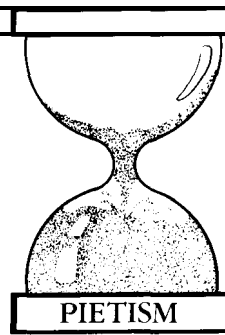


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. II, No. 5

©ICE, 1989

May 1989

"THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT . . ." PART ONE

by Michael R. Gilstrap

Dr. Cl. Scofield wrote in his notes to Acts 15, "Dispensationally, this is the most important passage in the N.T. It gives the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next."¹ The editors of the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1967, temper the original note, but nevertheless also see the passage as quite important to the dispensational system. The revised note reads, "This important passage shows God's program for this age."²

The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15 is, of course, Luke's narrative of the proceedings of the first Church council. The occasion of the council was the crisis that had been created by the reception of the Gentiles into the infant Church. Antioch was the center of the Church's activity among the Gentiles, so it was natural that the crisis surfaced there. Luke records that "certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (v. 1).

Having just returned from their first missionary journey among Gentiles, Paul and Barnabas had definite opinions about this new evangelism program for Gentiles, ostensibly sent down by the home office. As a matter of fact, in no uncertain terms, they told the good brothers of Judea **exactly** where they could file that program. The leadership in the Antioch Church didn't quite know what to do, so they did what any good churchman does in the face of a potentially explosive situation, they kicked the matter upstairs. After all, what were those apostles and elders getting paid for anyway? And, since Paul and Barnabas felt so strongly about the matter, they decided to pack them off to Jerusalem as well. Let 'em fight it out with the heavyweights, and let the Church at Antioch get on about her business.

So off Paul and Barnabas went. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were greeted by the apostles and elders, and "they reported all things that God had done for them" (v. 4). Undoubtedly they told of how the Lord had converted many Gentiles through their ministry. Paul may have gleefully told how the Holy Spirit had waxed that nasty sorcerer Elymas (Peter particularly enjoyed that story), and Barnabas probably related their suspenseful escape from Iconium.

No sooner than they'd settled in, swapping war stories with Peter, James, and company, than some Pharisees

crashed the party to argue that "it was necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles], and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (v. 5). Recognizing that the fun and fellowship would have to wait, James convened the Jerusalem Council to consider the matter of the Gentiles' reception into the Church.

Unfortunately, the Lord didn't see fit to give us a blow-by-blow account of the debate. Luke's understated remark is simply that there was "much dispute." To put it in the vernacular, it was a knock-down-drag-out of the sort that sailors and fishermen especially enjoy. Finally, Peter stands up and says that the Council should not make any distinction between Jews and Gentiles because God doesn't; after all, He gave the Holy Spirit to both Jew and Gentile, and both Jew and Gentile are saved in the same manner (vv. 7-11). Paul and Barnabas shout "AMEN!", and then add that God had worked many miracles through them among the Gentiles (v. 12). Finally, James rises. As the head honcho of the Jerusalem Church, he issues the decree:

Men and brethren, listen to me: Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: "*After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen down. I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things.*" Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath. (Acts 15:13-21 NKJV).

What James decrees then, is that Gentiles are to be welcomed into the Church with open arms. What happened to Peter at Cornelius' house is not a unique, strange event. As a matter of fact, it is obviously the first among many such events. To underline his decree, he quotes from Amos 9:11-12. Even the prophets foretold a day when Israel would be exalted, and when the Gentiles also would seek the Lord. This whole chain of events is in accordance with Scripture! But to preserve peace and order in the Church (i.e., to keep the "no small dissensions" and "much disputes" to a minimum), it is wise to advise the Gentiles not to throw the baby out with the bath. Just because it's unnecessary for them to be circumcised and keep the minutiae of the Law of Moses, doesn't mean they're free to

1. C.I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945 [1909]), 1169.

2. The New Scofield Reference Bible, edited by E. Schuyler English, et al, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1185.

fornicate, drink blood, or ignore the danger of pollution by idolatry. The decree met with the approval of the Council, and a written decree was drafted to be circulated among the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

Thus we have in a nutshell the overwhelmingly accepted interpretation of this passage from the earliest times until now – that is, with the major exception of dispensationalism.

The Dispensational View of the Jerusalem Council's Decree

As noted in the introduction, Scofield saw this passage as the most important in the New Testament. He writes:

It gives the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next. (1) The taking out from among the Gentiles of a people for His name, the distinctive work of the present, or church-age. The church is the *ecclesia* – the “called out” assembly. Precisely this has been in progress since Pentecost. The Gospel has never anywhere converted all, but everywhere has called out *some*. (2) “After this [viz., the outcalling] I will return,” James quotes Amos 9:11,12. The verses which follow in Amos describe the final regathering of Israel, which the other prophets invariably connect with the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (e.g., Isa. 11:1, 10-12; Jer. 23:5-8). (3) “And I will build again the tabernacle of David,” i.e., re-establish the David rule over Israel (2 Sam. 7:8-17; Lk. 1:31 -33). (4) “That the residue of men [Israelites] may seek after the Lord” (cf. Zech. 12:7-8; 13:1-2). (5) “And all the Gentiles,” etc. (cf. Mic. 4:2; Zech. 8:21-22). This is also the order of Rem. 11:24-27.3

Following Scofield's five part breakdown, we see that what he understands James' message to be is quite different from the interpretation commonly accepted. Scofield finds in these verses the “plan of the ages!” First, God calls out a “Church” made up of Gentiles. Then Christ returns to set up the fulfillment of the Davidic Kingdom (the Millennium). During the Millennium, Israel is drawn to the Lord, but Gentiles are also saved during this period.

The pivotal exegetical premises for the dispensationalist are identified by John Walvoord. He writes:

The evident blessing of God upon the Gentiles, their salvation, and spiritual gifts were indisputable evidence

that a change in approach to the Gentiles was necessary. They must face the fact that both Jew and Gentile were saved by *grace* in exactly the same manner. How was this to be reconciled with the promises of God to Israel? It is this which James answers,

He states, in effect, that it was God's purpose to bless the Gentiles as well as Israel, but in their order. — God was to visit the Gentiles *first*, “to take out of them a people for his name.” James goes on to say that this is entirely in keeping with the prophets, for they had stated that the period of Jewish blessing and triumph should be *after* the Gentile period: “After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen,” Instead of identifying the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David, it is carefully distinguished by the *first* (referring to Gentile blessing), and after this (referring to Israel's coming glory). The passage, instead of identifying God's purpose for the church and for the nation Israel, established a specific time order. Israel's blessing will not come until “I return,” apparently reference to the second coming of Christ. That it could not refer either to the incarnation or to the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost is evident in that neither is a “return.” The passage under consideration constitutes, then, an important guide in determining the purpose of God. God will first conclude His work for the Gentiles in the period of Israel's dispersion; then He will return to bring in the promised blessings for Israel.⁴

In the above passage, Walvoord focuses more tightly than Scofield on the linch-pin of the passage. For the dispensationalist, the entire interpretation depends on the meaning of the phrase “at the first” in v. 14, and the phrase “after this” in v. 16. There are a number of problems with this interpretation. Furthermore, identifying the phrase “I will return” with the second coming is also open to serious question.

Next month, we will look at these exegetical problems, — pointing out not only how it is impossible for the passage to mean what the dispensationalist says it means, but also demonstrating that Cl. Scofield himself recognized the tenuousness of his scheme, *but he argued for it nevertheless!*

3. Scofield Reference Bible, 1169-1170

4. John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 205-206.