

Acts 15: The Jerusalem Council

¹⁵ Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders. ³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”

¹² The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;
from its ruins I will rebuild it,
and I will set it up,

¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.

Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.’

¹⁹ Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. ²¹ For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

²² Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, ²⁵ we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

³⁰ So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. ³² Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Background

- This chapter occurs about ten years after Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10; F. F. Bruce, 306).
- **The controversy:** "Many Jewish people believed that Gentiles were saved simply by keeping the seven laws given to Noah (prohibiting idolatry, sexual immorality, etc.); others believed that Gentiles had to convert to Judaism by being circumcised (if male) and (according to most of this group) baptized (whether male or female)." ¹
- **The compromise:**
 - The Greek of v. 20 makes it clear the four requirements are to be seen as a concession and not an imposition. ¹ The text is clear that James is not commanding; he's asking.
 - The four requirements (20, 28) can also be found in the rules for aliens residing in Israel, found in Leviticus 17-18², where the general term "fornication" (*porneia*; 20) appears to be derived from the censure of incestuous relations, bestiality, etc. in Leviticus 18.

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1. Jews maintained ritual cleanliness through obedience to the Law. Gentiles, not following the Law, were therefore unclean. Jewish tradition, for this reason, forbade table fellowship with Gentiles. His experience with Cornelius showed Peter that Gentile converts were clean by the action of the Holy Spirit and had no need of the Law.

Were non-Christian Gentiles still to be treated as unclean? If so, why weren't Gentile believers told to avoid their unbelieving Gentile friends?

2. Paul himself was willing to bend over backwards to spread the gospel (Acts 16:3; 21:26; 1 Cor 9:19+). In his letters, Paul also taught those "who are strong in the faith to voluntarily restrict their liberty in matters of food and the like so as not to offend weaker consciences (cf. Rom 14:1+; 1 Cor 8:1+)" (Bruce, 314). How do you see these principles at work here? On other topics Paul insists there must be no compromise, and is willing to go to jail and even risk death to hold the line.

Is this a hold-the-line issue or a matter of compromise? If the latter, who is compromising?

3. Leftover from last time: When Peter is in the midst of telling Cornelius the gospel, Cornelius and the other Gentiles begin speaking in tongues, exactly as the Jewish Christians did at Pentecost. Peter's response is strikingly different from that one might expect from many modern Christians. Where Peter saw the hand of God, many modern non-charismatic believers see it as a dangerous distraction. Why? Does this make sense?
4. Judas and Silas were sent to carry the message up north to the church in Antioch. As prophets, Luke tells us that, as prophets, they "said much to encourage and strengthen the believers" (32; see also Eph 4:11-13). For many modern non-charismatic readers in the U.S. this will cause a double take, as prophecy is seen as, at best, a distraction, especially after several years of false, politically motivated prophecy. ³

Paul, in 1 Cor 12:31, urges believers to pursue the "greater gifts", particularly prophecy. Craig Keener, in his book *Gift and Giver*, advises those interested in prophecy to focus on learning to think the way God thinks. It is safe to say that all modern churches in America could use some "encouragement and strengthening." How might a deliberate and directed application of Keener's advice be of use?

5. Acts 15 at first looks like a weird curiosity: The Pharisee Christians were hectoring the Gentile Christians, leading to our weird, and at first glance somewhat random strangled-animal compromise. We are glad the Pharisaical Christians calmed down, but application of the 4 odd-fellow laws to modern life feels remote.

In fact, the events of Acts 15 are of the greatest possible importance, and even The Four Compromises show the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. What would the modern church look like now if there had been no compromise?



Insightful Chrysostom Quote: "'For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.' Why did they add 'and to us,' when 'to the Holy Spirit' was enough? The latter prevents them from thinking it came from people, while the former teaches that they too welcome the Gentiles, even though they as Jewish Christians are circumcised. They have to speak to people who are still weak and afraid of them. This is the reason why this is added as well." [*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*]

Fun fact: "A proselyte, when he undertook to fulfill the law, was said to 'take up the yoke of the kingdom of heaven'. This expression was later used to denote the recitation of the *Shema*, the Jewish confession of faith, 'Hear, O Israel...' (Deut 6:4f.)" (F. F. Bruce, 307).

Fun fact #2: Modern Christians obey only two of James' big four: no incest or sleeping around and no altars in the basement, but we pay little attention to how our food was killed. Somewhere in the last two millennia, we stopped worrying about the food laws. Bruce writes (315), "the food laws ... appear to have been observed as late as AD 177 by the churches of the Rhone valley in Gaul, which were in close relation with the churches of the province of Asia. In the province of Asia we find the general terms of the apostolic decision upheld at the end of the 1st century in Rev 2:14, 20. And towards the end of the 9th century they were included by King Alfred of England in the preamble to his law code."

Fun fact #3: Regarding strangled animals (v. 20), Instone-Brewer points out that the word used in the Greek actually meant "smothering," not "strangling." This word was in fact associated with a common way in which infants were aborted after delivery. He suggests that this instruction represents a veiled prohibition against infanticide, a practice not uncommon among Romans but considered abominable by Jews. ⁴

¹ Keener, C. S. (1993). *The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament (Ac 15:19–20)*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

² *New Jerome Bible Commentary*.

³ Craig Keener, "[Failed Trump Prophecies Offer a Lesson in Humility](#)," *Christianity Today*, Jan 20, 2021.

⁴ David Instone-Brewer, "Infanticide and the apostolic decree of Acts 15," *JETS* 52 (2009), 301-321.

Additional discussion questions

1. As we will see in Galatians, *any* imposition from the law upon Gentiles will be viewed by Paul as being unacceptable. As F. F. Bruce puts it, "Paul saw quite clearly that the concession in the matter of table fellowship was bound in the long run to compromise the basic gospel principle that salvation was the gift of God's grace in Christ, to be received by faith alone" (304). So how does it make sense that everyone is satisfied with four "laws" being laid on the shoulders of Gentile Christians?
2. If obedience to the Law (as represented by the gateway rite of circumcision) was not required for Gentile Christians to be clean in God's eyes, why ask them to follow the somewhat random assortment of requirements in verse 20?

The natural options open to James and company were to require of Gentile converts (a) nothing from the Law; (b) everything; (c) a subset. How would each of these have impacted the relationships of Gentile converts to Christian Jews, non-Christian Jews, and Roman friends and associates?

3. Scripture and God's people have had a love-hate relationship with the Law. All of Psalm 119 is a giant love letter to the Law. Yet here we see Peter describe the law as "a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear" (10). As Bruce puts it, "To ordinary Jews like Peter and his hearers the traditional law, especially as expounded by the severe school of Shammai which was dominant at the time, was a heavy burden under which they groaned." In our day we have Lauren Winner's *Mudhouse Sabbath* extolling the nourishing value of the Law, but this is a minority view.

Why such a range of attitudes about the Law? How, as a Christian, do you regard the darling of Ps 119?