

The First Church Council Acts 15:1-35

Introduction

The church in Antioch (Syria) continued to be the 'headquarters' for the Gentile church. Paul and Barnabas had spent a lot of their time there caring for the people (11:26). They had helped the church become strong with a group of gifted prophets and teachers (13:1). This was the same church that had sent Paul and Barnabas on the first recorded missionary trip. The number of believers was growing in Antioch and other areas which had been evangelized. It was a good reason to rejoice. However, reports of the Gentiles converting made the Jewish Christians concerned about the ways of their Jewish religion. They thought that the converted Gentiles had to be circumcized so they could become a part of Judaism. However, Paul could see that forcing Gentiles to be circumcised could confuse them into thinking that they could EARN their salvation. He knew that the ways of Judaism no longer applied. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem were asked to help settle the disagreement when they could not agree. This became the first church council.

Outline of Acts 15:1-35

- I. Conflict Concerning Gentiles - Acts 15:1-5
- II. Council's Consideration of the Matter - Acts 15:6-29
- III. Chosen Men Carry the Decision to Antioch - Acts 15:30-35

I. Conflict Concerning the Gentiles - Acts 15:1-5

The gospel of Jesus Christ was the main message of every church, but there were big differences between the Gentile churches and the churches in Judea. For example, the Jewish believers were still going to the synagogue to practice the Old Testament law. In the Gentile churches, Jewish rituals were not observed. In Antioch, a conflict arose between the law (Old Testament requirements)

and liberty (freedom from the law). The men who insisted on keeping the law became known as "**Judaizers**."

There was a good reason for wanting to keep the Old Testament laws. After all, the law had been given by God. The authority of the law was sacred to Jews. They had been practicing the rituals their whole lives and it was a very important part of their lives. One of the requirements of the law was circumcision of all Jewish males (Genesis 17:10-14). Any Gentile males who wanted to live among Jewish people were also required to be circumcized (Exodus 12:48-49). Therefore, the Judaizers believed the Gentiles who believed in the Jewish Messiah must also be circumcized.

The Judaizers chose to teach their views in Antioch, the Gentile church headquarters. From Antioch, their doctrine would spread to all the Gentile churches.

Paul and Barnabas had never been led by the Holy Spirit to circumcise their converts. Therefore, they strongly disagreed with the Judaizers. The issue caused so much arguing that the Antioch church decided to send a group to Jerusalem to resolve it.

The trip from Antioch to Jerusalem took the men through Phoenicia and Samaria where the gospel had spread. Paul and Barnabas used this trip to encourage the believers in these areas with news of their successful mission trip. The news was welcomed with *great joy*.

They were welcomed by the apostles and elders when they arrived in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas gave a report of *all things that God had done with them* on their missionary adventures.

Unfortunately, not everyone was excited about the news brought by Paul and Barnabas. Some of the **Pharisees** (the strictest and most legalistic of the Jews) insisted that the Gentiles be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law.

II. Council's Consideration of the Matter - Acts 15:6-29

The apostles and elders called a church council meeting to think about this new situation. They needed to understand the Gentile believers' relationship to the law. Verses 12 and 22 state that the whole church participated in the council meeting.

Both sides wanted to state their opinions. Luke notes that there was *much dispute*. Peter waited for everyone to have a chance to give their opinion, and then he arose to speak.

Peter began by reminding the council that God had chosen him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He pointed out that God had accepted the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He had given it to the Jews when they believed. God had made no **distinction** between the Jews and Gentiles; the hearts of both had been cleansed and changed by faith.

Peter asked the Judaizers why they were putting God to the test. They were questioning God. God had purified the hearts of the Gentiles and given them the Holy Spirit. The Judaizers were *putting a yoke on the neck of the* (new Gentile) *disciples*. It was a yoke the Jews themselves had never been able to bear.



In other words, God's Law was a yoke around His people's necks. It gave them direction and purpose and instructed them on how to serve Him. However, no Jew had ever been able to keep the Law perfectly...until Jesus. Jews were continually offering animal sacrifices because of their sins (breaking God's Law). (Note: Jesus was the last sacrifice that ever had to be made because He had kept the Law perfectly. His sacrifice made it possible for the

'yoke' to be removed. God's people still needed to obey the Law, but Jesus' perfect sacrifice of Himself made it possible for believers to receive forgiveness directly from God without an animal sacrifice.)

The only way to be saved, for both Gentiles and Jews, is *through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*. No matter how hard they tried, no one (except Jesus) had ever been saved by obeying the law perfectly. So, not only was the Judaizers demand impossible, it was unnecessary. *For by grace you have been saved through faith* (Acts 15:9), *and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8). Everyone (Jew and Gentile) must depend upon the grace of Jesus Christ for salvation.

Peter's words left the council speechless. Paul and Barnabas took the silence as an opportunity to share the *many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles*.

Again there was silence. Then James spoke. He was Jesus' half-brother and Galatians 2:9 calls him a *pillar* of the church. The Jerusalem congregation recognized him as a leader and when he called them to listen, they did. James said that this argument was settled even before Simon (Peter) went to the Gentiles. It was in agreement with God's plan as revealed by the Old Testament prophets.

James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to show that Gentile believers were a part of God's **prediction** and purpose. His statement that the *prophets* (plural) *agree* showed that the quote from Amos represented what all the prophets had spoken (see Zechariah 2:11 and Isaiah 9:2, for example). In fact, the devout Jews expected a Messiah who would be a *light to the Gentiles* (Luke 2:32 and Isaiah 49:6). Amos' prophecy spoke of rebuilding the tabernacle of David so that the Gentiles might seek the Lord. This was done by Christ who was a descendant of David (Matthew 1:1 and Luke 3:23-31).

The conclusion was that God had called and accepted the Gentiles. Therefore, the Jewish

believers should not burden the new believers with unnecessary rules (such as circumcision). However, the Gentiles should not **offend** the Jews by continuing their pagan customs.

James suggested that the council write a letter to the Gentile believers. He said that Gentiles should be asked to **abstain** from things which would offend their fellow Jewish brothers. The Gentile believers were no longer to join in pagan feasts. They were asked to not eat meat with undrained blood, or buy meat sold in the marketplace which had been sacrificed to the pagan gods. They were also asked to keep their bodies from immoral actions.

The Gentiles were asked to follow these rules so that the Jewish and Gentile believers could have peace with each other. Keeping these rules would not give them salvation, but would help them to not hurt their Jewish brother's feelings.

A letter was written to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:23). Judas Barsabas and Silas were chosen to go with Paul and Barnabas to deliver the letter. It stated that the Judaizers who had caused the dispute were not sent by the Jerusalem church. It asked the Gentile believers to **abstain** from the *necessary things* (those that James had suggested). There was no mention of circumcision in it. It simply asked the Gentiles to show courteous respect to their Jewish brothers so that there would be unity within the church.

III. Chosen Men Carry Decision to Antioch - Acts 15:30-35

The problem had been solved. Judas and Silas accompanied Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with the letter in hand. The church at Antioch was gathered together and the letter was read. *When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.*

After staying in Antioch for a while, Judas returned to Jerusalem. The church in

Jerusalem was encouraged by the greetings brought back from the Gentile churches. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch teaching and preaching the word with many others. It is uncertain whether Silas remained in Antioch or returned to Jerusalem with Judas. However, he must have been blessed to witness the Gentile church in Antioch, because soon he will become a missionary to the Gentiles alongside Paul! †

Prayer

God loves to use ordinary people in exciting ways to encourage and strengthen His church. Ask God to show you how you can be an encouragement to your church. Perhaps you can write your pastor a thank you note this week. God will help you think of ways to serve in your church. You just need to be willing!

Memory Verse

Acts 15:18 *"Known to God from eternity are all His works."*

Vocabulary

Judaizers - live according to Jewish custom

Pharisees - a religious group of Jews that practiced Judaism and strict observance of the Mosaic law

distinction - that which makes someone different from another

prediction - something told before it happens; foretold

offend - to cause anger or hurt feelings

abstain - to hold yourself back by choice

Questions for Acts Lesson 13

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

DAY ONE: Review last weeks lesson and notes.

1. What did you learn from last week's lesson about how to settle a disagreement?

2. ♥(Heart Question) How will you encourage someone in your church this week?

DAY TWO: Read Acts 15:36-16:5.

3. a. Who had a disagreement in Acts 15:36-41? What was the reason for it?

4. ? (Thought Question) Can you see that anything good came out of the disagreement? If so, what?

5. a. Who did Paul meet in Lystra?

- b. Circle the facts that are true about this person.

His mother was Jewish.

Paul circumcised him.

His father was a Greek.

Nobody in Lystra liked him.

His mother was a Christian.

- c. ? (Thought Question) Why did Paul circumcise Timothy? See 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 for help.

DAY THREE: Read Acts 16:6-15.

6. a. From Acts 15:40-16:10, list the members of Paul's missionary team.

- b. How did the Holy Spirit have an influence on where Paul and his missionary team travelled?

7. Why did Paul and his missionary team go to Philippi? Underline the correct answers.

Paul had a vision.

They needed to stock up on supplies.

They got a ride.

Philippi had a large synagogue.

Timothy's mother lived there.

8. a. Where did the missionaries go on the Sabbath Day? Why?

b. Who did they meet there?

c. Why do you think they did not go to the synagogue?

9. Circle T or F next to the statements of Lydia. If a statement is false, please correct it.

T F Lydia was a business woman.

T F Lydia worshipped idols.

T F She believed Paul because she was so intelligent.

T F Lydia and her household were baptized.

T F She found a nice hotel room for Paul to stay in.

DAY FOUR: Read Acts 16:16-25.

10. a. What happened next that annoyed Paul?

b. What did he do about it?

11. From verses 18-19, what two things were gone?

1. _____ 2. _____

12. a. What did the masters of the slave girl do to Paul and Silas? Why?

b. Give the verses where you find the following facts.

vs. ____ The girl's masters accused Paul and Silas of causing trouble in the city.

vs. ____ They falsely accused Paul and Silas.

vs. ____ Paul and Silas were thrown into prison.

vs. ____ Paul and Silas gave the first Christian concert in Philippi.

13. What impressed you most about Paul and Silas in this passage.

DAY FIVE: Read Acts 16: 26-40.

14. a. How did God intervene? _____

b. What was the first response of the keeper of the prison (jailer)?

c. How did Paul encourage him?

15. a. What did the jailer ask Paul in verse 30?

b. What was Paul's answer?

16. What good things happened as a result of this experience?

17. Why did the city magistrates plead with Paul and Silas to leave the city?

VOCABULARY FOR ACTS LESSON 13

*"Will I have to use a dictionary to read your book?" ...
It depends...how much you used the dictionary before you read it."
Darconville's Cat by Alexander Theroux*

DAY ONE: Write the vocabulary words.

Judaizers - _____

Pharisees - _____

distinction - _____

prediction - _____

offend - _____

abstain - _____

DAY TWO: Write three sentences using three different vocabulary words of your choice.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

DAY THREE: Circle the word's synonym(s). (Synonym is a word/phrase that means the same thing.)

prediction - speech..... forecast foretold

offend -insult displease compliment

abstain - use go withouthold back

a person who has converted from one religion to another

ANSWER KEY

DAY FIVE: Unscramble previous vocabulary words. Each circle is a letter in the final word. Use the word bank and the definition of the final word to help you. NOTE: There are more words in the word bank than in the puzzle.

LUPSEVMII	I M <u>P</u> U L S I V E
TUTAHRYOI	A U T H O <u>R</u> I T Y
CEVDTINOC	C <u>O</u> N V I C T E D
PEEHSDAZMI	E M P H A <u>S</u> I Z E D
SEUSEDCA	S A D U S E <u>E</u> S
TAIVL	V I T A <u>L</u>
RECPISCIOHY	H <u>Y</u> P O C R I C I E S
TOXTALAIEN	E X A L T <u>A</u> T I O N
FUILELLDF	F U L F I L L E <u>D</u>

WORD BANK

authority L4
 blasphemy L5
 conversion L1
 convicted L3
 criticized L10
 deception L5
 emphasized L3
 evangelize L11
 exaltation L3
 fulfilled L3
 generation L1
 hypocrites L4
 impulsive L3
 proselyte L7
 Saducees L4
 sovereignty L1
 testimony L1
 vital L4

P R O S E L Y T E

a person who has converted from one religion to another