

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Jerusalem Council

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Acts 15:1-35

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 15.

This story – the Jerusalem Council – forms the CENTRE of the book of Acts both structurally and theologically.¹ Acts 15 brings us to arguably the most significant decision in the history of the New Testament church. It would be hard to overstate just how important this passage is.

In order to understand it, we need to remember what led to it. As we have made our way through the book of Acts, we have been following the spread of the gospel as it has moved from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth! By chapter 15, the movement that began with a group of 300 Jewish Christians huddled up in a room in Jerusalem has – seemingly overnight – become the most diverse gathering in the Mediterranean world! Jews and Greeks! Barbarians and Scythians! Slaves and free! Men and women! All worshiping together in unity!

It was incredible! It was everything that Jesus had promised! And quickly, it became very, very complicated. In fact, the church was very nearly torn in two. Our passage this morning tells us the story of the meeting that held the church together when it looked for all the world like it was going to fall apart.

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 242. “Luke's account of the discussion regarding the relation of the Gentiles to the law of Moses forms the centre of Acts both structurally and theologically.”

Because our passage is so large, I'm going to divide it into three separate sections so that we can unpack each element of the story as it appears. Afterwards, we'll draw out some of the implications for today. Look with me now at verses 1-2 where we find:

The Dissension

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² And after 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 ESV)

Remember, Paul and Barnabas have just returned from their first missionary journey. They've been sharing the good news with the church that God is saving the Gentiles! But, while Paul and Barnabas are rejoicing, some visitors from Jerusalem are spreading a very *different* report. They are throwing a wet blanket on the celebration and arguing that a person cannot REALLY be saved until they receive circumcision. We catch a fuller glimpse of their argument in verse 5:

some **believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees** rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5 ESV)

These dissenters – these men who were suspicious of the faith of all these new Gentiles – were *former Pharisees*. That sheds some light on the problem. These were men who had grown up in the branch of Judaism that ADDED laws to the Mosaic law just to ensure that no one *ever came close* to accidentally breaking the commandments.

These were men who LOVED rules! They LOVED fences! And even though they had surrendered to Christ, they brought those old loves with them into their Christianity.

And they were shocked when they saw that men and women who had no regard for their fences were being allowed into the church! Gentiles were placing their trust in Jesus, going through the waters of baptism, and being welcomed into the church – but who was enforcing the law of Moses!? These people weren't circumcised! These people didn't know the dietary laws!

These former Pharisees saw themselves as the *defenders of the truth*. The heart of their argument was that, in order to become a Christian, a person must first become a Jew. That argument was THE GREATEST THREAT that the early church faced. If these former Pharisees had won the day then the church would have lost the gospel.

Let me ask you: How does a person become a Christian? Through faith in Jesus.

But these brothers were arguing for faith in Jesus *plus* circumcision and obedience to the law. And as soon as we ADD to the gospel, we have LOST the gospel!

What was particularly dangerous about these men was that they had somehow gained a great degree of influence. In fact, even PETER deferred to them at one point. The Apostle Paul describes the scene in Galatians 2 where he writes:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that **even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy**. ¹⁴ But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Galatians 2:11-14 ESV)

The issue was so severe that Paul rebuked Peter in front of EVERYBODY! Even Barnabas – the man who had just finished preaching outside of the temple of ZEUS – was now unwilling to eat with the Gentile Christians because he was afraid of what the former Pharisees might think! The church was at risk of losing the gospel.

And so, the church wisely reached out for clarification. These men claimed that they were representing the church in Jerusalem. The church in Antioch was determined to verify that. They sent a group of delegates to Jerusalem to figure out a solution to this growing dissension. That brings us to the second episode in this critical story: The deliberation.

The Deliberation

Look with me at verses 3-6:

³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ 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. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. (Acts 15:3-6 ESV)

Let’s stop here. I want to draw your attention to one really important detail before we go further. Look again at verse 6. Take note that this monumental decision is being made by apostles AND ELDERS. Similarly, when they reach a decision, we read in verse 22:

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles **and the elders, with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:22a ESV)

The apostles could have made this decision on their own. But instead, they included the elders of these congregations, and they deliberated *together* to find a solution. Why did they go about it this way? I would argue that the apostles were intentionally *weaning the church off* of a dependence on their leadership. They were intentionally empowering a structure of spiritual leadership and discernment that could be established in every local church and replicated around the world. We saw the same thing a few weeks ago as the Apostle Paul revisited the churches he had planted so as to appoint elders. The plan to maintain health and orthodoxy in the post-apostolic church revolves around the appointment of healthy, discerning, faithful elders in every church.

I am particularly motivated to draw your attention to that detail this morning because our nominating committee will be meeting after the service today to begin the process of identifying new elders to lead and discern for this congregation. Pray that God would raise up leaders here at Redeemer who model the same kind of wisdom and humility that we see on display in this passage.

Let’s turn our attention now to the deliberation itself. It is broken up into three speeches. Peter speaks first, Paul and Barnabas speak second – though their speech is not recorded – and then James brings the closing argument. We can summarize the content of the three speeches into two points. First, Peter, Paul and Barnabas collectively argue that:

1. The conversion of the Gentiles has already been validated

Look with me at verses 7-12:

⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. (Acts 15:7-12 ESV)

Peter essentially said, “Look, you can debate all you want about whether or not *you* think these people are saved, but God has already given His verdict!” Peter then goes on to point to the conversion of Cornelius. Do you remember that story from chapter 10? Cornelius was a Gentile who had not been circumcised and who did not observe the law of Moses. And yet, apart from circumcision and apart from a new diet, God miraculously saved Cornelius and his family! And then God *recreated the Pentecost experience* for these Gentiles so that there would be NO ROOM for doubt as to whether or not their conversion was authentic! Cornelius and his family were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues – just like the Jewish believers in Jerusalem! Those who have the Spirit are clearly saved!

Similarly, Paul and Barnabas stood up and testified that God accompanied their ministry to the Gentiles with powerful signs and wonders! Each miracle testified to the fact that it was GOD who was opening the door for Gentiles to come into the faith – and He wasn’t waiting until people could brush up on the Mosaic law. As G. Campbell Morgan summarizes:

Here is the fact, God has already given the Gentile all grace without ceremony, ritual, rite, and observance. Here is the deduction: do not be afraid to follow God, even though He seems to be breaking through things dear to our heart; do not tempt God, by refusing His guidance.²

The argument that Peter, Paul and Barnabas are making here is that, you may not like it – you may not have gone about it this way if you were in charge – but God has already validated the

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 361.

conversion of the Gentiles. He has given His verdict. If they have placed their faith in Christ and received the Holy Spirit than – circumcision or not – they are IN!

The final voice to speak in the deliberation was James. James was the brother of Jesus, and he had become the most prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. People looked to him as the voice of orthodoxy. In fact, we read in Galatians that these dissenters who had made their way to Antioch were claiming to speak on behalf of James! They assumed that James would share their concerns and would be equally outraged at the clear disregard of the Mosaic law. Therefore, when James finally spoke up, his words carried significant weight. James turned to Amos 9 and explained that:

2. The conversion of the Gentiles was always assumed

If Peter, Paul and Barnabas were making the argument that God was doing a new thing, James was making the argument that if we want to understand this *new* thing then we need to look *back* at an *old* announcement. We see this in verses 13-18:

¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

¹⁶ “After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.’ (Acts 15:13-18 ESV)

James is quoting here from Amos 9 and, in doing so, he is reminding the assembly that this seemingly new dilemma was actually announced a long, long time ago. God said that this day would come. God said that He would rebuild the tent of David that had fallen. And, significantly, God said that *He would include the Gentiles* in His coming plan of restoration. James is picking up this old promise and he is landing it squarely on the establishment of the New Testament church. The tent of David has been restored! And we should not be surprised that the Gentiles are here in the tent with us – nor should we hinder them. As one commentator summarizes:

The point would seem to be that God is doing something new in raising up the church; it is an event of the last days, and therefore the old rules of the Jewish religion no longer apply:

God is making a people out of the nations and nothing in the text suggests that they are to become Jews in order to become God's people.³

After James had spoken, the matter was settled. Even the dissenters came to a place of agreement. All that was left was to summarize a decision for the way forward. That's what we find in the third and final episode of this story.

The Decision

Look with me at verses 19-29. We pick up again in the conclusion of James' speech:

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,²³ with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." (Acts 15:19-29 ESV)

There are two parts to the Jerusalem council's decision that we need to understand. First, with regard to the question of whether or not a person had to receive circumcision and observe the law of Moses to become a Christian, the council clearly and unapologetically declared:

1. Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to come to Jesus

We've already covered this ground, but I want to point you back to verse 11 where Peter explained this so succinctly. He declared:

³ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 253.

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”
(Acts 15:11 ESV)

This is the way of salvation, and it is MONUMENTALLY important that we never EVER add to it! Circumcision is not needed for salvation. Dietary laws are not needed. A person does not need to become a Jew in order to come to Jesus. We are not saved by keeping the law.

We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That is the heart of the heart of what it means to be a Christian. The council couldn't have been any clearer in their decision.

But there was a second part to this decision. Because, while they wanted to guard against legalism and a false gospel, they also wanted to clarify that Christians should be marked by courtesy. The council recognized that some wisdom would be required in order to preserve the unity of the church in the midst of her expansion. To that end, they also decided that:

2. Gentiles should abstain from practices that would needlessly offend

The council called upon the new Gentile believers to abstain from four things:

- Abstain from food sacrificed to idols
- Abstain from blood
- Abstain from what has been strangled
- Abstain from sexual immorality

Can I ask an obvious question? Why did these four things make the list?

If the goal was simply to point the Gentiles towards a basic foundation of morality, then why wouldn't they simply list the ten commandments here? Or, if word count was an issue, then why didn't they simply include the great commandment? Jesus summarized the heart of the law succinctly when he said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37b-40 ESV)

I'll be honest – this passage would be a lot easier to understand if the council had simply included *that* as the requirement for the new Gentile believers.

Instead, they listed these four seemingly obscure abstentions. Sexual immorality feels like a no brainer – even in our context 2,000 years later. And the “no food sacrificed to idols” rule is understandable enough. But no blood? No strangled food?

This list begs the question: What was the Jerusalem council trying to accomplish with these parameters? What was the goal of these four prohibitions?

The best answer that I have come across in my study is that the Jerusalem council included these instructions because they wanted to preserve the unity of the church. As one commentator notes:

Things which are cultural requirements for Jews were not necessary for the salvation of Gentiles, but their observance would have made it much easier for all types of believers to associate, worship and eat with each other.⁴

This list represents the four things that would have made it nearly impossible for Jewish and Gentile believers to live together. So, as the council decided *against* the concerned former Pharisees, they also gave base-level instructions to the Gentiles as to how to love and respect their Jewish brothers and sisters so that fellowship and unity could be maintained.

Once these decisions were made, they were recorded in letters and sent off with delegates to the Gentile churches. We read about that in verses 30-35:

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. (Acts 15:30-35 ESV)

We end where we began. Rejoicing with the Antioch church! Only now, the church is clear on the gospel and united in her celebration. As we conclude, I want to very quickly draw your attention to three implications for us today.

Implications for Today

First, in light of what we have read this morning, let us:

⁴ Conrad Kempf et al. eds., *New Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1089.

1. Resolve never to add extra requirements to the gospel

I quoted G. Campbell Morgan earlier and I want to point you back to his quote again because I believe that he gets at the heart of the matter. He wrote:

Here is the fact, God has already given the Gentile all grace without ceremony, ritual, rite, and observance. Here is the deduction: do not be afraid to follow God, **even though He seems to be breaking through things dear to our heart**; do not tempt God, by refusing His guidance.⁵

“Do not be afraid to follow God, even though He seems to be breaking through things dear to our heart.” I think that sentence brings us to the heart of the issue at the Jerusalem council, but I think it also brings us to the heart of the issue in so many of our own legalistic tendencies.

The former Pharisees in our passage this morning were *legitimate Christians*! That’s an important detail that we could easily miss. They were Jesus followers. They were all in! It was their *love for God* that led them to the dissension that nearly split the church! It was their *zeal for obedience* that had them rebuking their fellow believers and trying to impose a law that was no longer in force.

The implication then is that real believers are capable of making a real mess! Even with really good intentions.

Our grandparents didn’t fight about music style because they hated young people. They fought about the music because they *love Jesus* and they didn’t think the new music was acceptable.

The man who rebuked you for wearing a hat to church didn’t rebuke you because he’s a villain. He rebuked you because he’s always been taught that wearing a hat is a sign of disrespect.

The same goes for the woman who glared at you for walking out mid sermon for a smoke break. Or the man who gave you a lecture for mowing your grass on a Sunday. Just like the converted Pharisees who thought that their upbringing was the only way to express a REAL love for Jesus, so too are we tempted to subtly add our own obstacles to the gospel. Real Christians do this!

But – and hear me when I say this – real Christians shouldn’t.

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 361.

Those cultural norms – the dress code, and the music preference, and all the other things that feel so important to us and leave us feeling offended – those aren't in the Bible!

Shame on us for all of the times that we have put obstacles in between lost people and Jesus!

To state it practically: If someone comes to this church, and they show up late, wearing shorts and a backwards ballcap, and they take two smoke breaks during the sermon, and they use some four-letter words in their conversation with you after the service, let's THANK GOD that they are here! Because dress codes and etiquette don't save people! Jesus saves people!

They don't need to look like you before they can come to Him. Amen?

Some of us need to hear that this morning. But others of us need to consider the other side of that coin. In light of what we have read this morning, let us:

2. Be considerate of the consciences of our brothers and sisters

This was so important to the early church that they codified it at the Jerusalem council. Even though Jesus taught us that all foods are clean, the council enforced food laws for the new Gentile believers. Why? Because there were Jews in the church who had been following the Mosaic food laws for a lifetime and they really struggled when their new brothers and sisters carelessly brought defiled food to the worship gathering.

We're going to say more about this in coming weeks, but for this morning I want to encourage you to be considerate. Are you free to wear whatever you want to church? Yes. But, if you come to discover that it offends that sweet old man worshiping next to you every time you come in with a ball cap, then couldn't you show your love for him by running a comb through your hair? Jesus isn't offended when you show up late, but if the sister who sits behind you each week IS, then why not set the alarm ten minutes earlier so you can arrive on time?

These are trivial things. Small things. But if you can love your brother or your sister by making one small change then, shouldn't you? Love does not insist upon its own way.

Finally, in light of what we have read I want to encourage you to:

3. Trust in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit

I think this is really the root of the issue. The Pharisees wanted to keep all the old fences of the Mosaic law because they assumed that, without those fences, the church would spiral into chaos!

Can I tell you something: We so often do the same thing.

I suspect that, on either side of the spectrum, you need to hear this reminder today: The Holy Spirit *actually* changes people. This is the promise of the New Covenant! True believers in Jesus receive a new heart! True believers in Jesus receive the Holy Spirit! True believers in Jesus are transformed by the inside out from one degree of glory to the next!

He softens the heart of the legalistic Christian.

He brings maturity to the young and careless.

HE changes us!

So, take a breath. Praise God for all of those people who look and live nothing like you who have now come to faith in Jesus! You're not responsible to change them. The Spirit does that. But you are responsible to learn how to worship in unity with them. To that end, let's pray together.