

COVENANT — THE FIRST CHURCH

The Council in Jerusalem

LESSON 06

JULY 12, 2026

LESSON TEXT

Acts 15:1–17, 28–29

FOCUS VERSES

Acts 15:28–29

²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

²⁹That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

TRUTH ABOUT COVENANT

Covenant with God calls us to be in covenant with other people.

MY RESPONSE TO COVENANT

We will keep biblical principles and promote unity even amid different views.

COVENANT CONTEXT

As the church continued to grow into Gentile nations, a major point of discussion arose concerning how to treat Gentile Christians. The New Testament church leaders met in Jerusalem for the first church council, which threatened unity and could have divided the church into two groups. Nevertheless, the apostles followed the Spirit, maintained unity, and preserved the new covenant for all people—an example to us still today.

TEACHING OUTLINE

Icebreaker: What is the most successful conflict resolution you have witnessed or been a part of?

Teacher Tip: Connect the group's answers to the conflict resolution seen in the church council in Acts 15.

Lesson Connection: Share the Lesson Connection. **(I)**

I. THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

A. The Requirements of the Law

B. The Power of the Spirit

DISCUSS: *What can we learn about the disciples' quest for unity without compromising the truth of the gospel?*

C. I will seek solutions that promote unity in the body of Christ. **(V)**

***DISCUSS:** What elements are always necessary in resolving an issue at work, in your family, and in the church?*

II. PETER'S TESTIMONY

- A. The Purity of Faith
- B. I will witness to people of all cultures.

***DISCUSS:** How can you reach out to someone from a different culture?*

III. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE GENTILES

- A. Four Necessary Things

***DISCUSS:** What do we learn from the list of four prohibitions the apostles agreed on in Acts 15? How does this decision apply to us?*

- B. The Holy Ghost and Us
- C. I will seek the Spirit to keep covenant with others in difficult situations.

***DISCUSS:** Name some ways you individually can help maintain unity within the local church.*

Internalizing the Message

PRAYER FOCUS

Lead the group in prayer and consider the following topics of focus:

- For God to send a spirit of unity among members of the body of Christ in our church
- For God to send a spirit of unity between local churches nearby us

LESSON CONNECTION

(I) The building of the Panama Canal is considered one the greatest achievements of human engineering. Mariners had long viewed the Isthmus of Panama as the perfect place to make a shortcut between the two great oceans of the earth: the Atlantic and the Pacific. While the French started the work of building the canal, the United States ultimately took over and completed the work. It took ten years of hard labor on the part of everyone involved between 1904 and 1914.

When asked about the reason for the Americans' success, George Washington Goethals, the principal engineer for the project is reputed for saying: "The pride everyone feels in the work." The former president of Sears and Roebuck, Robert Wood said, "Men reported to work early and stayed late, without overtime. Every American employed would have worked that year without pay, if only to see the first ship pass through the completed Canal. That spirit went down to all the laborers."

That is an amazing summary of the work because when the French started in 1881, they had to quit the project due to so many labor problems. Tragically the Chinese workers who had been brought over to Panama to do the work committed suicide en masse. What happened? Since the engineers did not appropriately share the vision with the Chinese that their work was changing the world, the Chinese workers never felt valued and appreciated by those in charge of the project. They dealt with harsh conditions, disease, accidents, and mistreatment. The workers basically lost all hope that anything would get better.

In 1904 the United States took over to finish the project. Under the leadership of John Frank Stevens and George Washington Goethals, the workers faced significantly better conditions by improving sanitation and public health measures. Ten years later the Panama Canal was finally finished and the first ship, the USS *Ancon*, sailed successfully through the canal. The canal reduced shipping times between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, making sea travel much more efficient.

Men and women can accomplish so much when they come together for a common cause. This is the vision Jesus Christ has for the church, and it is imperative we keep our eyes focused on what can be accomplished if we all work together in unity. As we arrive at Acts 15, growing questions between the Jews and Gentiles threatened to destroy that unity.

BIBLE LESSON

I. THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

A. The Requirements of the Law

The law of God given to Israel at Mount Sinai was absolutely necessary to establish them as the people of God. They had been slaves for four hundred years, so laws were necessary for them to work together to become a nation. The Sinai law of God dealt with sin. The sins of the people had to be covered lest judgment fall on them. Blood was the only substance that could make an atonement for sin (Leviticus 17:11). All the laws God gave to Moses were “types and shadows” of things to come: the blood of Jesus, as well as many aspects of the Christian life. The laws given at Sinai were the building blocks of redemption Jesus Christ would carry out on the cross.

B. The Power of the Spirit

In Acts 15 the church was at a strategic junction. The gospel had jumped the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, but the leaders of the newly born-again church were uncertain of how to move forward. All had experienced the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and they were working to walk in the Spirit, which produced an atmosphere in which the Spirit of God could work.

As the gospel continued to spread to the ends of the earth, the Jewish Christians were concerned that the Gentiles were not fully in covenant with God because they had not obeyed Jewish law. The early church needed God’s Spirit to lead them in whether or not to require the new Gentile converts to adhere to the old Law. This decision was extremely controversial and divisive. Yet when the leaders of the church walked in the Spirit and were led by the Spirit, even these difficult doctrinal issues could be resolved and worked out.

The first church council was held in Jerusalem, bringing together different opinions. Some strongly held to the Mosaic law and felt it absolutely necessary to require the Gentiles who were entering the church to fully obey it. Others regarded the same laws, yet they had witnessed the power of the Holy Ghost working among the Gentiles who did not have the same background in the Mosaic law.

One ingredient these early church leaders had, which made all the difference, was their respect for one another. Their respect is apparent in the event of Acts 15. These Jewish leaders wanted to give the Gentile members of the

church every opportunity to succeed. The apostles were so in tune with the Spirit that they would do nothing to endanger the unity of the body of Christ. Their Hebrew background was not going to put new converts at risk because their desire to carry out the Great Commission was linked with Jesus' call to be in unity.

***DISCUSS:** What can we learn about the disciples' quest for unity without compromising the truth of the gospel?*

C. I will seek solutions that promote unity in the body of Christ.

Jesus taught a parable in John 10:12–13 about the hireling fleeing when he sees the wolf coming. The hireling isn't like the shepherd; the hireling doesn't care about the sheep. When trouble comes, he takes off. He will not fight against the threat and hold the flock together. He lets the flock scatter and be destroyed. Every saint of God needs to decide never to flee when problems and difficulties come to the church. It is easy to be a hireling and flee when trouble comes. It is taxing to stand with the flock and fight off attacks of the enemy. But if everyone decides to stand with the local church and hold together through difficulties, no matter what, we will see stronger and more effective churches doing greater things for God.

When disagreements come to any group, there is always the human tendency to dig in one's heels and refuse to budge once we take a side. It takes a strong person to make concessions and work to see the other viewpoint. Fleeing the church when trouble comes or digging in one's heels and refusing to work with others will not bring the blessings of God on the church. Both decisions bring irreparable harm and division.

(V) When truth is at stake, it takes much prayer and thought to carefully work through the issues. Truth will always require a defense. If an issue of truth is at stake, the solution will require much study, prayer, and discussion. The Acts 15 council is a masterclass on how to deal with controversial developments and still maintain unity in the body of Christ.

***DISCUSS:** What elements are always necessary in resolving an issue at work, in your family, and in the church?*

II. PETER'S TESTIMONY

A. The Purity of Faith

An amazing event happened in the Jerusalem Council decision: Division between Gentiles and Jews was addressed and resolved. This occurred because Peter and the other apostles knew the mind of Christ. Jesus had taught them the heart was what really mattered. Outward differences, such as the old covenant sign of circumcision, should not divide us as long as we have hearts full of the Holy Ghost and faith to please God.

Peter and the apostles understood that God had invited the entire world into a new covenant through the gospel. Not only did they need to be in covenant with God, but they needed to be in covenant with one another and with new members who were being added to the church. This remarkable decision propelled the people of God into even greater revival. The gospel spread like wildfire. It was evident God blessed their efforts to fight for the rights of all humanity to be saved.

What a beautiful way Peter explained his decision-making process. Peter shared his testimony about God reaching the Gentiles, “purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9). Further, Peter even made the Gentiles the template when he said, “But we believe that through the grace of the LORD Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11). It was risky for him to say the Jews could be saved just like the Gentiles were, but it was true. It was also true that the Gentiles would be saved just like the Jews were because everyone stands on level ground, thanks to the gospel.

B. I will witness to people of all cultures.

Humans have always had the tendency to look down on others. There are many reasons for this fallacy, but in the church of Jesus Christ, it must not be allowed to fester and grow. Herein lies the great challenge for every generation of believers: Will we stand against divisions in the church? Examining ourselves regularly is an important function in our walk with God. We must ask God to show us and root out our prejudices or pride so we can help keep the church united and bless the world around us.

Just because someone is different from us does not negate our ability to connect with them and lead them to Jesus Christ. It would be good practice for every child of God to work hard at meeting new people and interacting with different people groups and cultures. Jesus’ last message to His disciples was to go into all the world and preach the gospel. This reveals the heart of God—He wants all of humanity to have the message of salvation.

***DISCUSS:** How can you reach out to someone from a different culture?*

III. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE GENTILES

A. Four Necessary Things

God will do great things for everyone in covenant with Him, but we must bring things to the table too. There are some requirements we do for God in this covenant relationship. Since the Protestant Reformation, there have been ebbs and flows of faith and works. At times the church would get carried away with works, believing we can earn our salvation through works. Then the pendulum would swing in the opposite direction, and faith became the only criteria: There is nothing to do but believe.

While faith is always the primary ingredient to pleasing God, the apostles made it clear in Acts 15 that we must do things to maintain order and unity within the church. Peter, the man with the keys to the Kingdom, again rose up. He declared the Jewish church was not going to put a yoke on the Gentile church that God did not require. Peter’s remarks did not inflame people nor set off angry arguments; rather, they maintained a spirit of unity. What a beautiful example this is to future generations. Leadership committed to unity can do remarkable things. Peter laid out some parameters for the Gentiles that would help them maintain order and purity:

1. Abstain from meats offered to idols.
2. Abstain from blood.
3. Abstain from things strangled.

4. Abstain from fornication.

The first three of these prohibitions were tied to the Jewish law in order to keep from offending the Jewish Christians. However, abstaining from fornication is a moral law that applies to all people for all generations. No matter where we are born or live, our human nature will always seek to run wild. Those in leadership must have the freedom to give parameters to the people of God in areas where our flesh (human nature) wants to dominate. Of course the first three prohibitions are not part of being born again, but they were necessary to keep God's church from splintering into a Jewish Christian church and a Gentile Christian church. According to Ephesians 2:14, Jesus tore down the wall that divided the Jews and the Gentiles.

***DISCUSS:** What do we learn from the list of four prohibitions the apostles agreed on in Acts 15? How does this decision apply to us?*

B. The Holy Ghost and Us

Paul and Barnabas seemed to help seal the decision when they mentioned the two voices we should be hearing: the Holy Ghost and us. It was necessary that God lead His church and necessary that His church agree with Him in order to maintain unity between two major different groups of people and backgrounds. The Holy Ghost was at work in this council. The leaders walked in the Spirit. They made decisions with open hearts to the Spirit of God. This council was a conflict-resolution seminar for the ages: God was working with leadership to make decisions that would build up His great church.

The final decision appeared to rest in the hands of the pastor of the Jerusalem church, James. When he spoke, everyone listened because they wanted to know what James thought of the decision. He pastored in the largest Jewish city in the known world, so if anyone would side with the Jews clamoring for Gentiles to obey Jewish law, it was James. But he courageously and obediently took a stand for the gospel, not just to please people.

We must allow God's Spirit to lead us in all areas of our lives, especially in areas of faith. We should develop a deeper relationship with God and seek Him for direction when we are faced with difficulties in life. If we will read His Word, listen for His voice, and seek for unity without compromising truth, we will please God and see His church continue to reach the world with the gospel.

C. I will seek the Spirit to keep covenant with others in difficult situations.

Human organizations, even the church, will always have unity challenges. People have different backgrounds and ways of thinking that tend toward division and separation. The Spirit of God that fell on the Day of Pentecost was the great unifier. When we commit to be in covenant with every member of our local church and daily seek to commune with God's Spirit, we can overcome any obstacle that presents itself.

***DISCUSS:** Name some ways you individually can help maintain unity within the local church.*

***Teacher Option:** Tell the story below or share one of your own to illustrate how amazing things can happen when we follow God and fight for unity.*

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

The First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was a move of God that swept across England as well as the American colonies. The revival changed the hearts and minds of many people. Benjamin Franklin wrote of walking in the streets of Philadelphia and hearing singing and prayer everywhere he walked.

One of the most amazing developments of that great revival was the anti-slavery movement. For thousands of years, slavery was an accepted norm the nations of the world lived with. However, in the middle of the eighteenth century, people like John Adams and Benjamin Franklin began speaking out against the evils of slavery. Something about the Spirit of God moving in people's hearts caused a change in social norms. People began to rethink the widespread practice of slavery (Eddie L. Hyatt, *Abolitionist Founding Fathers*).

When people are striving to walk in the Spirit, new and better ideas begin to take shape. The creative power of God is unleashed in the earth when people keep their ears attuned to the voice of God. The Holy Spirit was working when the United States of America was born in 1776. America was birthed with a high regard for God and His laws. The Declaration of Independence makes this powerful, world-changing statement: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Bringing people together and establishing new norms that are better for all humanity have their roots in the power of God working on earth. So much could be accomplished if everyone in the church would commit to working together, hearing from God, and letting God lead us into new frontiers. When it seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us, let us follow the Holy Ghost and be part of all God will do through all of us.