



The First Church Council Acts 15:1-35

Introduction

The Book of Acts is a book of firsts: the first evidence of the baptism and filling of the Holy Spirit (2:4-6), the first evangelistic crusade (2:14-41), the first persecution of Christians (4:1-21), the first appointed church lay leaders (6:1-6), the first Christian martyr (7:54-60), the first preaching of the gospel to Samaria and the first Jews of mixed ancestry to receive the Holy Spirit (8:4-17), the first preaching to the Gentiles and the first Gentiles to receive the Holy Spirit (10:24-48), the first organized preaching to the Gentiles (11:20), the first time the disciples were called Christians (11:26), the first missionaries (13:2), and the first missionary campaign (13:4-14:26). Now, in Acts 15, Luke gives an account of the first church council.

At this time, Antioch (in Syria) was the hub of the Gentile church. Paul and Barnabas had nurtured the church there (11:26) with the support of a group of gifted prophets and teachers (13:1). Being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, the church had sent Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to Cyprus and the southern part of Galatia in Asia Minor. The fruits of the gospel were flourishing in Antioch and in the areas which had been evangelized. This, of course, was reason for much rejoicing among the believers (15:3). However, reports of the widespread conversion of Gentiles *caused the Jewish Christians to fear that their Jewish heritage was threatened; they thought that the converted Gentiles must be brought into Judaism through circumcision. Paul recognized that forcing Gentiles to be circumcised might make them think that salvation must be earned. He knew that the Judaizers (legalistic Jewish Christians) had to be opposed lest they hinder the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles* (New Geneva Study Bible, Thomas Nelson Publishers). The disagreement between Paul and the Judaizers was referred to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, leading to the first church council.

Outline of Acts 15:1-35

- I. Conflict Concerning the 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

Although the gospel of Jesus Christ was the central doctrine of every church, there were distinct differences between the churches in Judea and the Gentile churches. In the Jewish churches, the Christians continued to attend the synagogue and practice the Old Testament law. In the Gentile churches, no Jewish ceremonial rites were observed. As a result, a conflict between the law and liberty broke out at Antioch.

A. Judaizers arrive in Antioch - Acts 15:1

The *certain men* who traveled to Antioch from Judea became known as Judaizers because they wanted the Gentile Christians to adopt Jewish customs. These men were very zealous for the law and with good reason. The law had been given by God and the authority of the law was sacred to them. They had been born under the law and raised in observance of the law. It was near and dear to them; an integral part of their lives. The law demanded circumcision of all Jewish males (Genesis 17:10-14) and all Gentile males who desired to live among the Jewish people (Exodus 12:48-49). Therefore, they reasoned that any Gentiles who had come for refuge to the Jewish Messiah must surely be brought under the law as well.

The Judaizers chose to teach their views in Antioch, the home base of the Gentile churches, knowing their doctrine would spread to all the Gentile churches.

Today we are quick to judge and condemn the Judaizers for their actions, but let us be careful to remove any log from our own eye before trying to take the speck out of theirs. As Matthew Henry notes in his Commentary, *There is a strange proneness in us all to make our own opinion and practice a rule and a law to everybody.*

B. Paul and Barnabas dispute with Judaizers - Acts 15:2

The missionaries to the Gentiles had never been led to circumcise their converts and they strongly disagreed with the Judaizers. The issue caused so much dissension that the Antioch church decided to send a delegation to Jerusalem to get the matter settled.

C. Paul and Barnabas sent to Jerusalem - Acts 15:3-5

Who would be better to send than the missionaries to the Gentiles! Paul and Barnabas went on their way, supported by a contingent from the Antioch church.

1. Traveling through Phoenicia and Samaria - 15:3

The route from Antioch to Jerusalem took the delegation through Phoenicia and Samaria where the gospel had spread as a result of the martyrdom of Stephen (8:4-25 and 11:19). Paul and Barnabas used this trip as an opportunity to share the success of their mission to the Gentiles with the believers in these areas. The news was welcomed with *great joy*.

2. Reception in Jerusalem - 15:4

Upon arrival in Jerusalem *they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders*. The word *received* implies a cordial welcome. The apostles and elders listened as Paul and Barnabas gave a report of *all things that God had done with them* on their missionary adventures.

3. Pharisees' objections - 15:5

Unfortunately, all who heard were not filled with enthusiasm over the missionary report. Some believers who were from the sect 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 consider the Gentile believers' relationship to the law. Verse 6 mentions only the apostles and elders, but verses 12 and 22 show that the whole church participated in the council.

A. Disputing - Acts 15:6-7a

Both sides wanted to express their opinions, and Luke notes that there was *much dispute*. Peter waited until after the others had their say, then arose to speak.

B. Peter's speech - Acts 15:7b-11

Peter reminded the council how God had chosen him to speak to the Gentiles so they might *hear the word of the gospel and believe*.

1. The witness of God - 15:7b-9

Not only had God sent Peter to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, but He had acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He had given it to the Jews

when they believed. God made no distinction between the Jews and Gentiles; the hearts of both had been cleansed and changed *by faith*.

2. The testing of God - 15:10

The Judaizers were putting God to the test. They were questioning God after His will had been revealed. Like Ananias and Sapphira (5:9), they were seeing how far they could push God's patience. God had purified the hearts of the Gentiles and given them the Holy Spirit and now the Judaizers were as much as saying, "Do You know what You did?" "Are You sure You did the right thing?" They were second guessing God by putting the yoke of the law on the Gentile disciples, a yoke the Jews had never been able to bear.

3. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ - 15:11

The only way to salvation is *through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*, for both Gentiles and Jews. No matter how hard they might have tried, no one had ever been saved by observing the law. The Gentiles should not be forced to attempt what was impossible and 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). We all must depend upon the grace of Christ for salvation.

C. Paul and Barnabas' testimony - Acts 15:12

Peter's words left the entire council speechless. The two who had gone as missionaries to the Gentiles took the opportunity to share the *many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles*.

D. James' decision - Acts 15:13-21

Again there was silence. Then James, Jesus' half-brother and a *pillar* (Galatians 2:9) of the church, spoke. The Jerusalem congregation recognized him as a leader and when he called them to listen, they did. James' argument was that the whole matter had been settled by God even before Simon (Peter's Hebrew name) had gone to the Gentiles. Peter's call to go to the Gentiles and their acceptance into the church was in agreement with God's plan as revealed by the Old Testament prophets.

1. God had visited the Gentiles - 15:13-14

Just as God had *visited and redeemed His people*, Israel (Luke 1:68), He had now visited the Gentiles, (through Peter's going to Cornelius), accepting them to become *a people for His name*. The Old Testament had designated Israel as God's true people and now the Gentile believers were included as God's people. Peter wrote of this later in one of his letters, *You.....who once were not a people*

but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10).

2. The prophets were in agreement with this - 15:15-17

James quoted from Amos 9:11-12 to show that the successful mission to the Gentiles was both predicted by God and in the purpose of God. His statement that the *prophets* (plural) agree, showed the quote from Amos was representative of what all the prophets said. Many prophets spoke of the calling in of the Gentiles (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 in order that the Gentiles might seek the Lord.

a. Rebuilding the *tabernacle of David* - 15:16

The *tabernacle of David* refers to the *house* of David, literally his family, his descendants. There had not been a king of the house of David for hundreds of years. But according to Amos, God would rebuild the house of David out of its ruins. This had been accomplished in the coming of Christ who was a descendant of David (Matthew 1:1 and Luke 3:23-31).

b. The purpose of the rebuilding of the *tabernacle of David* - 15:17

Christ had come *so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are called by my name*. This is an amazing statement. It says that the purpose of Christ's coming was to fulfill God's plan of reaching out to the Gentiles.

3. God had foreordained it - 15:18

God had not only foretold the calling of the Gentiles through the prophets, He had planned and purposed it from eternity! It is difficult for our short-sighted human minds to comprehend such a thing. We can only plan and see a short way ahead, and even then we can never be certain of the outcome. Our plans and purposes are often thwarted. But whatever God does, is infallibly determined, designed, and accomplished! This demonstrates not only the power and authority of God, but His mercy as well. Those who have come to God through His Son the Lord Jesus Christ can take comfort in knowing that we are a part of God's perfect, predetermined plan. Nothing can touch us which is outside the will of God.

4. *Therefore.....we should not trouble.....the Gentiles.....* - 15:19-20

Because God had called and accepted the Gentiles, the Jewish believers were not to force burdensome and unnecessary rules (such as circumcision) upon them (15:10). However, the Gentiles must be careful not to offend the Jews by continuing their pagan customs. James suggested that the council write to the Gentile believers asking them to *abstain from certain things which were repulsive to the Jews* (Acts, I. Howard Marshall). Four things are mentioned.

a. *Things polluted by idols* - 15:20

The Gentile believers were no longer to join in the pagan feasts or eat meats sold in the marketplace which had been sacrificed to the pagan gods.

b. *Sexual immorality* - 15:20

Religious prostitution in the pagan temples was an everyday occurrence and moral corruption was commonplace among the Gentiles. This was no longer acceptable for the Gentile believers.

c. *Things strangled, and.....blood* - 15:20

These two prohibitions went together. If an animal were killed by strangling, it meant that the blood had not been properly drained. The Jews were strictly forbidden to eat blood. This ban had been in place long before the giving of the law. God had instructed Noah, *But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood* (Genesis 9:4).

Later He had explained the reason for the sanctity of the blood and extended the ban to Gentiles who lived among the Jews. *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. Therefore I said to the children of Israel, "No one among you shall eat blood, nor shall any stranger who sojourns among you eat blood"* (Leviticus 17:10-14).

The Gentiles were asked to abide by these rules, not to insure their salvation, but in order to establish a solid basis for fellowship in the church. It would be difficult for the Jewish Christians who abhorred the eating of blood to *break bread* (2:42) with the Gentiles who showed no restraint in consuming it.

5. Confirmation of the decision - Acts 15:21

James pointed out that there were synagogues in every city where the law of Moses was preached every Sabbath. Because the Jews had been so entrenched in the law from their youth, having heard it in the synagogues every Sabbath, the Gentiles were asked to avoid the practices which were offensive to them. This verse

could also be taken to infer that if the Gentiles desired to know more about the Jewish law, they could attend the synagogue any Sabbath and hear the law of Moses preached.

E. The Jerusalem Decree - Acts 15:22-29

A letter was written to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:23). Representatives were chosen to carry the letter back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The two emissaries, both leaders of the church (15:22) and prophets (15:32), were Judas Barsabas, perhaps the brother of Joseph Barsabas (1:23) and Silas, also referred to as Silvanus in the letters of Paul (1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2 Corinthians 1:19) and Peter (1 Peter 5:12). Silas, a Roman citizen (16:37), later accompanied Paul on his missionary trips.

The letter contained a censure of the Judaizers, a commendation of Barnabas and Paul, and a code of conduct for the Gentile believers. It was sent from a unified council, *with one accord* (15:25), which was under the powerful guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit (15:28). It was sent with gentleness (*it seemed good to us* - 15:25) and love (the Gentile believers were warmly greeted as *brethren* 15:23).

1. Censure of the Judaizers - 15:24

The letter made it clear that the Judaizers who had *troubled and unsettled the souls* of the Gentile believers had not been sent or sanctioned by the Jerusalem church.

2. Commendation of Barnabas and Paul - 15:25-26

Barnabas and Paul were described as *beloved,.....men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

3. Code of conduct for the Gentiles - 15:27-29

The letter made it clear that the council did not wish to burden the Gentiles. They were asked to abstain from only four *necessary things*; the same four things which were suggested by James (15:20). No mention is made of circumcision or the necessity of keeping the law of Moses. By abstaining from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality, the Gentiles would be showing courteous respect to their Jewish brothers and thus promoting 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.

A. Encouraging letter delivered - Acts 15:30-31

The church at Antioch was gathered together and the letter read. *When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.*

B. Strengthening words spoken - Acts 15:32-35

Judas and Silas, being prophets, were called upon to speak to the congregation. The primary role of New Testament prophets was to encourage and strengthen believers, which they did. It is interesting that the church at Antioch had its own prophets and teachers (11:27 and 13:1) in addition to the gifted Paul and Barnabas, yet the church was further strengthened by these ministers from Jerusalem. It is never possible to have too many gifted people in a church. Notice that in 15:35 Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch teaching and preaching the word *with many others*. God will make good use of every one He calls and equips.

After staying in Antioch for a time, Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem with encouraging greetings for the church in Jerusalem. Some manuscripts read that Silas stayed on at Antioch. The important thing is that all continued to minister as God had willed and called.

Applications

1. How is God using you to minister in the body of Christ? Do you think your church has enough gifted people serving and that they don't need an ordinary person like you? God delights to use ordinary people in exciting ways to encourage and strengthen His church. Will you let Him know that you are willing to let Him use you and work through you in any way He has planned (15:18)? *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them* (Ephesians 2:10).

2. Christians are not under the law. We have complete liberty in Christ. However, the decision made by the Jerusalem council shows that we are not to use this liberty to serve ourselves but to serve others. *For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another* (Galatians 5:13). Is there any way you are using your freedom in Christ to cause another believer to stumble? Some examples may have to do with drinking, eating, spending your money, use of free time, commitment to church attendance, and so on. *Beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak* (1 Corinthians 8:9). *Resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way* (Romans 14:13).