

ACTS

Chapter 15

The Council at Jerusalem

15 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question.⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.¹³ When they finished, James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simon^a has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:¹⁶ ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it,¹⁷ that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’^b¹⁸ that have been known for ages.^c¹⁹ ‘It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.’”

15:1 *Some men.* Probably from “the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). These were believers who insisted that before a person could become a true Christian he must keep the law of Moses, and the test of such compliance was circumcision.

from Judea. Meant that these Judaizers (or legalists) were given a hearing, not that they correctly represented the apostles and elders of Jerusalem (cf. v. 24).

UNLESS YOU ARE CIRCUMCISED – In effect they were saying, “There is something you must do to be saved.” It directed people away from Christ’s work to a work of their own, circumcision. (PBC)

15:2 SHARP DISPUTE AND DEBATE – It is easy to idealize the experiences of primitive Christianity, where all was hardly sweetness and light. Besides the spectacular extension of the church, Luke candidly, very honestly also records the squabbles and quarreling that went on in early Christianity. (LL)

SOME OTHER BELIEVERS – Included Titus, cited only in Galatians 2, who was one of Paul’s Greek converts, most probably from Antioch, and he had not been circumcised. In other words, here was a walking, breathing test case on the theological question. (LL)

go up to Jerusalem. See notes on 12:1; Gal 2:1. Those who hold that Gal 2:1–10 refers to the famine visit of 11:27–30; 12:25 argue that since Gal 2:2 says that the visit mentioned there was occasioned by a revelation, it must refer to Agabus’s prediction of the coming famine (11:27–28). Those who believe that Gal 2:1–10 refers to the Jerusalem council visit of 15:1–22 assert that the famine visit occurred at the time of Herod Aprippa’s death in A.D. 44 (11:27–30; 12:25). Thus Saul’s conversion, which was 14 years earlier (Gal 2:1), would have occurred in 30, the probable year of Christ’s crucifixion—which obviously seems too early.

15:4–22 The sequence of meetings described in vv. 4–22 is: (1) a general meeting of welcome and report (vv. 4–5); (2) a meeting of the leaders (perhaps to one side) while the church was still assembled (vv. 6–11); (3) a meeting of the apostles, the elders and the whole assembly (vv. 12–22).

15:3 SENT THEM ON THEIR WAY – The Greek word for this makes it clear that the church in Antioch helped its representatives with food, money and travel arrangements for their trip to Jerusalem. (PBC)

15:4 The first meeting was a report, cordially received, about the work done among the Gentiles. – They once more “recount” how much God has done with them, from which we can learn that God was the true author of the Gentile mission, not Paul and Barnabas. (Sacra) – En route to Jerusalem, Paul, Barnabas and Titus did not miss the opportunity of reporting to believers in Phoenicia and Samaria the exciting news that even the Gentiles were being converted to Christianity. Since 99 percent of future church membership would eventually be Gentile, we miss the drama in the missionaries’ report today. In those days of Jewish exclusivism, however – when one rabbinical prayer ran: “I thank Thee, Lord, that I was not born Gentile, an animal, or a woman” – we may better understand the sensation. (LL)

15:5 *believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.* Some Pharisees became Christians and brought their Judaic beliefs with them. They believed that Gentiles must first become converts to Judaism and be circumcised (see v. 1), and then they would be

eligible to be saved by faith. Perhaps some of them had gone to Antioch and now returned to present their case. – “the circumcision party” of Christian Pharisees who were later called Judaizers. A foretaste of their theology had surfaced when Peter returned from his mission to Cornelius, and they criticized him for dining with “uncircumcised men” (11:3). Though Peter’s reply satisfied them for a time, the narrow-minded legalists now dispatched representatives to Antioch, who insisted that the only way a Gentile could become a Christian was to become a Jew first. (LL) – In Paul’s account of what happened at this council he writes: “Some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves” (Galatians 2:4) (PBC)

15:7 *Peter got up.* After a period of considerable discussion by the apostles and elders, Peter addressed them. – Peter reminded his hearers of the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10-11). The vision at Joppa and the baptism of Cornelius with his household had occurred about ten years ago. He reminded them that at that time God decided the issue of how Gentiles were to come into the church. God settled the matter and set the church’s policy by giving the Gentiles the Holy Spirit just as he had given the Jewish believers the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What had God done? He had accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit. He had purified their hearts. He had done this by giving them faith. These were not separate events, extended over a period of time while Cornelius and the others completed some requirements like being circumcised or fulfilling the requirements of the ceremonial law. (PBC)

Gentiles might hear. Peter’s argument was his own experience: God had sent him to preach to the Gentiles (10:28–29).

15:8 *giving the Holy Spirit to them.* The irrefutable proof of God’s acceptance (see 10:44, 47; 11:17–18).

15:9 *purified their hearts by faith.* Peter’s way of saying what Paul affirmed (Ro 5:1; cf. Gal 2:15–16).

15:10 *a yoke.* The law (see Gal 5:1; cf. Mt 11:28–29). – Yokes are placed on beasts of burden so that they can pull a load. Peter was saying, “Our Israelite forefathers could not pull the load of the law. We have not been able to pull such a load ourselves.” Peter realized that, if the Gentiles submitted to circumcision and other demands of the Pharisees, they would be subjecting themselves to the entire law with all its demands and restrictions. Not long after this Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia: “I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law” (Galatians 5:3). No man, except the God-man Jesus, ever fulfilled the law. That was true of the ceremonial law and of the moral law with its demand of perfect love for God and man. More than anything else, the law was there to show people that they needed a Savior. (PBC)

15:11 *through the grace of our Lord.* No circumcision was required.
we are saved, just as they are. See Ro 3:9.

15:12 *assembly became silent.* See note on vv. 4–22. Apparently the people had remained in place while the apostles and elders met. The assembly had not remained quiet during that time, but now they became silent to listen to the leaders.

Barnabas and Paul. The order here puts Barnabas first (perhaps reflecting his importance in Jerusalem), whereas in the account of the missionary journey the order was “Paul and Barnabas” after the events on the island of Cyprus (13:7, 9, 13, 42).

TELLING THEM – Paul and Barnabas reviewed how extraordinarily God had blessed their efforts in Asia Minor. Would He have given them the power to perform miracles there if they had been preaching a wrong gospel?

miraculous signs and wonders. See 8:19–20; 14:3.

15:13 *James.* The brother of the Lord. His argument added proof from Scripture. – The person with apparently final authority at the conclave. In the gospels, he is the first named among Jesus’ four half-brothers, but during Jesus’ public ministry, he seems to have had qualms and concerns over Jesus’ activities. However, Jesus’ resurrection and special appearance to him (1 Cor. 15:7) swept away all doubts and transformed James into the leader of the Jerusalem church. Later, he most probably wrote the epistle bearing his name, and we also know how he died, even though the NT does not tell us. Instead, the Jewish historian Josephus reports a confrontation between James and the Jewish Sanhedrin in A.D. 62 which bears a strong parallel to Good Friday: against the wishes of the Roman governor, James was stone to death – another martyr for the faith. (LL)

15:14 *Simon.* Peter (see v. 7). James uses Peter’s Hebrew name in its Hebrew form (Simeon; see NIV text note).

a people for himself. A new community largely made up of Gentiles but including Jews as well (Jn 10:16; cf. 1Pe 2:9–10).

15:15 *prophets.* Specifically Am 9:11–12 (see NIV text note on Am 9:12).

15:16 *After this I will return.* † Some have taken this quotation from Amos as setting forth a sequence of the end times, including (1) the church age (taking out “a people for himself,” v. 14), (2) the restoration of Israel as a nation (v. 16) and (3) the final salvation of the Gentiles (vv. 17–18). The context, however, indicates that the quotation merely confirms God’s intent to save Gentiles.

15:19 MY JUDGMENT – James was not rendering this judgment on his own authority. The Holy Spirit had made it clear that the Gentiles did not have to Judaize. (PBC)

not make it difficult. Circumcision was not required, but four stipulations were laid down (see note on v. 20). These were in areas where the Gentiles had particular weaknesses and where the Jews were particularly repulsed by Gentile violations. It would help both the individual and the relationship between Gentile and Jew if these requirements were observed. They involved divine directives that the Jews believed were given before the Mosaic laws.

15:20 *food polluted by idols.* See v. 29; 1Co 8:7–13; Rev 2:14, 20. – The fourfold restrictions – three dietary and one moral – were very mild tokens asked of the Gentiles

so as not to offend their fellow Jewish Christians. (In rabbinical tradition, the three sons of Noah, who were ancestors of both Jews and Gentiles, had had the same restriction placed on them). (LL) – It was intended, rather, to encourage them to avoid things that would make it difficult for Jews to share a meal with them or express full fellowship with them in other ways. (PBC)

sexual immorality. A sin taken too lightly by the Greeks and also associated with certain pagan religious festivals.

meat of strangled animals. Thus retaining the blood that was forbidden to be eaten (see Ge 9:4).

blood. Expressly forbidden in Jewish law (see Lev 17:10–12). Reference here may be to consuming blood apart from meat.

15:21 MOSES HAS BEEN PREACHED – James’s point here was that many Gentiles were already familiar with these Jewish laws and others could learn them. (PBC)

The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. ³⁰ The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ^a ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

15:22 *apostles and elders, with the whole church.* Apparently there was unanimous agreement with the choice of messengers and with the contents of the letter (vv. 23–29).

DECIDED – The Jerusalem council had clearly opted for salvation by God’s grace through faith rather than salvation by law, a momentous turn for the future of Christian theology. As Paul would later write to the new Christians in Galatia: “We did not give in to them (the Judaizers) for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might remain with you” (Gal. 2:5).

Judas (called Barsabbas). The same surname as that of Joseph Barsabbas (see 1:23 and note). The two may have been brothers. *Silas*. A leader in the Jerusalem church, a prophet (v. 32) and a Roman citizen (16:37).

15:23 *in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia*. Antioch was the leading city of the combined provinces of Syria and Cilicia.

15:27 TO CONFIRM BY MOUTH – This reminds us that written message can be misunderstood. Letters cannot answer questions about themselves. (PBC)

15:28 *seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*. Prior authority is given to the Spirit (whose working in the assembly is thus claimed), but there was also agreement among the apostles, elders and brothers (vv. 22–23).

15:29 *abstain from food ... sexual immorality*. See note on v. 20.

15:32 *prophets*. One of the primary functions of prophets in the early church was, as here indicated, to encourage and strengthen the brothers.

15:33 *those who had sent them*. The Jerusalem church (see v. 22).

15:34 See NIV text note on v. 33.

Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.”

³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

15:36 *towns where we preached the word*. Towns of the first missionary journey (see 13:4–14:26).

15:38 *he had deserted them*. Mark had turned back at Perga and did not go to Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (see note on 13:13).

15:39 *they parted company*. Barnabas and Mark do not appear again in Acts. However, in 1Co 9:6 Paul names Barnabas as setting a noble example in working to support himself. Also in Gal 2:11–13 another scene is described in Antioch that includes Barnabas. Mark evidently returned from his work with Barnabas and became associated with Peter (see 1Pe 5:13). During Paul’s first imprisonment, Mark was included in Paul’s group (see Col

4:10; Phm 24). By the end of Paul's life he came to admire Mark so much that he requested him to come to be with him during his final days (2Ti 4:11; see Introduction to Mark: John Mark in the NT). – Sharing the squabbles such this one and the one in the early part of this chapter may have been to comfort future generations of Christians. If, in the warm afterglow of the first Pentecost, the early church, informed and inflamed as it was by the Holy Spirit, could still become a cockpit of controversy between faithful and erring, parties and ethnic groups, then there is some small consolation for later generations of Christians, which have done – and are doing – the same.

However there is also a lesson from the first Christians on how to solve such controversies. The decision at the Jerusalem council involved several elements: 1) A face-to-face confrontation. There was no whispering campaign, no rush to publish, no direct attacks or misunderstandings, but an open exchange between reasonable people, not extremists. 2) Listening. Possibly the most important verse in Luke's report on the conclave is 15:12. "The whole assembly became silent as they listened..." An honest effort was made by each side to hear the other side. 3) A Scriptural solution. James based his decision on three prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos – whom he deemed mouthpieces of God. ALSO, good can come of bad. The net result was two missionary expeditions instead of one.

Cyprus. The island of Barnabas's birthplace (cf. 4:36).

15:40 *Silas.* Had returned to Jerusalem with Judas after delivering the Jerusalem letter (vv. 32–33). His presence in Antioch now indicates that, after reporting to those who had sent him, he came back to Antioch to participate in the church's work there.