

The
Acts
of the Apostles



Believers receive salvation by faith
in what Jesus accomplished, which
compels us to live a Christlike way

Acts 15

Introduction

- Luke records one of the most important moments in all of Christian history, the Jerusalem Council.
- The Antioch church is on the verge of splitting over a doctrinal question: what makes a Christian a Christian? Is it through grace alone? Or through grace plus circumcision?
- Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem where they meet with all the apostles to settle the dispute.

*We are saved by grace alone,
not by our works.*

Acts 15:1-18

Judaizers

- Previously, the apostles returned to the church at Antioch (which had both Jewish and Gentile Christians) to update them on God's saving work throughout their first missionary journey (14:26–27).
- In the wake of their report, everything seemed to be going well. Grace was overflowing to so many places and saving so many people, and the church in Antioch was being strengthened.

Judaizers

- In a season of such great news, it only makes sense that the Enemy was close at hand with a plan to put an end to all this joy in Antioch.
- The counterattack comes in the form of “some men,” namely, Judaizers, who come down from Judea to teach a false Gospel.
- Their teaching was dangerous in that it was close to the Gospel, but not wholly dependent on it.

Judaizers

- The Judaizers (known as the Christian Pharisees) taught that belief in the Gospel saves, but it must be paired with the Jewish custom of circumcision to really count.
- Instead of saying grace alone saves, these men were teaching that grace plus something else saves.
- Having grown up in Jewish culture and religious norms, for them, it was grace plus circumcision.

Paul and Barnabas Respond

- Upon hearing about this, Paul and Barnabas immediately respond.
- We notice three major principles in the actions they took.
- First, Paul and Barnabas show a great divide, between themselves and the Judaizers. Normally, we should avoid division among believers and gather with them around the things that unify all Christians.

Paul and Barnabas Respond

- However, the apostle's example here teaches us that there is one thing we are called to be divided about, and that's preserving the true message of the Gospel.
- Second, they don't just draw a line between them and the Judaizers for the purpose of running away in fear.
- Instead, they debate. They try to correct bad teaching instead of hiding from it.

Paul and Barnabas Respond

- Third, they debate directly with the Judaizers themselves.
- Instead of gossiping or going to someone else, the apostles head straight to the source of the problem and deal with it personally before pursuing more public measures.
- This course of action is in keeping with Jesus' own teaching about conflict (Matthew 18:15–17).

Paul and Barnabas Respond

- A resolution cannot be agreed upon.
- The false teaching persists, and the Antioch church cannot operate normally until it is resolved.
- The definition of what it means to be a Christian is at stake, so the church sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to resolve the dispute among the other apostles and elders.

Apostles Gather

- All of the apostles gather in Jerusalem to discuss the role of circumcision, and ultimately, the role of Jewish laws and customs in the salvation of Gentiles.
- This meeting is historically known as the Jerusalem Council. Luke records further dissension among the Jerusalem (Christian) Pharisees and it becomes clear more wisdom is needed to settle the matter.
- All the apostles and elders gather for discussion.

Apostles Gather

- Peter stands up to speak. He reminds them of God's decision to send him as a witness to a Gentile (Cornelius, Acts 10).
- He also reminds them that God confirmed this choice by giving the new believers in Cornelius' household the very same gift they received: the Holy Spirit.
- Both the Jewish and Gentile Christians were cleansed of their sins by grace, through faith.

Apostles Gather

- In addition, both groups were given the Spirit as verification of God's favor and empowerment.
- Peter makes it clear: God makes "no distinction between us and them."
- The equalizing gifts of salvation and the Holy Spirit have erased any traditional sense of difference between the two ethnic groups.

Apostles Gather

- Peter concludes his speech with a final reminder that not even the Jews could keep the Jewish Law.
- Why would they want to saddle the Gentiles with a burden they themselves could not bear?
- The Law served simply as a mirror to show people their own inability to measure up to God's holiness (Galatians 3:23–25; Romans 3:19–20).

Apostles Gather

- The Law's purpose was to lead the Jews to see that they desperately needed a Savior and then turn to that Savior for salvation. This is the very process these Gentiles had walked through.
- Jews and Gentiles are both saved by the grace of Christ alone, plus nothing.

Apostles Gather

- Paul and Barnabas add their support by sharing all the ways God was working in the various Gentile cities they had visited in their missionary journey.
- Finally, James stands up to speak. If the testimony of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas wasn't enough, surely the half-brother of Christ would put an end to this bitter debate.

Apostles Gather

- “James the Just,” as he’s named in Christian history, responds in total agreement with Peter as he appeals to Scripture to support his view of “grace alone” for salvation.
- He reminds the Council that according to their own biblical prophets, particularly Amos, God would build a Gentile people around Israel who would share in their Messianic blessings without becoming Jewish converts.

The gift of grace leads us to
live a transformed life.

Acts 15:19-35

Letter to Antioch

- Though the issue of circumcision is resolved at the Jerusalem Council, the church at Antioch still waits in uncertainty, so James suggests sending them a letter.
- In the wake of the debate, James has instructions for both sides.
- To the Christian Pharisees, he says to lay off the new Gentile converts. Stop troubling them!

Letter to Antioch

- To the new Gentile believers, James gives instructions about specific ways to behave in their society.
- Though they don't have to adopt a Jewish context, they do have to apply overarching biblical principles to their own cultural context.
- In their culture at the time, this would require three restrictions, as James makes clear.

Letter to Antioch

- First, they must avoid idol worship, which was rampant in the pagan culture.
- Second, they must avoid all types of sexual immorality, something else that was widespread in their pagan culture at the time.
- Third, they should not do anything that would offend the conscience of their Jewish brothers or sisters (blood - for example, eating rare steak).

Letter to Antioch

- James instructs them to be charitable and loving, especially at meal times where fellowship is formed.
- As believers, we also need to avoid idols, avoid sexual immorality, and make room for one another's personal convictions.
- Luke (verse 28) considers this important resolution to be a product of both the Holy Spirit and the apostles' cooperation working in tandem.

Letter to Antioch

- As the letter is read, the verdict is clear. Salvation comes by grace alone, through faith in Christ.
- Great joy breaks out among the people, for the true Gospel had won, and the people were honoring each other's cultural applications of Scripture.
- Paul and Barnabas would later depart to share the Council's news with all the other church plants they started on their first missionary journey.

Ask Kerby

Church Councils

Jerusalem Council

- First church council was held to decide the conditions under which Gentiles could enter the Church.
- This council recorded in Acts 15 became the model for other church councils through the centuries.
- However, these later councils did not have apostles (those who saw the risen Christ) and were not always accepted by all the Christians.

Council of Nicea

- The first council of Nicea met in AD 325 and was important in formulating the creed that defined the deity of Jesus.
- A second council centuries later (AD 787) affirmed for the Orthodox church the propriety of icons as an expression of the Christian faith.

Council of Nicea

- The Arian controversy arose when a man by the name of Arius began to spread doctrinal views that were contrary to those of Alexander of Alexandria.
- Alexander maintained that the Son was divine and coeternal with the Father, or he could not be a true Son.
- Arius emphasized the supremacy and uniqueness of God the Father. Therefore the Father's divinity must be greater than the Son's.

Council of Constantinople

- The first council of Constantinople met in AD 381 and formulated another part of the creed that defined the deity of the Holy Spirit.
- A second council of Constantinople met in AD 553 and reconfirmed the doctrines of the Trinity.
- The third council of Constantinople met in AD 680 and affirmed the true humanity of Jesus.

Other Councils

- The council of Ephesus (AD 431) defined Christ as the Incarnate Word of God and rejected Nestorianism.
- Nestorianism was a doctrine taught by Nestorius that emphasizes a distinction between the human and divine natures of the divine person, Jesus.
- The council of Chalcedon (AD 451) defined Christ as Perfect God and Perfect Man in One Person.

Discussion

- Jewish believers in the Old Testament were different from the world because of circumcision. What makes Christians different from the world today?
- You know Christians from other denominations who are different from you. What do you have in common?
- What does it mean to you to live by grace rather than under the Law?