

WHAT ABOUT ACTS 15?

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good people do nothing.”

~ Edmund Burke

One of the important lessons of Acts 15 is that good people DID SOMETHING when they saw the truth in the Church of God in need of defense. God’s people voluntarily came and the church sent others to Jerusalem, from vast distances, to work out the difficulties over the issue of Gentile circumcision. It was not just the “upper paid ministry” that came together to resolve their problems. Their difficulties were dealt with in a respectful manner, but there were no fear or intimidation tactics used against the people at the conference. Such tactics were not yet being employed in the Church of God.

What can we learn about church leadership, and how the church governed itself from Acts 15? A lot! Let’s begin with how this conference was called together:

*Acts 15:2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, **they** determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.*

*3 So, **being sent on their way by the church**, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.*

Notice “the church” sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to confer with the other apostles and elders about this important matter. Again, we see a collegial approach to the guidance and leadership within the church. Sometimes Paul “sent” Timothy. But at other times, it was Paul who was “sent” by the local or regional church membership.

Make no mistake, Paul was the main leader over the Gentile churches. He sometimes had to correct them in love. He guided them by expounding and sharing with them God’s words. But he did not rule over or govern them as we see today by those who practice their self-appointed approach of government by pyramidal hierarchy. Let’s learn further from God’s Word:

In verses 4 and 6 of Acts 15, we see that Paul and Barnabas and others were received not by some “higher up” pyramidal committee of a leading “council of elders” or church “board,” but they were received by the church, the apostles and the elders. The elders played a significant and important role with the apostles in this doctrinal matter of

applying God's Word. It was very collegial. This is God's truth made plain! Today, this clear example from God is not being practiced by many church leaders who, apparently are seeking to maintain the status quo of their power and control. In Acts 15, we see that once the evidence of God's Word was presented to the gathering of apostles, elders and many church brethren, a collegial consensus was formed. It was James who made the final pronouncement and judgment (verses 13–19), not Peter. Then they decided to write a letter to clarify that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, as did the Israelites. Notice from whom it was addressed:

Acts 15:22 *Then it pleased the apostles **and elders, with the whole church**, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.*

23 *They wrote this letter by them: **The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren** who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.*

The letter came from 1) the apostles, 2) the elders, and 3) THE BRETHREN! Many brethren were also at this conference. This is virtually never done by the “leading” COGs today! WHY? It is one thing for people to SAY they’re restoring apostolic Christianity, however it is entirely another thing to actually do it!

It is clear that the apostles did have more influence and authority than the elders. They were taught directly by Christ. But the whole conference was INCLUSIVE, not exclusive of the brethren. The apostles did NOT pontificate to the elders and brethren as they sat quietly and listened. The brethren were much more involved than they are allowed or encouraged to be today. What has happened?

It's not the tail wagging the dog. But the system which was and is practiced by the Gentiles has crept in among us, wherein a few at the top RULE OVER their subjects! This might seem acceptable, if it were not for the fact that Jesus said this “shall not be so among you” (Matt.20:25-27).

Paul was no more a “yes man” to the church membership than he was to other ministers or apostles (Gal.1:10). But neither was he intimidated or fearful of any “power” wielded by those at the “top” of some man-made pyramid of power. **Nor was he concerned about losing his salary, for what he taught or for standing on Godly principle!**

Mr. Armstrong recognized the abusive use of salary in an attempt to force paid ministers to do or say what those “at the top” wanted. Read the words (that one presiding church leader has said were “prophetic”) from page 528, Volume 1 (1986 Edition) of Mr. Armstrong's *Autobiography*:

“I know of evangelists who probably are sincere in supposing they are serving God – and who would like to be free to proclaim many truths they now hold back. They reason

something like this: “If I go farther, and preach those things, I’ll lose all my support. I’d be cut off from the ministry altogether. Then I could preach NOTHING. Better to serve God by preaching as much of the Biblical truth as possible, than to be prevented from preaching anything.” They are relying on the financial support of MEN, or of organizations of men. Anyone in that predicament is the SERVANT OF MEN and NOT OF GOD, whether he realizes it or not.”

How sadly true this remains today!

Yet in spite of this warning, the system (set up shortly after this section of the autobiography originally was written) created the very environment that Mr. Armstrong himself said he personally refused to subject himself to. It is a system where ministers all around the world are controlled by one man and his assistants or by a “board.” This worldwide control over the ministry is enforced via their paychecks, their rites of clergy within the organization, and even ultimately by the threat of the loss of their “membership” in the church. This system continues to predominate to this day. But it is not apostolic or Biblical. Indeed, money is a root of evil (1 Tim.6:10).

There is no power or authority except that ordained by God (Rm.13:1). So all power can be checked by scripture to see what is in line with God’s Word and what is therefore ordained of God, and what is not. That which is not, is merely of men. We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). God is our Provider, not men or their systems of hierarchy.

We are not the only ones who have seen this. Other church leaders once knew, or at least taught the same or similar things. In 1993, the Global Church of God, published a fine booklet titled *Church Government and Church Unity*. Sadly however, within a couple of years of growth of that church organization, this booklet was no longer offered. Notice what it said on page 12:

*“Note that Paul did **not** unilaterally make this decision! It was obviously made – in a “collegial” manner – in concert with the other ministers and leaders of the local church. And so Paul and others were to go up to the apostles (plural) and ELDERS (plural) about this question. No hint that they were to go and present themselves before “Pope Peter” and get HIS decision. For again, there WAS NO MOSES in the New Testament Church!”*

Continuing: *“God guided **many** apostles and elders to work in a brotherly, non-threatening, collegial atmosphere, and no single one of the apostles towered over the others at that conference!”* Further on that same page it states: *“Because of the open, brotherly atmosphere inspired by the Holy Spirit in this conference, the elders were not intimidated by the apostles and obviously were listened to with respect.”* *“So being SENT on their way by the church [**not** Paul’s own decision]... And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church [**not** “Pope Peter”] and the apostles and ELDERS (verses 3-4).”* On the following page the author asked, *“How utterly **different** is the ‘flavor’ of this meeting as compared with modern times!”*

That is so true. But why ask the question if one is not willing to make real changes and follow God's pattern?

On page 15 of the same booklet under the section entitled "*The Government of GOD?*," the author admitted the following:

*"Unwittingly, we have been rather careless in using the term "Government of God." This term **never** appears as such in the Bible, and certainly not in connection with New Testament church organization or government. Yet, in the Church, most of the ministers and brethren seem to think that the awesome title "Government of God" is wielded by **whoever** happens to "get in charge" of any local church congregation, or the Church at large." And later on page 23, the author asks: "Can they just say that, 'the government of God' [actually the very human government in the Church!] says it is okay, so it must be 'just fine?' **Of course not!**"*

These are very candid admissions. Many appreciated very much the approach set forth in this fine booklet, and were disappointed to find that many of the principles it so clearly spelled out did not appear to be being practiced. Many people were also sad to see that this booklet was no longer being offered. In my opinion, the matter was beautifully summed up on page 29 when the author wrote: "*Given that, the **KEY FACTOR** that we have been pointing out in this booklet is that the human church government must **NEVER** attempt to override or supersede the **DIRECT** government of God through His written Word and the inspired guidance of His Holy Spirit!" WELL SAID! **God's Word is the "DIRECT" government of God to all of us!** Anything else leads to rebellion towards God and leads to idolatry.*

Quite a number of brethren in God's Church have understood many of these things. Yet, as happened before, people can become complacent and comfortable in the old systems. Others are fearful of their minister or church leaders, so they just continue to quietly submit – but not all. Many have begun to understand these things, which explains the incredible growth of one of the largest segments of the Church of God, sometimes sarcastically called "the independents," by some in leadership positions in the "larger" or so called "main" COG organizations.

As the "independents" grow in knowledge and humility, they will more and more be able to share fellowship together with various groups among God's people. They may even be able to unite in support of certain efforts to preach the Gospel (Good News) to the entire world! True children of God who are in small independent scattered groups, are God's people just as much as those in any of the larger church "organizations." They need and deserve the same love, care, attention and prayer as any other member of the body of Christ. Indeed, true ministers are to seek those who have been scattered or driven away, and to encourage and help them as part of the fold of the True Shepherd – Jesus Christ (Ezek.33).

What might have happened to God's Church had the brethren not requested the conference as they did in Acts 15:2? Edmund Burke was right when he said "***All that is necessary for the triumph of evil, is that good people do nothing.***" What if the "good people" were so fearful that they did and said nothing? What if the brethren and elders in Acts 15 thought, "Since Jesus is in charge, and this is the Government of God, I'll do and say nothing"? What if? But by the revealed Way of Jesus Christ (Gal.2:2), they found a peaceful and humble way to DO SOMETHING! True Harmony and Unity was the result of their action!