

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Acts 15:1–35

Opening Thought

1) What is legalism? Why is it so dangerous? What are some—modern-day examples of legalism among Christians and churches?

2) How can a believer discern between rules that are truly biblical and those that are merely cultural or human-made?

Background of the Passage

The flood of Gentile believers into the church surfaced underlying attitudes of pride and prejudice. Some legalistic Jews even tried to demand that the new converts be circumcised. Fierce arguing among the parties resulted in the first church council. At Jerusalem the apostles and elders convened to consider the relationship between Jewish believers and Gentile Christians, between the Mosaic law and the gospel of grace.

The council concluded, based on the Old Testament book of Amos (as expounded by James, leader of the proceedings) and in light of the sovereign experiences of both Peter and Paul, that Gentiles were equal partners with the Jews in God's eternal plan. Further, the council ruled that salvation depended solely on belief in Jesus, not on keeping the law of Moses.

The Jerusalem Council summarized its decision regarding Gentile circumcision in a letter. This letter was carried to Antioch of Syria by Judas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas accompanied these specially chosen messengers.

The letter instructed the Gentile converts to strictly avoid idolatry, immorality, and eating the meat of unbled animals—activities common among the Gentiles that were especially offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

This decision and directive brought joy to the believers at Antioch. The Jerusalem entourage stayed with the Gentile church there for a while, strengthening the believers and teaching God's Word.

Bible Passage

Read 15:1–35, noting the key words and definitions to the right of the passage.

Acts 15:1–35

- ¹ *And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*
- ² *Therefore, 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.*
- ³ *So, 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.*
- ⁴ *And 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.*
- ⁵ *But 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.”*
- 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.*
- 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.”*
- 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, saying, “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. Farewell.*
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.*

certain men (v. 1)—Judaizers, that is, false teachers who were self-appointed guardians of legalism, teaching a doctrine of salvation by works

Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved (v. 1)—This was, briefly summarized, the heresy propagated by the Judaizers.

up to Jerusalem (v. 2)—The city of Jerusalem has a higher elevation than the surrounding area; thus travelers literally go “up” to enter the city.

elders (v. 2)—the leaders of the Jerusalem church

all things (v. 4)—The report by Paul and Barnabas was thorough and should have been enough evidence of God’s sovereign selection of the Gentiles.

Peter rose up (v. 7)—Peter’s speech, the first of three at the council, is a strong defense of salvation by faith. In essence, he reminded everyone that God had not required circumcision of previous Gentile converts (see 10–11). If that were so, how could the legalists demand this act for salvation?

giving them the Holy Spirit(v. 8)—proof of the genuineness of their salvation

a yoke (v. 10)—the idea is that the legalists were placing a heavy burden or load on these new converts

Barnabas and Paul (v. 12)—The missionaries spoke next and reported on God’s obvious work among the Gentiles during their just completed trip.

James answered (v. 13)—the third address of the conference; also a ringing defense of salvation by faith

the words of the prophets agree (v. 15)—The quote is from Amos—the scene is of the millennium—and the text makes no mention of Gentiles becoming Jewish proselytes; the idea is if Gentiles can be saved without becoming Jews in the age to come, they do not need to become Jews in the present age.

we should not trouble(v. 19)—The Greek word means “to throw something in the path of someone to annoy them”; the idea was that it would be wrong to require the Gentiles to keep the Old Testament law and observe Jewish rituals.

we write to them (v. 20)—The council did not want the Gentiles to revel in their freedom to the point of offending their Jewish brothers, so they did propose abstinence from certain offensive practices.

things polluted by idols (v. 20) —food offered to pagan gods and then sold in the market

sexual immorality (v. 20)—sexual sins in general, but also the orgies associated with pagan rites in particular

things strangled, and from blood (v. 20)—a request that they be sensitive to the Jewish dietary restrictions

Silas (v. 22)—Also known as Silvanus, he later accompanied Paul and served as his scribe.

troubled (v. 24)—This verb means “to deeply upset” and is a different word from the one used in verse 19.

unsettling (v. 24)—used in extrabiblical Greek to speak of someone going bankrupt; the idea is chaos and turmoil

risked their lives (v. 26)—a reference to the persecution and stoning experienced on the first missionary journey

Understanding the Text

3) What conflict threatened to tear apart the early church?

4) What did first-century believers do to attempt to resolve this bitter debate?

5) How did the events of the Jerusalem Council unfold?

6) What decisions were eventually reached? Upon what evidence did the leaders make their decision?

Cross Reference

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1–13.

Exploring the Meaning

7) What was the situation in the church at Corinth? How (if at all) does this compare to the situation in chapter 15? What counsel did Paul give the church?

8) Read Romans 14:14–21. How does legalism differ from voluntary self-restriction due to the law of love?

9) How were the council's decisions received by the Jews? By the Gentiles? What does Hebrews 13:17 have to say about submission to church leaders?

Summing Up ...

“Throughout its history, the church’s leaders have met to settle doctrinal issues. Historians point to seven ecumenical councils in the church’s early history, especially the Councils of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Yet the most important council was the first one—the Jerusalem Council—because it established the answer to the most vital doctrinal question of all: ‘What must a person do to be saved?’ The apostles and elders defied efforts to impose legalism and ritualism as necessary pre-requisites for salvation. They forever affirmed that salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone.” —*John MacArthur*

Reflecting on the Text

10) R. C. H. Lenski has written:

“To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on a par with him, yea to make it the crowning point. That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge.”

What are some of the common, modern-day misconceptions about salvation? In what human elements do many people trust to save them?

11) What principles for conflict resolution among believers do you see in chapter 15? Which ones can you use this week? How?

12) How would history have been affected and how might your life be different if the leaders of the first-century church had not addressed the issue of salvation as it did in chapter 15?

Recording Your Thoughts
