

# Church 2.0

*“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)*

*“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)*

## **The Jerusalem Council**

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**Acts 15:1-35**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 15:1; that’s on page 923 in your pew Bibles. This morning we are going to be reading the story of the Jerusalem Council. Many scholars and Bible commentators identify this story as the theological and narrative CENTRE of the Book of Acts. This is the moment where the church could have died. This is where the mission COULD have ground to a halt. This is where Christianity COULD have become little more than a Jewish cult. Everything could have come to an end right here.

But it didn’t.

By the grace of God and through the leadership of the Holy Spirit the early church HANDLED their first theological crisis and made a decision that literally changed the world. It’s a fairly long story – we’ll read all 35 verses of it – and then we’ll try and ask and answer FOUR QUESTIONS.

- 1. What was the issue?**
- 2. How did they address it?**
- 3. What did they decide?**

#### 4. Why does it matter for us today?

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

1 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. 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. 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. 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.’

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.” 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 15:1–35 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright, the first question we need to figure out here is this:

## **1. What was the issue?**

Remember last week Pastor Steve was talking to us about the END of Paul’s first missionary journey. He and Barnabas completed their circuit and came back to Antioch – their sending church – for a time of rest, refreshment and REVIEW. The first thing they did when they got back was give a report.

And what a report!

I'm guessing that would have been the most fascinating missions report of all time! They would have been talking about miracles – like the time Paul healed a man who had been crippled from BIRTH who then stood up and began leaping and dancing and praising God! And there would have been stories of persecution too – like the time when Paul was stoned and left for dead in Lystra. And then of course, there would have been stories of CONVERSION. Lots and lots of stories about CONVERSION. In every city Paul and Barnabas went masses and masses of both JEWS and GENTILES were brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ – hallelujah!

BUT – therein lies the essence of this problem.

Look again at verse 1 of Acts 15:

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.” (Acts 15:1 ESV)

So everyone was hearing about all these incredible things that had happened on Paul and Barnabas' trip – the stories were getting passed around, the success of the trip was literally the talk of the town – and even beyond the town. Luke says that some men came down from JUDEA to look into these matters. Now we don't know who they were – but scholars typically ASSUME that they were converted Pharisees.

Look at verse 5. When the church got together to talk about all this, the CHARGE, as it were was brought by a particular group of people – we PRESUME the same people who raised it in the first place. Luke says:

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.” (Acts 15:5 ESV)

So apparently, a considerable number of PHARISEES converted to Christianity in the early days of the movement – enough of them that they could form their own PARTY. There was such a

thing as Pharisaic Christianity in the first generation of the church. Now remember, Jesus criticised the Pharisees A LOT during his earthly ministry; he said some pretty harsh things like:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.” (Matthew 23:15 ESV)

So first of all, CREDIT to these Pharisees who converted to the worship and Lordship of Jesus! And yet – clearly – they came into the movement with some baggage. In general, Jesus said that the Pharisees cared too much for external appearances and put too much stock in ritual and ceremony. Remember, he said:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” (Matthew 23:23 ESV)

You weigh out your garden herbs so that you can say that you’re a tither but you neglect justice and mercy and faithfulness – you really have no idea what this is all about, do you?

So the Pharisees cared about PRECISE, PERFUNCTORY OBEDIENCE to the Law of Moses – but they had a hard time understanding that real religion was a matter of the heart. And they brought that confusion with them into the church.

That was the issue.

The Pharisaic Christians were arguing that a person had to become an obedient JEW BEFORE he or she could be saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

But that would be to put the cart before the horse! Literally! That is the exact opposite order of what we see in Holy Scripture – Old Testament and New! Remember Jesus was critical of how the Pharisees read the OLD TESTAMENT – not the New Testament, which of course hadn’t even

been written yet. Meaning it wasn't that they were good Jews who just needed to unlearn some things in order to become Christians – they weren't even good Jews! Good JEWS ought to have known that GRACE always come first.

If you have your Bible with you, flip back, a fair ways left, to Exodus 20 and the giving of the 10 Commandments. This is the HEART, of the HEART, of the HEART of the Old Testament. And what do we see there? Let me read it to you. Exodus 20:1-3:

1 And God spoke all these words, saying,  
2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.  
3 “You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:1–3 ESV)

So what do you see there? You see GRACE coming BEFORE the call to obedience. God says: I am the Lord who saved you – that's grace! God saved the people of Israel before they kept the law!! He saved the people of Israel before they even HAD the law! He said to a people saved by GRACE – walk and live this way.

That was the order of things even in the Old Testament – and so the issue here is that these Pharisaic Christ followers want to bring their disordered understanding of things into the church – and had they been successful, Christianity would have become nothing other than a backwater Jewish cult.

But of course, they weren't successful. The early church addressed this challenge head on. Let's look at how they did that.

## **2. How did they address it?**

The first thing they did is pretty obvious:

- i. They called a council

In verse 2 it says:

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 15:2 ESV)

And in verse 6 it says:

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

By the way, it is interesting to notice that in both of those references Luke mentions Apostles AND elders. We might wonder WHY the elders were needed, if you have the Apostles? Who cares what the elders think if you've got Peter and John and Thomas and James, the brother of Jesus? Shouldn't they be making these decisions? But actually, what we see here, is the passing of the baton. The Apostles were only going to be there for one generation but the ELDERS were going to be there until Christ returns, so the elders need to know how to do this. They need to know how to lean into plurality and safeguard the deposit of the Gospel – and so that's what they do. They call a COUNCIL.

Notice that.

The church is not led by an infallible human being – it is led by a plurality of leaders. They didn't just ask PETER for a verdict – they called a council. That's wisdom!

“in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” (Proverbs 11:14 ESV)

A church that is dominated by a single voice is headed for trouble, so the early church called a council.

The second thing they did was:

- ii. They heard testimony and examined evidence

In verse 4 Paul and Barnabas give their mission report all over again to the church in Jerusalem. They tell all about what God did through them on that journey. And then in verse 7 Peter gets up and he talks about how this is really no different than when the household of Cornelius was converted back in Acts 10 – he didn't say Acts 10 of course – but he refers to that story. He said, they were a bunch of Gentiles. None of them were circumcised. None of them were eating kosher – and yet:

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. (Acts 15:8–9 ESV)

Huh.

That's a fair point. If God GAVE those uncircumcised, hot dog eating Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit – which is the climactic gift of the Gospel – then who are we to question the reality of their faith?

And all the assembly fell silent – because that's a powerful argument. How do you argue with that? Peter couldn't see a way to argue with that. Once he saw the Holy Spirit falling on these uncircumcised, hot dog eating Gentiles, he said:

“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:47–48 ESV)

So Peter was already there!

He had already been convinced that God was saving Gentiles irrespective of their circumcision and law keeping. It did not appear to be a factor. He was convinced by the undeniable fact that they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed.

Case closed – as far as Peter can see.

That was powerful testimony – and the gift of the Spirit was incontrovertible evidence – but they didn't stop there, they went on to study the Scriptures. They wanted to make sure that their experience aligned with what they saw in the Bible.

iii. They consulted the Scriptures

There is wisdom in that as well, because of course, it is possible to be misled by our experiences. The devil disguises himself as an angel of light, so they wanted to make sure that these events and these testimonies SQUARED with the teaching of the Bible, so James stands up and he begins to show how what these brothers have just said SQUARES with what he's reading in Amos 9. Look at verses 14-18; he says:

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 15:14–18 ESV)

Alright! So all this lines up!! The Old Testament SAID that at some point in the future God would renovate, restore and EXPAND the house of David by bringing in MASSES and MASSES of Gentiles – well, obviously, this is that! Jesus is the Son of David and MASSES and MASSES of Gentiles are now coming in. So, what we are seeing here is entirely congruent with the promises and prophecies of the Bible.

Case closed.

Right?

What argument can be raised against that? God said it would happen – it is happening – so even if it is not happening in exactly the way we anticipated – who among us has any reason to stand in the way of what the Lord is doing?

That was the end of the argument.

Then in verses 19 and following James summarizes where the council has landed. So let's look at that.

### **3. What did they decide?**

James says:

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. (Acts 15:19–20 ESV)

And it wasn't just James who came to this conclusion, verse 22 says that it seemed good to the elders and apostles as well and they appointed delegates to communicate their decision to the churches.

So Gentiles don't need to be circumcised in order to become Christians - they don't have to embrace the Old Testament law in order to become Christians – we're not going to put that burden on them. Everyone is going to get saved the same way - by grace, through faith in Christ. However - well apart from any issue related to salvation - let's do what we can, James says, to live peaceably, wisely and respectfully with one another. Gentile converts need to live lives of SINGULAR WORSHIP, SEXUAL PURITY and SOCIAL CONSIDERATION.

Practically speaking, he is saying, you can't worship Jesus AND go to Roman pagan festivals. You can't worship Jesus AND go to the prostitutes or have sex with your slaves, like most Romans do. And if you want to be part of the church, then you need to be considerate around customs and food – that's the bit about strangled meat and blood.

Jewish people are offended by such things and so, given how much of the Christian life happens around food and the dinner table, you need to be considerate about that.

Singular worship, sexual purity, social consideration – that's not how you get saved, but that is how you should live as a saved person.

That was the decision.

Alright, the last question then is what does this matter for us today?

#### **4. Why does it matter for us today?**

As I mentioned, many scholars believe that the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 represents the theological and narrative centre of the Book of Acts – so the fact that LUKE thinks it is important cannot be denied. He thought this was a game changer. He thought it really mattered and I think it does as well. Let me give you three reasons why.

- i. It preserved the Gospel from its first serious external threat
- ii. It provided a model for how to handle theological controversy moving forward
- iii. It properly prioritized selflessness and consideration in the life of the Christian church

A word or two about each of those.

First of all, Luke's main concern is to show us how the Gospel was preserved in the first generation from an external threat. Later in Acts, in chapter 20, he will show the Apostle Paul

charging the Ephesian elders with guarding that Gospel from external threats that will come in subsequent generations. He says:

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert” (Acts 20:29–31 ESV)

Luke wants us to understand that the Gospel will be under siege until the return of Christ and the church – and the elders of the church in particular – need to STAND GUARD against those threats. That’s their job. Their job is to hand off the Gospel – unchanged and untwisted – to the next generation of believers.

Luke wants us to see that – and we need to see that.

This story also matters for us because it provides a model for how to deal with theological controversy. I love what David Peterson says here; he says:

“In this historical framework, Luke presented conflict and debate as legitimate and necessary elements in the process of discerning God’s will. He showed how such disagreement ‘serves to reveal the true bases for fellowship, and elicit the fundamental principles of community identity.’”<sup>1</sup>

I love that!! At the risk of sounding negative, it was the absence of this that really bothered me in our final days within the CBOQ. In the CBOQ there was so much concern about maintaining unity that all discussion of theological difference was suppressed. Conversation was discouraged lest we discover how little we have in common. Now, unity is important, but unity without TRUTH – unity without agreement in the Gospel is USELESS – so there should be conversation; there HAS TO BE conversation. Listen, church we’ve got some stuff to figure out in our generation. We need to have some talks. In fact, we’ve been discussing the need for this within our leadership team. We want to have a few open discussion nights on some Sunday evenings throughout the year – because we are living in a time of unprecedented external pressure on the

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<sup>1</sup> David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 442.

Gospel – and the way to handle that is to not suppress conversation, it is to FACILITATE conversation, as they did in the early church. So we're thankful for this inspired example.

And then lastly, this story matters for us today because it reminds us of the importance of selflessness and consideration in the life of the church – and we need that reminder because we live in a culture that glorifies what is called “expressive individualism”. Individualism is about putting your SELF at the centre of your own personal solar system. Individualism is about absolutizing your own desires, instincts and orientations – it's about turning your feelings into law and it is about pursuing your pleasure and self-fulfillment at any cost. EXPRESSIVE individualism is about the need to constantly COMMUNICATE and BROADCAST your identity and experiences. We're an Instagram culture now. You can't just eat a sandwich, you need to post a picture of yourself eating a sandwich so that everyone can KNOW that you are eating a sandwich.

That's expressive individualism – and it is toxic to social formation. If you are always concerned about yourself and talking about yourself – then it is hard to build relationships with other people. This is why so few people are getting married. This is why those that do are getting divorced. This is why Millennials have abandoned church – because CHURCH functions as a curb on EXPRESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM. When you come to church we tell you to turn your cell phone off – or even better LEAVE IT IN THE CAR! But how are supposed to take a selfie of yourself worshipping and post that on Instagram without your cell phone?

Hello?!!!

And church requires you to put Someone else at the centre of your universe. JESUS is the centre of the solar system in here – and you aren't even number 2. You're number 3 at best! Remember we use to say: “Jesus, others, self”?

That's Christianity in a nutshell – and that runs directly counter to expressive individualism. But that's exactly what the Jerusalem Council is requiring of all Gentile converts. Remember? Singular worship. Sexual purity. Social consideration.

That means worshipping Jesus – and nothing else, including yourself.

That means NOT doing whatever you feel like and NOT listening to all your inner desires.

And that means – thinking about others, more than you think about yourself. That means not starting every sentence in your inner monologue with: “But why shouldn't I be able to...” or “but I have every right to...” Rather it means disciplining yourself to start those sentences with some version of: “what would be helpful for the people sitting around me?” “What would be considerate for those who may be struggling with things that I don't struggle with?”

That is social consideration – and it has been a necessary element of Christian life and fellowship since the very beginning.

O God, help! Let's pray together.