

## MAIN POINT

*Every Christian is responsible for clarifying and defending the gospel when necessary.*

## INTRODUCTION

What is the biggest dream or vision you've had for your life? Has that dream been fulfilled?

As you have pursued your dream, what obstacles have been the toughest to deal with? Were any of those obstacles related to tradition, "the way things have always been done"?

How can traditions be helpful and also hurtful to our walk with Christ?

**What does it take to be right with God? That was the debate that broke out in the early church, with some Christians insisting that faith in Christ must be accompanied by obedience to the rituals of the Hebrew Scriptures. By addressing this conflict, Paul and the other leaders were defending the core of the gospel and preserving our spiritual freedom.**

## UNDERSTANDING

**After their missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch (14:28). During their stay, some men traveled from Judea to Antioch. They began to teach that Gentiles had to keep the customs prescribed by Moses. These Jewish Christians, known as Judaizers, insisted salvation came through becoming a Jew first and then exercising faith, rather than through faith in Jesus alone.**

### > READ ACTS 15:1-5.

What things did the teachers in this passage say the Gentiles must do? If you were a Gentile hearing that these regulations were required, how would you feel about your new faith? As a strict Jew, why would these rules be important to you?

What were some of the expected, extra-biblical rules you were supposed to follow in the church where you grew up?

Is there anything in our church that a new believer might view as an extra rule or requirement? If so, what should we do about it?

**The debate centered around one question: Did Gentiles who believe in Jesus have to convert to Judaism to be saved? All the first believers were Jews, and Christianity was a movement which began within Judaism. Jesus Himself was a Jew. For these reasons and more, some believers viewed Christianity as an extension of Judaism and its legal requirements. They were concerned because the Antioch Christians had not entered the process of becoming Jewish converts. That process required circumcision of males and obeying the Mosaic laws.**

What was in jeopardy if the church couldn't reach an agreement about these issues?

How would things be different for Christians today if the people in Acts 15:5 had been successful?

**Paul and Barnabas understood that to add keeping the Mosaic law to the requirements for salvation was to deny that salvation is by faith alone. The conflict described in these verses involved theological as well as practical concerns. The integrity of the gospel and the unity of church fellowship were at stake.**

**> READ ACTS 15:6-21.**

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In Peter's words, are both Jews and Gentiles saved in the same way? How?

How would you describe Peter's struggle with this issue (vv. 7-11)? Take a moment to look at Acts 10. How did Peter come to understand God's plan for Gentiles?

Knowing Paul's Pharisaic background and Peter's desire to keep the law, how would their testimonies have made a difference? How much influence does the testimony of another believer have on your opinions? How much influence should it have?

**After Peter's speech, the gathering fell silent. Barnabas and Paul recounted their work among the Gentiles, emphasizing what God had done through them. They had performed signs and wonders by God's power. These miracles impressed the Gentiles and validated the gospel Paul and Barnabas proclaimed. The reports of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter had great impact because they were Jewish Christians who had witnessed God's grace in action.**

In verses 12-21, James used two Old Testament Scripture passages to support his idea: Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 45:21. Why do you think he chose these Scriptures from the Old Testament?

What was James's recommendation? How did his compromise satisfy both parties?

How did the council's decision accurately represent the gospel?

Read Acts 1:8. What is the significance of the council's decision in light of that command?

James announced his opinion, perhaps as a formal motion: Gentiles would not have to become Jewish converts to become Christians (v. 19). Then James suggested a letter be sent to Gentile churches instructing believers to keep four ritual requirements in deference to Jewish Christians. Not only did they establish that the gospel is for everyone, but they also worked to eliminate future conflicts by ensuring everyone was unified around the gospel. The council's letter to Gentile believers in the next set of verses is a great example for us of making sure that everyone is given the opportunity to receive the gospel without any strings attached.

> **READ ACTS 15:22-35.**

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What is the tone of the letter? What are its main points?

In this gospel-centered letter and the response to it (vv. 30-35), what are the important lessons for the church today?

The letter's writers stressed that the council's decision was the Holy Spirit's decision and theirs. The Spirit had guided the council to put no greater burden on Gentile believers. Gentiles would not be required to become Jews to become Christians. They were to keep certain ritual requirements, however, not for salvation but for the sake of fellowship and unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians (v. 29). The Jerusalem council's decision freed the Christian movement to include all people who would make a faith commitment to Christ. Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, He left no doubt that the salvation He offers is available to everyone through faith in Him. He also worked hard to ensure people didn't face any obstacles to receiving that gospel. We have the same responsibility to clarify and defend the gospel as we live out our faith today.

## APPLICATION

What is your main takeaway from today's text and discussion?

How does the example of Paul and other leaders in Acts 15 impact your personal ministry efforts?

Do you anticipate any opportunities to defend the gospel this week? If so, how can we be praying for you leading up to that conversation or interaction?

## PRAY

Close in prayer by asking God for the courage and boldness to stand for His truth when faced with compromises. Pray that God will give your group members the confidence to clarify and defend the gospel if the need arises in the coming weeks. Thank Him for Truth worth defending.

## FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

**1. Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:**

Have you had the chance to clarify or defend the gospel this week? How did that conversation go?

What is one step you need to take toward a lifestyle that gives a clearer picture of the gospel?

**2. The challenge to memorize Acts 15:16-18.**

## COMMENTARY

## ACTS 15:1-41

15:1-2. After their missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch (14:28). During their stay, some men traveled from Judea to Antioch. They began to teach that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. They had to keep the custom prescribed by Moses. These men from Judea comprised the circumcision party. Paul and Barnabas contested the Judaizers' teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation—that Gentiles had to be a part of Israel, the covenant community, to become Christians. The words engaged . . . in serious argument and debate describe a heated, face-to-face confrontation in which Paul and Barnabas rejected the Judaizers' claim. The term they refers to the Antioch congregation. Possibly in a called meeting, the church formally designated Paul and Barnabas and some others as representatives to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

15:3-5. The Jerusalem church remained the mother church, and the apostles and elders evidently gave counsel on theological issues. They probably did not give directives to other churches. Yet the Antioch church saw the need for a broader meeting of church leaders to resolve the controversy. Thus the Antioch church underwrote the journey of more than 250 miles to Jerusalem. The conflict described in these verses involved theological as well as practical concerns. Theologically, it concerned how a person is saved. Practically, it involved church fellowship—how saved people relate to one another. Specifically it concerned the relationship of Jewish and Gentile Christians and how they would interact with one another. The integrity of the gospel was at stake.

15:6-8. The apostles and the elders assembled to consider Gentile conversion and fellowship with Gentile believers. Apostles refers to all or some of the Twelve. The elders were other leaders in the church. Verse 12 implies other church members also were present. Paul and Barnabas had engaged the circumcision party in lengthy debate. When Peter spoke, he reminded the assembly that in the early days of the Christian movement, God had chosen him to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles so they might believe. (See Acts 10). Peter had been God's messenger to Gentiles with the good news. Peter stressed that God had validated the Gentiles' conversions by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to Jewish believers at Pentecost. Only God knows the heart fully, and He gave evidence that the Gentiles' conversions were genuine. God gives the Spirit only to believers.

15:9-10. Peter declared God made no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers. When Gentiles made a faith commitment to Christ, God cleansed their hearts as He had cleansed Jewish believers' hearts. Peter strongly implied real purity came as a result of faith; it did not come from circumcision or observing other

Jewish regulations. When the circumcision party heard Peter's account of what happened in Cornelius's house, they had affirmed God had saved Gentiles (see 11:18). Did these Jewish Christians refuse to believe God had saved Gentiles through faith? Did the circumcision party, like the complaining Israelites did in the wilderness (Ex. 17:7), reject God's guidance? Putting on the disciples' necks the yoke of legalism would be to test God by questioning whether He saved people by grace through faith and by seeking to impose a different way. Peter stressed that no generation had been able to bear the yoke of the law. Why burden the Gentiles with a load the Jews could not carry?

15:11-12. Peter rejected salvation by keeping the law and stated firmly: We believe we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way they are. The Gentiles' salvation became a model for Jews: Jews were saved by grace through faith even as Gentiles were. Jewish Christians rightly could cherish their law and strive to keep it, but they had been saved by grace through faith, not by the law. The whole assembly likely refers to the Jerusalem church and the group from Antioch. After Peter's speech, the gathering fell silent. Barnabas and Paul recounted their work among the Gentiles, emphasizing what God had done through them. They had performed signs and wonders by God's power. These miracles impressed the Gentiles and validated the gospel Paul and Barnabas proclaimed.

15:13. Following Paul and Barnabas, James responded. This was Jesus' half-brother (see Mark 6:3), not the apostle James or James the son of Alphaeus (see 1:13). This James had become the Jerusalem church's leader. He called for the assembly's attention. Doubtless all ears were attuned to him because of his position in the church. Also, he may have been a conservative Jewish Christian whose outlook had undergone change.

15:14-19. James referred to Peter by his Jewish name, Simeon. James called attention to Peter's account of how God had intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for His name. The Greek term translated intervened means "to examine with the eyes" with the further idea of looking on (someone) to help, benefit, or provide for the person. When Peter went to Cornelius's house, God provided the Gentiles an opportunity to receive the gospel. James quoted from the Hebrew prophets Amos and Isaiah to support his argument. James announced his opinion, perhaps as a formal motion: Gentiles would not have to become Jewish converts to become Christians.

15:20. James suggested a letter be sent to Gentile churches instructing believers to keep four ritual requirements in deference to Jewish Christians. Some scholars think these may have been introduced as a way for Jews and Gentiles within the church to have a common basis for contact. But it is more likely that these were designed to elevate the moral standards of the Gentiles by prohibiting them from engaging in a number of the practices that were associated with pagan temple rites such as animal sacrifice, sexual immorality, and idolatry.

15:21-23. James's reason for invoking Moses and the widespread proclamation of the law is not entirely clear. He may have meant that Jewish people who spread throughout the world via the Diaspora had made Moses' law known among Gentiles through their public reading of Scripture. Alternatively, he may have been saying that the standards he demanded of Gentiles in verse 20 reflected universal moral laws that were enshrined in the law of Moses. Judas and Silas, both leading men among the brothers in Jerusalem, accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch in order to vouch (personally and via hand-delivered letter) for the results of the Jerusalem Council.

15:27-28. A letter in the ancient world was a substitute for the personal presence of the author. It was often carried by a trusted person who would validate and expand upon its contents, which Judas and Silas as emissaries of the leaders of the Jerusalem church would do. James names both the Holy Spirit and human initiative (ours) as factors in the Council's decision. Throughout the New Testament, there is interplay between divine guidance and human actions that accomplish God's purpose (e.g., Php 2:12-13).

15:30-31. When the believers in Antioch read the letter, they were glad for its encouraging message. They rejoiced that their salvation in Christ was affirmed. They rejoiced that the gospel they had believed was correct, that salvation is a result of grace alone, not grace plus works. Also, they no doubt were glad they did

not have to begin the process of becoming Jewish proselytes, which all Gentile believers would have if the Judaizers' position had been affirmed.

15:32-33. Judas and Silas, the official Jerusalem representatives, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. These men were prophets. As such, they went beyond their assigned task of delivering the letter and also delivered God's word to the people. These men spent "some time" ministering in Antioch, after which the church sent them back to Jerusalem with "the blessing of peace."