



"The Jerusalem Council"

Acts 15:1-35

Study Guide #18 for the week of
May 29, 2022

The Council at Jerusalem - Acts 15:1-21

Some questions to answer and discuss:

1. Who came to Antioch? Why? (15:1)
2. How did the apostles determine to resolve the problem in Antioch? (15:2)
3. How did James summarize his views? (15:13-21)
4. What was wise about using a council to deal with the thorny issue of how non-Jews could be saved?
5. When dealing with difficult issues, what do we need to include in the decision-making process?
6. Where can you get help resolving an issue about which you are unsure?

Life Application Bible Notes

15:1 The question of whether Gentile believers should obey the law of Moses in order to be saved was extremely critical at this point in Christianity's history and could have potentially split the early church if not handled carefully. The controversy had intensified with the success of the new Gentile churches. The Judaizers in the Jerusalem church were led by converted Pharisees (15:5) who preferred a legalistic religion to one based on faith alone. If the Judaizers had won, the Gentiles would have been required to be circumcised and, in effect, converted to Judaism. This would have confined Christianity to simply being another sect within Judaism.

There is something of a "Pharisee" in each one of us. We may unwittingly mistake upholding tradition, structure, and legal requirements for obeying God. Make sure the gospel brings freedom and life, not rules and ceremonies, to those you are trying to reach.

15:2ff The delegates to the council at Jerusalem came from the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. The conversion of Gentiles was raising an urgent question for the early church: The real problem for the Jewish Christians was not whether Gentiles could be saved but whether Gentile believers also had to adhere to the laws of Moses and other Jewish traditions. The test of following these laws was circumcision. One group of Jewish Christians insisted that following the law, including submitting to the rite of circumcision, was necessary for salvation. The Gentiles, however, did not think they needed to become Jewish first in order to become Christians. The Jewish Christians also were worried because soon Gentile Christians would outnumber Jewish Christians. And they were afraid of weakening moral standards among believers if they did not follow Jewish laws. So Paul and Barnabas discussed this problem with the leaders of the church. Paul, Barnabas, and the other church leaders believed that the Old Testament law was very important but was not a prerequisite to salvation. The law cannot save; only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ can a person be saved. The council upheld the conviction expressed by Paul and Barnabas that following the Jewish laws, including being circumcised, was not essential for salvation.

15:2ff It is helpful to see how the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem resolved their conflict: (1) The church in Antioch sent a delegation to help seek a solution; (2) the delegates met with the church leaders to give their reports and set another date to continue the discussion; (3) Paul and Barnabas gave their report; (4) James summarized the reports and drew up the decision; (5) everyone agreed to abide by the decision; (6) the council sent a letter with delegates back to Antioch to report the decision. This is a wise way to handle conflicts within the church. Problems must be confronted, and all sides of the argument must be given a fair hearing. The discussion should be held in the presence of leaders who are spiritually mature and trustworthy to make wise decisions. Everyone should then abide by the decisions. **15:10** If the law was a yoke that the Jews could not bear, how did having the law help them throughout their history? Paul wrote that the law was a guide that pointed out their sins so they could repent and return to God and right living (see [Galatians 3:24, 25](#)). It was, and still is, impossible to obey the law completely.

***The Jerusalem Council:** A dispute arose when some Jewish believers taught that Gentile believers had to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss this situation with the leaders there. After the Jerusalem council made its decision, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with the news.*

15:13 This James is Jesus' brother. He became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James.

15:16-18 Despite the compelling experiences of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, James turned to God's Word as the ultimate test of truth. This should be the way we evaluate events. We all have beliefs (some of them fervent), we all have experiences, and our tendency is to want to measure others by our yardstick. It is common for believers to think that their experiences, their convictions, are true and should be the norm. Different ideas are thought to be inferior or invalid. Ultimately, however, what matters is what God's Word says. The more we know God's Word, the more we read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it, the better we will be able to discern what is right and best in times of controversy or doctrinal disagreement.

15:19-21 James's judgment was that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised, but they should stay away from food sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality (a common part of idol worship), and from consuming blood (reflecting the biblical teaching that the life is in the blood—[Leviticus 17:14](#)) or eating meat of strangled animals. If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would please God and get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, other actions were inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four. This compromise helped the church grow unhindered by the cultural differences of Jews and Gentiles. When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for faith we set up are God's, not people's.

15:19-21 The early church experienced the difficulty of bringing together diverse peoples. Jews and Gentiles had so little in common! Different histories, traditions, practices, customs, cultures, languages. How do you possibly take such dissimilar groups and make them one? One solution is to decide not to, to decide that it is impossible. So you segregate, isolate, and study each other with suspicion. This response profoundly affects Christianity's effectiveness and attractiveness. When there is snobbery or a judgmental atmosphere, the church betrays the teachings of Christ and loses all appeal. The other solution is to submit our prejudices and presuppositions to the greater purposes of God. When we imitate him ([Ephesians 5:1](#)), we become tolerant, understanding, and accepting. However, such tolerance is not meant to include sinful lifestyles. James mentioned a few laws that the Gentile believers should keep, with an understanding that basic morality and living for God would cover the rest. When believers of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and social strata come together in love and worship of the Savior, nothing gives greater glory to God or provides a more compelling witness.

The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers - Acts 15:22-35

Some questions to answer and discuss:

1. How often do you write letters to friends?
2. What was the letter to Gentile believers about? (15:24-29)
3. How did the Christians in Antioch respond to the message from Jerusalem? (15:31)
4. When Judas and Silas left for Jerusalem, what kind of send-off were they given? (15:33)
5. What is the best way to solve disagreements among Christians?
6. How would you handle a difficult problem with another Christian?
7. What difficult relationship should you improve this week for the sake of Christ? How?

Life Application Bible Notes

15:22 Later, Silas accompanied Paul on Paul's second missionary journey in place of Barnabas, who visited different cities with John Mark.

15:23-29 This letter answered their questions and brought great joy to the Gentile Christians in Antioch (15:31). Beautifully written, it appeals to the Holy Spirit's guidance and explains what is to be done as though the readers already knew it. Believers should be careful not only in what they say but also in how they say it. We may be correct in our content, but we can lose our audience by our tone of voice or by our attitude.

15:31 The debate over circumcision could have split the church, but Paul, Barnabas, and the Jews in Antioch made the right decision—they sought counsel from the church leaders and from God's Word. Our differences should be settled the same way—by seeking wise counsel and abiding by the decisions. Don't let disagreements divide you from other believers.

The Second Journey Begins: Paul and Silas set out on a second missionary journey to visit the cities Paul had preached in earlier. This time they set out by land rather than sea, traveling the Roman road through Cilicia and the Cilician Gates—a gorge through the Taurus Mountains—then northwest toward Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium. The Spirit told them not to go into Asia, so they turned northward toward Bithynia. Again the Spirit said no, so they turned west through Mysia to the harbor city of Troas.

Acts Study Guide questions and notes are from:

