

LESSON 4

Equipping Leaders: The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, and after gathering the assembly, they delivered the letter. When they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Both Judas and Silas, who were also prophets themselves, encouraged the brothers and sisters and strengthened them with a long message. After spending some time there, they were sent back in peace by the brothers and sisters to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas, along with many others, remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord.

(Acts 15:30–35)

Class Overview: Acts 15 highlights a crucial moment in the early church—the Jerusalem Council. As the gospel spread among the Gentiles, a heated debate arose over whether they needed to follow the law of Moses to be saved. The apostles and elders gathered to seek God’s guidance and preserve unity within the church. Through attentive listening, scriptural reasoning, and the leading of the Holy Spirit, they arrived at a conclusion that affirmed salvation by grace through faith and emphasized fellowship across cultural boundaries. This lesson shows how godly leadership prepares the church to handle conflicts wisely, protect the truth of the gospel, and promote peace among believers.

Class Objectives: By the end of this class, you should be able to—

1. Describe the issue that caused the dispute and why it threatened the unity of the early church.
2. Explain how the apostles and elders sought wisdom through discussion, Scripture, and the Spirit’s guidance.
3. Understand that church leadership exists to protect both sound doctrine and loving fellowship.

4. Recognize how humility, patience, and cooperation are essential in resolving conflict.
5. Apply these principles by seeking God's wisdom and unity whenever disagreements arise in the church today.

Introduction

THE CHURCH GREW RAPIDLY, with new believers coming to Christ from all backgrounds: Jewish and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor. However, growth raised questions. In Antioch, some Jewish Christians started teaching that Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses to be saved. Their teachings challenged the core of the gospel, leading to deep division. If salvation depended on law-keeping, then grace was no longer truly grace.

The disagreement became so intense that Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders. What occurred there served as a model for how the church should handle conflict: with prayer, humility, Scripture, and respect for one another. Leaders did not ignore the issue or resort to anger; they listened carefully, examined what God had done among the Gentiles, and sought the Spirit's guidance together.

Through Peter's testimony, Paul and Barnabas's report, and James's wisdom from Scripture, the church recognized the truth: salvation is by grace through faith. They wrote a letter affirming unity and encouraging believers to live in peace. The Jerusalem Council settled a vital question, not by human opinion, but by divine guidance.

This moment reminds us that God equips leaders not only to teach truth but also to protect it. Conflict in the church is unavoidable, but how we handle it shows whether we trust God's wisdom or our own. Unity isn't maintained by silence or compromise; it's built when godly people seek truth together under the Spirit's guidance.

Historical Background

By the time of Acts 15, the gospel had spread well beyond Jerusalem. Through Paul and Barnabas's efforts, entire Gentile communities in Antioch, Pisidia, and Galatia embraced faith. However, not everyone

in the early church understood how Gentiles fit into God's plan. Some Jewish Christians, often called "Judaizers," taught that Gentiles needed to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be accepted by God. They viewed Christianity as an extension of Judaism rather than as its fulfillment.

This teaching caused a serious problem. It challenged whether salvation was by grace through faith in Christ or by law-keeping and human effort. The issue was significant. It threatened the very foundation of the gospel and the unity of the church. The church in Antioch, where Jews and Gentiles worshiped together, became the center of this controversy. When the dispute couldn't be resolved locally, the congregation sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders. This gathering—commonly called the Jerusalem Council—was the first recorded meeting of church leaders to discuss doctrine and unity.

At the council, Peter reminded everyone of his previous experience with Cornelius, demonstrating that God had already accepted Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit outside of the law (Acts 10–11). Paul and Barnabas shared testimony about the miracles God performed among the Gentiles during their missionary journey. Then James, the brother of Jesus, summarized the issue from Scripture, quoting Amos 9 to show that God's plan had always been to include the Gentiles as His people.

The final decision was clear: salvation comes through grace, not law. The council sent a letter confirming that Gentile believers are full members of God's family without circumcision. They only requested that believers avoid certain practices that might offend their Jewish brothers and sisters: guidelines for unity, not requirements for salvation.

The Jerusalem Council served as a model for church leadership. It demonstrated the importance of addressing conflicts through prayer, humility, and reliance on the Spirit's guidance. It also conveyed a lasting truth: no one is saved by rituals, rules, or heritage; only through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Equipped to Guard the Gospel (15:1–6)

The opening verses of Acts 15 show how easily the gospel can be challenged when human tradition starts to replace divine truth. Some men came from Judea to Antioch teaching, *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.”* (v. 1). To them, faith in Jesus was not enough; they wanted to add requirements that God never gave.

Paul and Barnabas quickly recognized the danger. This wasn’t a small disagreement; it was an attack on the message of salvation by grace through faith. If circumcision was necessary for salvation, then the cross wasn’t enough. The argument struck at the core of what it means to be saved.

Luke says, *After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue.* (v. 2). Notice the humility and order in their response. They didn’t divide the church or rely on emotion. They sought the collective wisdom of godly leaders. They wanted to ensure the gospel was preserved for every brother and sister. As they traveled to Jerusalem, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, sharing the good news of Gentile conversions, which brought joy to all the believers. Even amid controversy, they kept the focus on what God was doing.

Here we learn an essential lesson about leadership: God equips His servants to guard the gospel. Every generation faces pressures to add, change, or distort the message of grace. Faithful leaders must know Scripture well enough to recognize error and courageous enough to confront it in love. Guarding the gospel requires both conviction and humility, conviction to stand for truth, and humility to seek unity under God’s word. The early church didn’t settle for compromise or confusion; they came together to protect the good news that Jesus alone saves. That same task still belongs to us today.

Equipped to Seek God's Wisdom (15:7–21)

When the church in Jerusalem gathered to address the dispute, there was “much debate.” This wasn’t a quick or easy discussion. Faithful men wrestled with a difficult question that affected the future of the church. Yet what stands out is how the leaders sought God’s wisdom together. They didn’t let emotion or pride control the conversation. They listened, they reasoned from Scripture, and they watched for the Spirit’s direction.

Peter was the first to speak. He reminded the assembly of what God had already done through him years earlier when he preached to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10–11). The Holy Spirit had come upon them without circumcision or observing the law. Peter concluded, *now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples’ necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.* (vv. 10–11).

Next, Paul and Barnabas described how God had worked signs and wonders among the Gentiles on their missionary journey. Their testimony confirmed Peter’s point: God Himself had accepted the Gentiles by faith, not by law.

Then James, the brother of Jesus, stood to speak. As a respected leader in the Jerusalem church, his words carried weight. He pointed to Scripture, quoting from Amos 9, to show that God had always planned to include the Gentiles in His people. He proposed a wise and balanced solution: do not burden Gentile believers with the law of Moses but ask them to abstain from certain practices that would unnecessarily offend Jewish believers. This was not law-keeping for salvation, but wisdom for fellowship.

Here we see a glimpse of what Spirit-led leadership looks like. The apostles didn’t rely on opinion or politics; they sought the Lord’s will through His Word and His work. They listened to testimony, weighed evidence, and reasoned from Scripture. The result was not division but clarity and peace.

When God's people face disagreement, this passage gives us a model to follow. We must slow down, pray, listen, and let the Spirit speak through His word. Wisdom is not found in winning arguments but in aligning hearts with God's revealed truth.

Equipped to Preserve Unity (15:22–35)

After prayer, testimony, and agreement, the apostles and elders reached a unified decision. They decided to send a letter to the Gentile Christians, along with trusted men, Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, to deliver the message. The church wanted to ensure the news came not from hearsay but from the very leaders who had prayed and discussed together.

The letter began with encouragement, not condemnation: *Since we have heard that some without our authorization went out from us and troubled you with their words... we have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you.* (vv. 24–25). The decision was presented as a shared conviction under divine guidance: *For it was the Holy Spirit's decision—and ours—not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements.* (v. 28).

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The message reaffirmed the core of the gospel: salvation is by grace through faith. The few instructions given, abstaining from food offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality, were not conditions for salvation but acts of love. These guidelines helped promote unity between Jewish and Gentile believers, allowing them to share fellowship without causing offense.

When the letter arrived in Antioch, the church celebrated. The message provided reassurance and motivation, strengthening the believers and bringing peace. Silas and Judas, both prophets, stayed for a while to teach and uplift. The conflict that once threatened to divide the church now became a chance for better understanding and unity.

God equips leaders not only to teach truth but also to foster peace. Unity doesn't mean everyone agrees on every detail; it means the church is connected through shared faith in Jesus Christ and submission to the

Spirit's will. Leaders maintain unity by listening carefully, speaking honestly, and acting with humility and love.

In a time where division comes easily, the Jerusalem Council stands as a model for the modern church. When we face disagreement, we must hold tightly to the essentials of faith and treat one another with patience and grace. The Spirit who guided those leaders in Jerusalem still leads the church today when we seek Him together.

Lesson Summary and Reflection

Key Truths about the Jerusalem Council:

- God equips leaders to protect both the truth of the gospel and the unity of the church.
- Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ: never by law, ritual, or heritage.
- The Holy Spirit provides wisdom when we seek God's will together in humility.
- True unity is built on shared faith, patient listening, and mutual love.
- Wise leadership turns conflict into an opportunity for growth and greater understanding.

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The Jerusalem Council was a defining moment for the early church. Faced with division over the law of Moses and salvation, the apostles and elders gathered to listen, pray, and seek the Spirit's guidance. The outcome preserved both the truth of the gospel and the unity of the body.

The leaders did not settle the issue through pride or pressure but through patient dialogue and submission to God's word. Peter reminded them that salvation is by grace through faith. Paul and Barnabas testified to God's work among the Gentiles. James confirmed their testimony with Scripture, showing that God had always planned to include all nations in His people. Together they affirmed that faith, not ritual, makes a person right with God.

The council's letter to the Gentile believers reflected humility and care. Rather than impose burdens, they encouraged practices that would promote peace and fellowship. The church rejoiced because truth and love had prevailed.

God equips leaders to protect doctrine and lead people toward unity. The health of a congregation depends not only on what is taught but also on how conflicts are managed. When we seek God’s wisdom together, through prayer, Scripture, and humility, the Spirit guides us to peace. Leaders who follow this pattern build churches that are strong in truth, gentle in spirit, and united in love.

Memory Verse and Weekly Challenge

*We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus
in the same way they are.*

Acts 15:11 (CSB)

Weekly Challenge: This week, pray for wisdom and humility in how you handle disagreement: at home, at work, or in the church. When differences arise, listen before speaking and seek what will build peace and truth. Ask God to make you a source of unity, not division, in His family.

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For Discussion
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1. Why was the question raised in Acts 15 such a serious threat to the gospel and the unity of the church?

2. How did the apostles and elders show humility and dependence on God’s word in handling the dispute?

3. What can modern church leaders learn from the way Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James worked together?

4. How does Acts 15 remind us that unity must be built on truth, not compromise?

5. In what ways can you personally contribute to unity and peace in your congregation this week?

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