

WHAT'S GOD DOING?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are all very concerned about events now taking place in the Middle East. God has always made that the focal point of history and of current events. With the intensification of developments there the circle has now come full term, because this is where Christianity began, where the explosion of the gospel first occurred. We have been tracing in the book of Acts the wonderful story of how this radical gospel began to break out upon a decadent, pagan society, to capture the interest and the hearts of men, to waken hope again in a hopeless world, and to change lives by a radical transformation of behavior and outlook.

This has been a very joyful account, one that illustrates tremendously compellingly the triumph and the power of the gospel. But, we have noticed, it has also been an account of the costliness of the spreading of the gospel. Paul and Barnabas and the others who proclaimed the truth of God in that first century met with bitter and violent opposition everywhere they went. Riots were created in cities where they preached, and everywhere they turned they found themselves confronted with an opposition that was ready to take their lives. Not only that, but they met with treacherous betrayal from within, because these are the ruthless tactics of the enemy that we combat.

Today, in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, we will look at the story of the most important, or rather the worst, of these inner betrayals of the gospel. In this chapter we learn of the clear emergence of what we can only call false Christianity. You will never understand Christianity, and you will never understand the church, until you understand that there are always present, in any so-called Christian gathering, manifestations and representatives of both true and false Christianity. Unfortunately, false Christianity is believed by millions who think they have understood the true, and have rejected the false. Therefore their minds are closed to the truth when it comes. Here we are going to see the first emergence, and the characteristics, of that kind of false Christianity which is unthinkingly accepted by millions of people today as the real thing.

Dr. Luke gives us the background in the opening verses:

**But some men came down from Judea [to Antioch] and were teaching the brethren,
"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."
And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and
Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles
and the elders about this question. {Acts 15:1-2 RSV}**

As so often in Acts, we have here a greatly condensed account of events which occurred over a period of several months. It all began with the introduction of a very plausible and attractive heresy which came disguised as Christianity. Luke says that certain Jewish brethren, who ostensibly were Christians, came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. They came among the Gentile believers there, who had just come out of raw paganism, who had been idolaters, had been devotees of the licentious and sexually immoral practices of the pagan temples. These Gentiles had been hopeless in their outlook toward the future beyond this life and were sunken in despair and darkness, but then God had saved them. They were now rejoicing in Christ. But these Jewish brethren came to them and said, as Luke quotes them here, verbatim: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." This introduced an issue which split the church at Antioch wide open. They were really saying, "In order to become a Christian, you must first become a Jew. Unless you become a Jew, you are a second-class Christian, if a Christian at all." Thus they challenged the gospel of the grace of God, as Paul and Barnabas had been proclaiming it.

So the first really serious internal strife within the church was over race and ritual -- over the question of Jews versus Gentiles, and of circumcision as the sign of acceptance.

This specific issue has long ago passed away as a concern to us; but the principle behind it is very, very

present with us yet today. The enemy has simply changed the players on the program. He has substituted some new issues on the same old divisive platform.

In many places today the issue is whether blacks are supposed to worship with whites. I read just this morning that one of the largest churches in Birmingham, Alabama, has been split for weeks over the question of whether they ought to admit one lone black woman to membership in a church which has never had a black member for ninety-eight years.

More widely perhaps, this same principle is involved in the feelings which many Christians have about hippies. They say that hippies cannot belong to the Christian church, that the gospel is not for them. I spoke a few weeks ago about one of our former interns who was working very successfully among the hippy culture in Los Angeles and bringing great crowds of them into the church he represented. He was dismissed, finally, because, as the official board of that church put it, "He's bringing the riff raff off the streets into the church."

That is the kind of issue that they had in Antioch.

I remember how shocked I was a few years ago at the reply a young couple gave to my suggestion that they visit another couple who were newcomers to our church. They looked at me and said, "Oh, no, you don't want them. They're not our kind of people." I had everything I could do to restrain myself from tongue-lashing them on the spot, because that is such a hateful denial of the universality of the church, and of its inclusion of all types and ages and backgrounds and races.

Not only people, but also rituals often become bones of contention today:

Substitute baptism for circumcision and you bring the issue right up to date. There are many who think you cannot become a Christian unless you are baptized.

You can substitute even more contemporary issues. Some insist that unless you undergo the ritual of a haircut, you cannot become a Christian. Barbers have now become the priests of our day.

Others say that no one should be admitted to a church gathering unless they have their shoes on. But I confess to you that I have searched the Scriptures and I cannot find anything there which says you must wear shoes to church.

These external issues are the kind of things that Christians are splitting over today. And that was what was occurring in Antioch. It was a tough question to settle. This issue had great power over these new Christians. They were relatively untaught, and the whole idea appeared very plausible, on several grounds:

First of all, these men who came down from Jerusalem were evidently sincere. They were not simply trying to cause trouble; they were deeply committed to the belief that unless a Gentile complied with the Law of Moses and was circumcised, he had no right to call himself a Christian. This whole concept struck with the tremendous force because of the sincerity of these men. They deeply believed it.

Furthermore, it looked as though it had a great deal of scriptural support. There are passages in the Old Testament which say that ultimately Israel will rule over the Gentile nations, and that the Jews are set aside as God's own people with a peculiarly special relationship to him. They went through the Scriptures and selected these verses, ignoring others that temper and balance them, and, like any good cultist today, they presented a tremendously appealing program that seemed to be based solidly in Scripture. With it they shook the faith of these people in Antioch.

What they were doing was to fail to allow God to reveal new truth. They were basing their position on the assumption that all truth had been given already in that day. But the Scriptures were not yet completed. God was revealing new truth. Remember that the Apostle Paul tells us very plainly that this whole truth about the Jews and the Gentiles becoming one body in Jesus Christ was never mentioned in the Old Testament. He says it was a mystery hidden from previous generations. It was something that was not known previously but was revealed to the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament era. But, for this reason, it was difficult indeed

to prove that this was not a violation of the Scriptures.

Third, the position of these men appeared to be supported by the church in Jerusalem. They came from James, the brother of our Lord Jesus himself, who had been raised with Jesus and could testify to the fact that Jesus obeyed the Law and was circumcised according to the Law of Moses. Using these arguments they had great power in the preaching of this heresy. Thus it is no wonder that Luke says they caused no small dissension and debate. That is another of Luke's understatements.

Though we are not told so here, this is unquestionably when occurred that incident which the Apostle Paul records in his letter to the Galatians. The Apostle Peter came down to Antioch and at first had perfect freedom to eat with the Gentiles. Peter enjoyed his first taste of a ham sandwich, and he had bacon and eggs every morning. He was rejoicing in his freedom in Christ. But, Paul says, when certain men came down from James and began to preach that you cannot be saved unless you are circumcised according to the Law of Moses, Peter (think of it! Peter the apostle) was carried away by this dissension. He went over to the kosher table for breakfast and no longer ate with the Gentiles. And Barnabas (Barnabas, Paul's faithful co-laborer in the dissemination of the Gospel!) was carried away likewise, for a brief time, until Paul straightened him out. Paul had to rebuke the Apostle Peter publicly for his inconsistency. You see what Luke means when he says this was no small debate. This was an important issue which threatened to divide Christianity for the rest of time!

So Paul and Barnabas were appointed by the church to go up to Jerusalem. Be careful not to read that as though Paul were uncertain as to the truth and had to consult with the other apostles before it was settled. Paul never had a moment's doubt over this issue. He tells us in Galatians that he went to Jerusalem by revelation. The Lord finally had to tell him, "Paul, I want you to go." And Paul was prepared to defy all twelve apostles and the whole church of Jerusalem if they should differ with him on this issue, because he knew what the Lord Jesus had revealed to him directly. He did not get his gospel from the apostles; he got it from the Lord. So he stood firm. For a while the whole fate of the gospel hung upon this one man's faithfulness.

So Paul goes to Jerusalem because this is the best way to silence these Judaizing teachers. If the church at Jerusalem will repudiate this doctrine, then these Judaizers will be thwarted and will have little to say of any effect. So they go up to Jerusalem for the first ecumenical council. Dr. Luke takes us to the gathering:

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. {Acts 15:4-12 RSV}

From this account, alone, it would seem as though there were one great meeting in Jerusalem, but actually there were three:

First there was a body life service when Paul and Barnabas arrived. This was the first time these men had appeared in Jerusalem after their triumphant missionary journey through the Galatian cities, and so they were welcomed home. What a grand occasion it must have been, as Paul and Barnabas stood up and told about all that God had done. They told of how they had held street meetings in front of saloons in the various cities

where they went, of how riots had started over them and they had been kicked out of meetings and driven out of towns. And they told of how, through it all, God had worked with them and confirmed their words and changed the lives of many. It stirred the whole church in Jerusalem to hear this account.

Then the next day there was a private meeting which Paul mentions in Galatians but which Luke does not record here. There Paul and the other apostles and the elders sat down and together discussed Paul's theology. "At the end of that meeting," Paul says, "it was quite apparent that these men who had lived and traveled with the Lord Jesus had absolutely nothing to add to me." In other words, from the Lord, Paul had learned directly what Jesus had taught the others through the whole scope of his ministry. Paul's gospel was exactly the same as theirs -- not one whit different. "And when they saw that," Paul says, "they extended to me the right hand of fellowship and put their blessing upon my ministry. We realized that we were proclaiming the same truth exactly," {cf, Gal 2:1-10, especially 2:9}.

The day after, there followed the great general meeting in which they took up this very divisive issue of whether you had to be circumcised in order to be a Christian. Titus had come to Jerusalem with Paul on this occasion and he became the focus of all the contention. The question was whether this young man, who was a Greek and not a Jew, had to be circumcised or not. You can imagine how embarrassed poor Titus was. But Paul tells us that this was the issue, and there was a great deal of debate as Luke records. There always is in such a meeting. The issue must be thoroughly aired. And, as always, there are two kinds of speakers: those who have something to say, and those who have to say something. So it went on and on.

Finally, Peter stood up.

It is important to note that Peter did not convene this council. If, as our Catholic friends tell us, he had been the first pope, that would have been his responsibility. But he did not. James was the president of the council and Peter was merely a spokesman.

Notice also that they did not settle anything by majority vote. They were seeking the mind of the Spirit which would be expressed in a sense of unity that they would all recognize. That is why the issues had to be clearly aired.

I am really surprised that Peter could keep silence as long as he did because that is not like him. He was always opening his mouth to change feet. But he was probably chastened and humbled by the recent rebuke he had received at the hand of the Apostle Paul. And so, biding his time and awaiting God's moment, he finally rises to speak. He has three things that he wants to say:

First he reminds them that at the very beginning of his ministry God had taught him a great lesson along this line, and had stripped him of all the ugly Jewish prejudices which he had possessed even as a Christian. God made him face up to the fact that he loved and searched for and wanted non-Jewish believers as much as Jews. Peter had told, in an earlier council in Jerusalem, of the struggle he went through in this area. Now he reminds them again of how, in the home of Cornelius, he had learned something new about the heart of God.

Then, (and this is very significant), he admits to them publicly and openly, challenging them to deny it, that the effort to obey the Law by trying their hardest was nothing but a burdensome yoke upon their necks, and had been throughout Jewish history. That is an amazing challenge, but this is what he said: "Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" Nobody ever came to God by trying to be good. Never. No Jew, no Gentile, no one ever came to him that way. The effort to do so has only been a crushing burden which has bowed people down under an intolerable weight, until they were oftentimes crushed in despair.

Peter's third point is a real blockbuster. He says to these Jews, "Look, I believe that we Jews shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as those Gentiles will." In other words, the norm for God's operation in saving men is more visible when he saves a Gentile than it is when he saves a Jew. The Jew often confuses the issue by his efforts at self-righteousness. But the Gentile does not try that. He usually just accepts the grace of God because he has no other way to turn. So Peter says, "I have come to see that we Jews are on exactly the same basis as these Gentiles, when it comes to being saved."

Now that was a real thought-provoker, and Luke tells us that it had impressive effect. "All the assembly kept silence," {Acts 15:12a RSV}. Even these Judaizers were silenced by that argument. Of course, that meant that they stopped talking and started thinking. Then "they listened as Barnabas and Paul related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles," {Acts 15:12b RSV}. Paul and Barnabas seized the occasion to confirm the words of Peter by showing that God was doing the very thing he said, not only in saving men, but also in confirming that these two were apostles. They had the signs of an apostle to prove it, the signs and wonders that God had done through them. This is probably when Paul and Barnabas received the right hand of fellowship, acknowledging that they were indeed authenticated apostles.

At this point, the chairman of the meeting, James, speaks. This is the conclusion of the whole event:

After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. Symeon [i.e., Peter] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written,
'After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will set it up,
that the rest of men may seek the Lord
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old.'
Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity [literally, fornication] and from what is strangled and from blood. For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues." {Acts 15:13-21 RSV}

This is an extremely important statement. It is made by the man who was the flesh-and-blood brother of the Lord Jesus. He had been raised in that home in Nazareth and had seen all that his older brother had done all his life. He had not believed in him until after the resurrection. But in the resurrection he saw confirmation of all the witness that the Spirit had borne to his heart through those years, and he became a believer in Jesus Christ. He holds the utmost respect of all factions in the church. He is called James the Just, and Old Camel-knees, because he prayed so long he wore holes in his robe and raised calluses on his knees. He is a man of tremendous integrity.

He summarizes now, after listening to the mind of the Spirit. He says four things which are of extreme importance:

First, he came squarely to terms with the activity of God. These Judaizers had been saying to the Gentiles, "Without circumcision you cannot be saved." But they were ignoring one very stubborn fact -- those Gentiles were already saved. God had already been saving Gentiles without asking anybody's permission to do so, and he was doing it without any ritual, or even any reference to the Law of Moses. And with this point they could not argue. That was extremely important because it forced them to take note of the direction of God's activity. They saw that God was already doing what they said could not be done, and, thus, God was overruling them.

But now notice the second point. It is supremely important! That activity was accepted as the valid activity of God only as it corresponded to the written Word of God. I wish I could get that across to people today. There is so much activity going on in our day which is being called the work of the Spirit of God, but which is not in line with what the Word of God says. And people are accepting it naively, ingenuously, because it has some appearance of supernatural activity. You see, it is all right to note what God is doing, but be sure it is God doing it.

Jack Sparks was telling me not long ago that he has been in meetings in Berkeley where he watched guitars and books come up off chairs and float around the room under the influence of demonic spirits. Yet many there said, "Look, God's at work!" But that which does not correspond with the Word of God is not the activity of God, no matter how it looks. There is so much occurring like this today.

There are meetings where people break out into tongues, and everyone says, "Oh, look at the restoration of the gift of tongues. God is at work. The Spirit is at work!" My question is, "Is it the biblical gift of tongues?" When you compare it with what the Bible says about the gift of tongues there is scarcely any resemblance at all. So I must say, "That is not God at work."

There are other things; for example, healings. I certainly believe that God can heal; I'm not denying that. But each healing must be questioned, to discern where it arises. James accepted this activity as of God only as he saw that it corresponded to the Word of God. He quoted one of the prophets, Amos, who had predicted that there would come a time when the Gentiles would be reached.

There are certain scholars today who attempt to infer that James is giving here a sort of outline of future events. "After this (the second coming) Jesus will return and restore Israel, rebuild the dwelling of David, etc. And then the Gentiles who are called by my name shall come to Christ..." But I honestly do not think he is doing that. James is viewing this prediction as referring to the first coming of Jesus. I do not question that there is a greater fulfillment awaiting us at the second coming. But here he is talking about the first coming, the coming of the Lord as the son of David, to gather up all the crushed and broken hopes of the Davidic line, and to fulfill the promise made to David by God: "Thou shalt never lack a king to sit upon thy throne," {cf, 2 Sam 7:16 KJV}. The fact is that the gospel, by that first coming, began to go out to the Gentiles. In other words, James is confirming, by the prediction of the Word of God, what Peter and Paul and Barnabas had declared. His point is that God intends to save Gentiles and he had already begun in the home of Cornelius.

Third, James gives three or four very practical suggestions for a letter to the Gentile believers, designed to lay this controversy to rest. He says, "We should write to them to abstain from idolatry, from fornication [sexual immorality], from eating that which is strangled, and from eating blood. For from early generations Moses has in every city those who preach him [and who would therefore be offended]." Notice the classification here: two things in the moral realm (idolatry and sexual immorality) and two things in the realm of Christian love, of sensitivity and understanding toward others. If the Gentiles ate animals that were strangled and ate blood, they would have great difficulty in fellowshiping with Jewish believers in Christ, who still clung to some of the dietary laws. So James wisely suggests that they should, in love, forego these practices in order to have fellowship in the body of Christ.

But notice that there is a footnote in the Revised Standard Version which suggests that the words, "and from what is strangled" are not in the better texts (here and also in Verse 29, later in the chapter). I personally believe that phrase was not in the original text, and that James pointed out only three things: they were to abstain from idolatry, from fornication, and from blood, which in that context means murder. I feel this is the case, not only because of the manuscript support but because these three practices are attacks, direct denials of Christian faith, in the areas of the spirit, the soul, and the body of men. If you do these things, James is saying, you are denying by your actions what you affirm is your faith.

The Scriptures support this reading. Paul says, "You cannot eat at the table of idols and the table of the Lord" {cf, 2 Cor 6:16}, it is one or the other. In the spirit, you can only worship one god. It is either God or a demon; one or the other.

In the soul, you can only give your inner life to one lord. If you give it away in sexual immorality, you are destroying yourself. Interestingly, Scripture everywhere warns against this. Peter himself says, "Flee youthful passions which war against the soul," {cf, 1 Pet 2:11}. In other words, sexual immorality, fornication, is the most devastating thing you can do to yourself psychologically. It destroys the emotional life. It breaks up the inner integrity of mankind. This is why the Bible says that nations which give themselves to widespread immorality are bringing upon themselves certain destruction, because they are undermining the whole concept of society.

And, of course, the third evil practice, against the body, is very evident. John says, "You know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him," {1 Jn 3:15b RSV}. You cannot, as an individual, take the life of another in anger, and still claim that you really belong to Jesus Christ.

James' fourth point, with which we will wind up, is to define the supreme purpose of God today. This is most important of all. He says these amazing words: "Peter has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name," {cf, Acts 15:14}. That is what God is doing in history. There is the focus of history. For the entire record of human life, this is the one thing God is doing: He is calling out a people for his name. Everything that happens in history or current events relates somehow to that great program of God. This is the place to begin in order to interpret history or current events.

Why are we having a war in Southeast Asia, from which we cannot extricate ourselves? Because God has determined that what is happening there is preparing the way, by some unseen and perhaps even unseeable process, for the people involved to be awakened, so that they will believe the gospel and he can call out a people for his name.

This is why God allows things to happen.

God may permit terrible catastrophes and awful persecutions and judgments to come upon a people in order to make them wake up to reality and turn to him, so that thus he will be able to call out a people for his name.

He may isolate a nation for years, centuries sometimes, shut it off and allow it to sink into darkness and despair and hopelessness, in order that, when the right psychological moment arrives, he can open the door and let the gospel in, and the people will respond in great numbers. I believe that is what he is doing in China today.

Everything relates to this one great task of God.

And let me say this: According to the Bible, one of these days our great American cities are going to lie in ashes, crumbled to the dust, destroyed perhaps in a great nuclear holocaust. Civilization will be tremendously altered, much of it destroyed. Out of the crumbling chaos of those days one institution involving humans will survive, and only one: The church of the Lord Jesus Christ, a people called out for his name's sake.

That is what God is producing in this world. Somehow everything relates to that. And unless your life, and my life, finds a part in that program, it, too, is worthless.

Only what God does is worthwhile. And if we do not find a part in what God is doing, in reaching out to all the nations and all the cultures and the tribes and peoples of earth, to call out from among them a people for his name, we have no justification for having lived. We are to be part of that great program.

My question to you, to my own heart, is, at this moment:

- What *am I* doing about it?
- Where *do I* fit into this?
- *Am I* concerned about that which concerns God?
- *Am I* involved in what God is involved in -- moving to call out a people for his name?

Prayer:

Our Father, help us to take these words with utmost seriousness, as they were taken in the first century, and thus split the world wide open in that day. Help us to do the same in our day, realizing that your great purpose has gone forward relentlessly. Throughout all the changing currents of human history, you are accomplishing what you set out to do. Grant that we may have a part, giving ourselves to the Lord Jesus, that we may be instruments of his working. We pray in his name, Amen.

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