

Heritage Christian Community Baptist Church
Acts 15:1-41 NKJV Advancing the Gospel, Walking Together
Rev. Dr. Eric Bostick – Pastor
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Acts 14 closes with Paul and Barnabas returning to Antioch after their first missionary journey, strengthening the disciples and reporting “all that God had done with them” and how He had opened “the door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). What began as a mission to proclaim Christ had now become something much larger: Gentiles were believing, churches were being established, disciples were being strengthened, and the boundaries of the people of God were visibly expanding. Yet whenever the gospel crosses boundaries, it can expose deeply held assumptions about identity, tradition, and belonging. The Gentile mission celebrated at the end of Acts 14 becomes the theological crisis that opens Acts 15. Certain believers from Judea arrive in Antioch teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved (15:1), forcing the early church to answer a fundamental question: Is Christ sufficient for salvation, or must Gentile believers add Jewish law and ritual to the work of Christ? Acts 15 therefore moves us from the missionary expansion of the gospel in Acts 14 to the theological clarification of the gospel in Acts 15. As we study this chapter, we will examine how the early church handles doctrinal conflict, listens to testimony, interprets God's activity through Scripture, discerns the Spirit's leading, protects the freedom of the gospel, practices love within Christian liberty, communicates difficult decisions, and ultimately returns to the mission of strengthening the church. Acts 15 teaches us that a growing church must not only know how to reach people for Christ; it must also know how to preserve the truth of the gospel while learning how to walk together as one people of God.

The Gospel Is Challenged (Acts 15:1-5) NKJV

¹And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. ³So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren. ⁴And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them. ⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

Acts 15:1–5 places the early church at a decisive theological crossroads. The conflict was not simply about circumcision as a Jewish practice; it was about the basis of salvation and the

identity of the people of God. Certain believers from Judea were teaching Gentile Christians at Antioch, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” In Pauline terms, this teaching threatened the sufficiency of Christ’s saving work by making faith in Christ plus Torah observance the basis of justification. Paul had already proclaimed at Antioch that “by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). Therefore, Paul and Barnabas could not simply treat this as a difference of opinion. Luke says there was “no small dissension and dispute” (15:2), because the question was fundamentally theological: How does a sinner become part of the redeemed people of God? Paul’s answer, developed throughout his letters, is that justification is grounded in God’s grace and received through faith in Jesus Christ, not achieved through works of the Law (cf. Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:28). The issue becomes even more significant when Luke identifies some of the opponents as former Pharisees who believed (Acts 15:5). Their conversion to Christ was genuine, but their theological framework had not yet fully caught up with the implications of the gospel. They were attempting to place Gentile believers under Israel’s covenantal boundary marker—circumcision—and under the Mosaic Law as a requirement for full covenant membership.

The Antioch church therefore demonstrates an important principle of Christian leadership: unity does not mean avoiding difficult theological conversations; biblical unity requires confronting issues that distort the gospel while preserving fellowship among believers. Paul and Barnabas did not respond by abandoning the Gentile converts, nor did they resolve the dispute through personal authority alone. The church collectively determined to send representatives to Jerusalem to seek discernment from the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2). Along the journey, Paul and Barnabas continued telling believers about the Gentiles’ conversion, and “they caused great joy to all the brethren” (15:3). That detail is narratively important: while controversy was developing, God was still building His church. The question before the Jerusalem church was therefore not, “Should Gentiles be allowed to become Christians?” God had already answered that through the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas. The deeper question was, “On what basis are Gentiles received as members of God’s people?” Acts 15 prepares us to see that the gospel creates a new covenant community whose defining identity is not ethnicity, circumcision, or Torah observance, but faith in Jesus Christ and the transforming grace of God. For the contemporary church, this challenges us to distinguish between biblical convictions that protect the gospel and human traditions that can become conditions for belonging.

Q1: What exactly were the men from Judea teaching, and why was their teaching a threat to the gospel?

A:

Q2. Why did Paul and Barnabas refuse to simply “agree to disagree” with these men?

A:

3. What does the presence of believing Pharisees in Acts 15:5 teach us about the difficulty of changing our theological assumptions?

A:

4. What contemporary “requirements” might Christians add to the gospel that God has not made requirements for salvation?

A:

The Jerusalem council (Acts 6-21) NKJV

⁶ Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. ⁷ And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: “Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, ⁹ and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they.” ¹² Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

The Jerusalem Council now moves from dispute to discernment. After “much dispute,” Peter rises and does something significant: he does not begin by defending a personal preference; he begins by remembering what God had already done. Peter recalls his experience with Cornelius and the Gentiles in Acts 10, where God gave the Holy Spirit to Gentiles just as He had given the Spirit to Jewish believers. The phrase “God, who knows the heart” is especially important because God’s judgment was based upon the transformed heart, not the external mark of circumcision. Peter declares that God “made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:8–9). Theologically, this is foundational to Pauline soteriology: the gospel does not create two classes of Christians—those who are saved through grace and those who are saved through grace plus religious performance. Peter even turns the traditional Jewish-Gentile relationship upside down when he says, “we shall be saved in the same manner as they” (15:11). The Jewish believers are not the standard to which Gentiles must conform; both Jew and Gentile stand on the same ground before God—the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter’s language about the “yoke” exposes the danger of making the Law a means of salvation. The Law revealed God’s righteous standard, but Israel’s history demonstrated humanity’s

inability to achieve righteousness through law-keeping. In Christ, salvation is not humanity climbing upward toward God through performance; it is God graciously reaching downward toward humanity through Jesus Christ.

Then the room becomes quiet. “All the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul” (Acts 15:12). That silence is significant because it demonstrates that healthy theological community requires both the courage to speak and the humility to listen. Peter has presented God's activity; now Paul and Barnabas testify to God's activity. They recount “how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.” Notice the repeated emphasis: God chose, God acknowledged, God gave, God purified, God worked. The missionaries are not presenting themselves as the heroes of the story; they are witnesses to what God has already accomplished. The Council is therefore learning to interpret the controversy through the evidence of God's redemptive activity rather than through inherited assumptions. For the contemporary church, this is a profound leadership principle: before we decide what God can or cannot do, we should pay attention to what God is already doing. Churches can become so committed to protecting familiar patterns that they fail to recognize God's work outside those patterns. Acts 15 teaches mature Christian leaders to bring disagreement into the presence of Scripture, testimony, theology, and the observable work of God—and then have enough humility to listen.

Q5: According to Peter, what evidence demonstrated that God had accepted the Gentiles?

A:

Q6: What does Peter mean when he says, “We shall be saved in the same manner as they”?

A:

Q7: What can today's church learn from the fact that the multitude became silent and listened to Paul and Barnabas?

A:

¹³ And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen to me:

¹⁴ Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ¹⁶ ‘After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; ¹⁷ So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the Lord who does all these things.’ ¹⁸ “Known to God from eternity are all His works. ¹⁹ Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by

idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas have testified to God's work among the Gentiles, James steps forward and brings the discussion to its theological conclusion. What is striking about James's leadership is that he does not settle the controversy merely by appealing to experience, apostolic authority, or personal opinion. He goes to Scripture. James quotes Amos 9:11–12 and demonstrates that God's inclusion of the Gentiles was not a departure from God's purposes but the fulfillment of what God had already promised. The language is especially significant: God is taking a people (*laos*) from the nations (*ethnē*). The Gentiles do not have to cease being Gentiles and become Jews in order to become God's people. This is profoundly consistent with Paul's theology: God's redemptive purpose in Christ creates one people from Jew and Gentile without requiring Gentiles to enter the Mosaic covenant as a condition of salvation. James therefore says, “I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). The church's decision is grounded in the recognition that God's grace has already welcomed those whom some believers were attempting to exclude. James demonstrates an important principle of Christian discernment: experience may show us what God is doing, but Scripture helps the church understand what God is doing.

Yet James does not stop with theological freedom. He immediately moves from grace to responsibility. Gentile believers are not placed under the Mosaic Law as a condition of salvation, but they are asked to abstain from practices involving idolatry, sexual immorality, blood, and strangled animals. The principle beneath these instructions is the law of love and the preservation of Christian fellowship and witness. Christian liberty does not mean exercising every permissible right without regard for another believer. This anticipates a major Pauline theme developed later in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10: believers may possess freedom in Christ while voluntarily limiting that freedom for the sake of another person's conscience, fellowship, and the witness of the gospel. Thus, Acts 15 holds two truths together that the church must never separate: salvation is by grace, but grace produces a life that considers others. The Gentiles were not being told, “Earn your salvation by obeying these rules.” They were being taught, “Because you have received grace, use your freedom in a way that strengthens rather than fractures the body of Christ.” The Council therefore protects both the freedom of the gospel and the unity of the church.

Q8: Why does James appeal to Scripture before giving his judgment?

A:

Q9: What does James mean when he says, “We should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God”?

A:

Q10: If Gentile believers were free from the Mosaic Law, why did James still ask them to abstain from certain practices?

A:

The Decision From Jerusalem (Acts 5:22-29) NKJV

²² Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. ²³ They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls,¹saying, “You must be circumcised and keep the law”—to whom we gave no such commandment— ²⁵ it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: ²⁹ that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

The Jerusalem Council now moves from discernment to implementation. Luke says, “It pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church” (Acts 15:22). This is significant because the council did not merely arrive at a theological conclusion; it developed a plan to communicate that conclusion to the churches experiencing the conflict. Judas Barsabas and Silas were selected to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. The inclusion of these men gave the decision both credibility and relational strength. Even more remarkable is the transformation of the people who initially opposed Paul and Barnabas. They were willing to be corrected. Their example teaches an important dimension of Christian maturity: being convinced by Scripture is more important than preserving our original position. This is where Observation becomes Interpretation: What happened? The church listened, examined the evidence, reached agreement, and sent representatives. What does it mean? Truth is not just something we discuss; once discerned, it must be communicated clearly and implemented faithfully. The church did not leave Antioch wondering what Jerusalem had decided. Healthy spiritual leadership removes unnecessary confusion by communicating truth with clarity, accountability, and sensitivity.

The letter itself contains one of the most significant statements in the passage: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” (Acts 15:28). The church understood its decision as more than human consensus; it believed its deliberation had occurred under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Notice the balance: they did not say, “The Spirit told us,” nor did they say, “We voted and this is what we decided.” They brought together the Spirit, Scripture, discernment, community, and mission. The letter also makes clear that the Gentile believers were not to be burdened with

requirements that God had not imposed upon them. They were given “no greater burden” than necessary things that would protect fellowship and Christian witness. This distinction is crucial for Pauline theology: obedience is the fruit of salvation, not the price of salvation. Grace establishes our relationship with God; transformed living demonstrates the reality of that relationship. Acts 15 provides a model for resolving conflict: listen carefully, examine Scripture, discern the Spirit's leading, seek communal agreement, communicate the decision clearly, and then move forward together. The goal is not simply to win an argument; the goal is to preserve the gospel, strengthen the church, and advance the mission of Christ.

Q11: What did the Jerusalem church do after reaching its decision?

A:

Q12: What does “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us” teach about Christian decision-making?

A:

Q13: What principle from Acts 15 should govern the way today's church handles disagreements?

A: (Open)

Joyful Reception and John Mark Contention (Acts 5:30-41) NKJV

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement. ³² Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. ³³ And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. ³⁴ However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵ Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. ³⁶ Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.” ³⁷ Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

The Jerusalem decision arrives in Antioch, and Luke records a beautiful response: “When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement” (Acts 15:31). The Gentile believers had been carrying the anxiety of wondering whether their faith in Christ was truly sufficient. The

Council's decision did more than settle a theological controversy; it strengthened wounded believers, restored confidence, and released the church to continue its mission. Judas and Silas then “exhorted and strengthened the brethren,” while Paul and Barnabas continued “teaching and preaching the word of the Lord” (15:32–35). Notice the movement of the narrative: first conflict, then discernment, clarity, encouragement, strengthening, then mission. This is an important Pauline principle: sound doctrine is never just intellectual; it is intended to produce a healthy, strengthened, functioning body of Christ. The church did not remain trapped in the controversy after the truth was established. They received the decision, encouraged one another, and returned to the work of the gospel. For today's church, Acts 15 teaches that when conflict is handled Biblically, the outcome should not simply be that an argument ends; the people of God should become stronger and the mission of God should move forward.

Acts 15:36 begins with Paul's pastoral heart: “Let us now go back and visit our brethren... and see how they are doing.” Paul understood that ministry is not only about planting churches but about pastoring people into spiritual maturity. Yet the journey quickly exposes a painful reality of ministry: faithful servants of God can disagree sharply. Paul and Barnabas disagree over John Mark, and their contention becomes so sharp that they separate. Luke does not declare a winner, which should caution us against turning this passage into justification for choosing sides. The earlier disagreement in Acts 15 concerned the gospel itself; this disagreement concerns a ministry relationship and the assessment of a coworker's reliability. Nevertheless, God continues His mission through both teams: Barnabas takes Mark to Cyprus, while Paul takes Silas through Syria and Cilicia, “strengthening the churches.” The later Pauline references to Mark—particularly Paul's request that Mark be brought to him because “he is useful to me for ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11)—suggest that the rupture was not the final word. God can redeem broken relationships, restore usefulness, and bring maturity out of painful ministry experiences. The inductive lesson is not that division is good because God can use it; rather, it is that even when God's servants fail to navigate disagreement perfectly, God's mission is not defeated—and Christian maturity requires us to pursue restoration rather than permanently defining people by their past failures.

Q14: What was the immediate response of the Antioch believers when they heard the Council's decision?

A:

Q15: What happened to the mission after the conflict was resolved, and what does that teach today's church?

A:

Q16: What was Paul's original reason for wanting to return to the churches?

Answer:

Q17: What does the later restoration of Paul and Mark teach us about ministry conflict?

A: (Open)