

Eternity Daily Bible Study

Romans 9-16 The Implications of Salvation

PLEASE PRAY FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE AIBI

Number: 626

Verses: Romans 15:25-29

Topic: A Huge Mistake

Date: 5th March 2007

Romans 15:25-29 HCSB *Now, however, I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints; (26) for Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (27) Yes, they were pleased, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to Jews in material needs. (28) So when I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will go by way of you to Spain. (29) But I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.*

The Hebrew Christians were experiencing a great famine, the one predicted by Agabus that came to pass during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28,29). So, out of brotherly love, the new Gentile Christians from Macedonia and Achaia were sending a large financial contribution (Acts 11:29). The gathering of this gift was expounded on at length in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15. This helps us with our New Testament chronology as in 1 Corinthians the giving is explained, in 2 Corinthians there is an exhortation to complete it and later in Romans it is actually on its way to be delivered.

There is no explicit mention in Acts of the gift being gladly received and this has led some commentators maintain that it was refused by James and by the Jerusalem Church. But let us look at what Acts actually says:

Acts 21:15-26 HCSB *After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. (16) Some of the disciples from Caesarea also went with us and brought us to Mnason, a Cypriot and an early disciple, with whom we were to stay. (17) When we reached Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us gladly. (18) The following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. (19) After greeting them, he related one by one what God did among the Gentiles through his ministry. (20) When they heard it, they glorified God and said, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law. (21) But they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, by telling them not to circumcise their children or to walk in our customs. (22) So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come. (23) Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have obligated themselves with a vow. (24) Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law. (25) With regard to the Gentiles who have believed, we have written a letter containing our decision that they should keep themselves from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality." (26) Then the next day, Paul took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering for each of them would be made.*

Even at this relatively late date the Jewish Christians were "all zealous for the Law" and were all circumcised and following the Jewish customs and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church all wanted Paul to demonstrate that he was still "careful about observing the law".

This must have created a great tension for Paul as we can clearly see from Romans, Galatians and many other places that Paul said the gospel abrogated the Jewish Law! At this point Paul must have realized his great error in going to Jerusalem despite the clear danger warnings of so many (Acts 21:10-14). Soon the situation becomes out of control with Jews from Asia who had heard Paul's teachings creating a riot and forcing his imprisonment (Acts 21:27-40).

We can see that James and the other apostles of the Jerusalem Church were still "under the Law" and thought that was proper for Jews such as Paul. They were also very cautious about having Paul in their midst but were glad that the Gentiles were believing in Jesus. But even so for them Christianity worked one way for Jews and another way for Gentiles, and the Jewish way was by implication the better way.

They asked that some of the money he brought be used to pay for four brothers who were taking a Jewish vow "under the Law" and by instructing Paul to join them, which he did. However what happened to the rest of the money?

My interpretation is that the offering was not warmly accepted and may even have been rejected and that this rejection of the goodwill and fellowship of the Gentiles marked the end of the authority of the Jerusalem church over the Gentile church. Here is how I got to that conclusion:

1. Acts never mentions the money being "gladly accepted" which, after the enormous effort put into gathering up this offering is quite unusual. The conversion of the Gentiles is accepted, but the gift itself is never mentioned.
2. The Jerusalem apostles could not accept Paul's gift without:
 - a) angering the local Jewish population
 - b) to some extent accepting Paul's theology and
 - c) being under some obligation to Gentiles for the gift (which was very hard for a traditional Jew).
3. However if they refused the gift they insulted the entire Gentile church. Given the intense local pressures it was easier for them to insult the Gentiles who were far away and who were viewed by many as culturally and spiritually inferior.
4. By this date Paul had written Galatians and Romans and clearly was no longer a Torah-observing Jewish Christian and had burned all his theological bridges with Torah-observant Jewish Christians. His constant refrain that we died to the Law through the work of Christ on the cross and that circumcision was of the heart not the body would have completely upset Torah-observant Jewish Christians who circumcised their children and kept Jewish customs (Acts 21:21). The Gentiles sent their gift through Paul and thus by implication they agreed with Paul's theology.

5. The gift was a koinoinian or “fellowship offering” and was meant to cement fellowship between Gentile Christians and their Jewish founding church. Refusal of a fellowship offering was effectively refusal of fellowship. The churches of Macedonia and Achaia had given very liberally and sacrificially to the Torah-observant Jewish Christians. To have this goodwill offering rejected would have naturally caused deep resentment.
6. By disowning Paul and not intervening to help him once the other Jews started protesting the Jerusalem church also disowned the churches that Paul led – that is the Gentile churches.
7. When at the end of the book of Acts Paul finally does arrive in Rome and speaks to the Jews there his words are bitter and angry. In fact the last words of Paul in Acts are a bitter denunciation of Jewish unbelief (Acts 28:25-29).
8. The Gentile Christian literature after this point, with the possible exception of the Didache, is relatively free of Jewish legalism. Any desire to follow after the Jerusalem based apostles seems to have completely evaporated.
9. Though Luke tactfully omits the refusal from the book of Acts others who were present such as Trophimus would have taken the word back to the Gentile church and Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea would not have gone unnoticed. The word would have got back and the damage would have been done. By the time Paul left prison two years later the Gentile church would have moved away from any Jerusalem based control.
10. After this the Jerusalem church becomes very Jewish and is led by relatives of Jesus until about 110 AD when all the Jews are expelled from Jerusalem. Towards the end it only accepted a Hebrew edition of the book of Matthew as the gospel. Its rejection of Paul's gift and of the validity of the faith of the Gentiles sent it into rapid and permanent decline.

What happened then? Paul's gift had a huge unintended consequence in splitting the early church. His attempt at reconciliation totally backfired. God even warned him not to go! Financial aid can seem a great idea but have terrible long term consequences! No matter how good or honorable our intentions or how deep our need for reconciliation and validation, we must follow the Holy Spirit.

Another spiritual lesson from this is seen today whenever denominational tradition or cultural pride causes group A to disdain group B. It is always those who reject fellowship, who are in turn rejected by God.

Blessings,

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