibitions are mentioned three times in Acts (15:20, 29; 21:25)
- but only sexual immorality is mentioned in Paul's letters and not the other three

Now, there are Christians who still think that all four of these prohibitions apply today

- the question arises, why do many Christians seem unperturbed about three of them
- but still adhere to the teaching that sexual immorality is wrong
- the point seems to be one of sensitivity to Jewish scruples
- if we knew a person who had been a strict Jew but who then became a Christian
- it would be a good gesture of fellowship to invite them to our home for a meal
- however, a thoughtful host/ess might choose not to serve a pork pie or black pudding
- the host/ess might enjoy pork pies and black pudding but it could be insensitive
- there are many other similar cases – we might not serve beef to a converted Hindu
- we might not serve meat at all to a converted Buddhist
- it is not that we think any of these things are wrong in themselves
- but we would not make life difficult or trying for the new convert

Gentile Christians are here receiving advice from the Jerusalem on how to be sensitive

- when sharing in fellowship with their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters
- Jews would not have eaten food that had been offered in pagan sacrifice
- Or the meat of strangled animals or anything with animal blood in it
- It would be better therefore to avoid these
- The general guidance is useful to us in all kinds of contexts for us today
- But it is not a hard and fast commandment in a Gentile context

The prohibition that is clearly different in kind concerns sexual immorality

- There are people who think that they have a clever argument by saying
- If you believe the Bible you either must not eat black pudding
- Or you must not be so traditional in your ideas about sexual immorality
- This case is made by those who advocate the equivalence homosexual partnerships
- This is a serious and sensitive point and needs consideration

There are two possible answers from the traditional point of view

- The first is that sexual immorality was a very big issue in the pagan world
- And especially shocking to Jewish Christians
- And that therefore Gentile Christians needed to be especially sensitive to this
- The second is that what the Jerusalem Council were really saying
- Was that Gentile Christians should not allow marriage within the prohibited degrees
- (typically relationships already shaped by a blood tie or marriage)
- I tend to favour the latter of these but the end product is much the same
- Now you are Christians remember the sensitivities of your Jewish brothers and sisters
- And remember also that marriage has a proper basis and live accordingly
- This would be an issue where Gentile Christians could have guilt by association
- As it could take a while for Jewish Christians to be accustomed to different foods
- So it could take a while for Gentile Christians to learn the proper base for marriage
- Gentile Christians would have to be sensitive at the table with Jewish brothers/sisters
- But they would have to say that if Gentile Christians continued to live immoral lives
- They would not continue in fellowship with them (1 Corinthians 5:9-11)
- Again the issue is somewhat different today but the underlying principle is there
- We must be careful not to endorse Christian immorality by leaving it unchallenged
- Which I think would be more important today than whether we shared a meal together

Applying these principles today could be very wide ranging

- Sensitivity to scruples of others is difficult – especially when we do not share them
- In Scotland, I had Christian friends who did not receive Sunday telephone calls
- That was not a scruple that I shared but I certainly would not have rung them
- People of other faith groups often feel that Christian women dress immodestly
- In our highly sexualised culture we have to consider that carefully
- What Christians call immorality the world might call ‘love’ we must stand firm
- I see Christians put their Bibles on the floor all the time
- This would horrify Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists – who would not understand
- In fact, since I have known that I have generally treated the Bible more reverently
- The apostle Paul tried to capture this thinking writing to the Corinthians

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1Cor 9:19-23).

It is on the principle that Paul decided that if Timothy was to be an effective witness

- That as Timothy was born of a Jewish mother he should be circumcised
- It was not necessary for salvation but it was helpful for the Christian mission

The underlying issue is keeping the PRINCIPLE OF FAITH, in our PRACTICE OF FAITH

- Maintaining also:

III PURITY OF FAITH

Kosher food was just one aspect of Israel needing to be a people separated and pure

- Retaining this purity was an extremely important aspect of their survival
- Therefore table fellowship with Gentiles and non-kosher food was a serious issue
- In the early church eating together was an important element of community life
- But now there was no distinction between Jews and Gentiles
- For God ‘purified their hearts by faith’
- It is this purity of faith and heart for which we must contend
- The Bible insists that salvation is by faith – faith in Jesus, crucified and risen
- It is to preserve the purity of faith and heart that the Christian turns to the scriptures
- Scripture is always our supreme standard for faith and practice
- It is here that we learn the truth of the gospel and how to live for Christ
- And whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, we are able to say:

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are.