



The following is the summary of the Sunday sermon that is sent to the body at Steadfast in an email called "The Weekly"

---

## Acts 15

The Jerusalem Council [Fall, AD 49]

With the growth of the Gentile church, largely as a result of Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey, the Jerusalem church expressed concern and sent a delegation to Antioch, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. The central issue of the emerging dispute was the relationship of the Law to salvation. The Jerusalem Council included Apostles, Jesus' hand-chosen, Spirit-inspired witnesses, whose testimony laid the foundation of the church's faith. It must have involved ultimately the following questions and concerns:

- How can fellowship occur if Jewish Christians keep the Law but Gentile Christians do not?
- Does the issue of uncleanness arise in this consideration?
- How can Gentile Christians ignore God's covenant Law?
- How can law-observing Jewish Christians and law-ignoring Gentile Christians coexist?
- What constitutes the people of God?
- How can the church remain unified?

It is also important to note the Council's procedure and decision-making process:

- The question was decided not by a single Apostle or by the Apostles exclusively but rather by a gathering of the elders with the Apostles.
- The connective unity of the various churches was expressed in the decision in Antioch to refer the controversy to the Apostles and the elders in Jerusalem.
- The issue was resolved by weighing eyewitness testimony in the light of Scripture, through pastoral wisdom.

An additional point of the context is what had occurred during and after Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey—the emergence of a group eventually known as the Judaizers and the writing of Galatians, Paul's first epistle.

### Peter's Defense, Acts 15:6-11

Peter organized his defense around his experience with Cornelius in Acts 10. God chose

Peter to give the word of the Gospel to the Gentiles at the home of Cornelius. Peter also argued that the Holy Spirit was given to them just as He had been given to Jewish believers at Pentecost in Acts 2. This gift came from God who knows the human heart. What was important was that God gave the Spirit without any circumcision being done. Stressing the Spirit also gave emphasis to the New Covenant cleansings detailed in Ezekiel 36:24-26. All of this was the work of God, not of Peter or of Paul or of anyone else.

Peter strengthened his point by asking in rhetorically, “Why do you test God?” God had revealed Himself and shown how Gentile hearts were now cleansed without circumcision. The use of the term “test” was a strong warning! Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus. This fact had opened the way for both Jews and Gentiles to experience God’s blessing. Peter was emphasizing the theological equality of Jew and Gentile when it comes to matters of salvation. [This is the last we see of Peter in the book of Acts.]

### **James’ Compromise Proposal, Acts 15:12-21**

The silence that followed Peter’s counsel was broken by Barnabas and Paul. They recounted how God had worked “signs and wonders” among the Gentiles, another divine affirmation of Gentile inclusion. James then spoke in clear support of Peter’s words, namely that God has called out Gentiles, who will represent Him and bear His name. This truth matched what the prophets had declared about the inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:11-12, with references to Isaiah 42:21, Jeremiah 12:15). James was stressing fulfillment, for the prophets agreed with what Peter had described. God had promised Gentiles inclusion; He was now doing it! God had begun rebuilding the dynasty of David—begun with the arrival of Jesus and the inclusion of the Gentiles.

James (and the Council) asked that the Gentile Christians be sensitive about four matters and to refrain from them. To be avoided were: [1] the pollution that comes from idols and associated rituals; [2] immorality, more than likely associated with pagan rites and temple prostitution; [3] strangled things, no doubt that which was associated with sacrifices and meals among Gentiles where the blood was not drained from the animal; and [4] blood matters, no doubt drawn from Leviticus 17:10-14, which prohibited the eating of meat that has not been properly drained of blood.

In summary, James was requesting that Jew and Gentile be faithful to the one true God, to be moral in worship, and to have sensitivity to issues of unclean animals and eating strangled animals without draining the blood. They displayed a cross-cultural concern that leads to harmony and unity in the church.

James concluded his remarks in 15:21 with an observation that Moses was read each week in the synagogue; so one must be sensitive to Jewish concerns. If you Gentiles need more guidance concerning Jewish concerns, go listen to the weekly reading of Moses in the synagogue in your region.

Two complementary lessons from the Council's decision:

- Salvation by grace through faith is absolutely essential—no compromise. No particular work of the Law was added as a requirement for salvation or membership in the New Covenant community of Jesus. It was all dependent on the “by grace through faith” principle.
- Christian fellowship: Grace is shown for differences not essential to salvation as an expression of Christian love. This preserved the unity of the church and protected it from fragmentation. Jewish believers were free to practice the faith in their way, just as Gentiles were not required to come under the law. As long as the Gospel was not compromised, then diversity of expression could be tolerated.

### **The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers, 15:22-35**

The final section on the Jerusalem Council contained the writing of the letter to the churches and the sending of the emissaries bearing the letter. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch and instructed the church there.

Paul and Barnabas Separate, 15:36-41

Paul proposed to visit the churches planted on the first journey and asked Barnabas to come along. However, Barnabas wished to take John Mark. Paul protested because he had deserted them at Pamphylia. They agreed to disagree, with Barnabas and Mark going to Cyprus and Paul and Silas to Syria, Cilicia and the cities of the first journey. The advance of the Gospel continued but in a manner that recognized the need for distinct ministries. The rest of the book will focus on Paul's journeys.

## Questions

- The Jerusalem Council emphasized the simplicity of the Gospel—salvation is by grace through faith plus nothing else. Does the 21<sup>st</sup> century church often add something to the Gospel? Do you?
- How did the Jerusalem church seek to respect the diversity of the growing church with the need for unity? Is that important for today's 21<sup>st</sup> century church?
- The Jerusalem Council encouraged sensitivity to Jewish traditions and practices while preserving the unity of the church. In our world today, what does sensitivity to traditions and practices look like? In what way is sensitivity related to Christian love?
- At the end of chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas have a significant disagreement about John Mark. That disagreement caused them to split. What can we learn from this today? Are there situations where to agree to disagree can actually advance the Gospel? How is this related to being a “peacemaker,” which Jesus calls us to be in Matthew 5:9?

Dr. Jim Eckman