

Chapter 36: Gathered Together to Consider This Matter

Acts 15:1–21

If we think back to the beginning of the Book of Acts, the gospel has already come incredibly far into the world. From a small group of disciples in Jerusalem waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit, we have now seen the Holy Spirit expand his dwelling place into men and women in several different areas, cultures, languages, and ethnicities. Especially, we have seen the power of the Holy Spirit to bring many Gentiles to faith in Christ. This progress has raised significant questions within the church, specifically regarding the ongoing applicability of the Jewish ceremonial law, such as circumcision. To deal with a specific issue that arises that would insist that Gentiles be circumcised, the church gathers together her officers to examine the question from all angles. The Jerusalem Council sets a pattern, therefore, for how we must handle controversies in the church to this day: *the church must judge controversies in light of God's Word.*

Salvation By Works (Acts 15:1–5)

When the Holy Spirit fell upon Gentiles in Caesarea by the ministry of the Apostle Peter (Acts 10:44–48), the church was forced to clarify their traditional views of God's covenant with his people. As Bock writes about the Gentiles, “the basis of their inclusion...is a major point of concern in Acts.”¹ The idea of requiring Gentiles to be circumcised was settled so long ago that we hardly think about it, yet it was a pressing and understandable concern of the early church. Polhill helps us to enter into the perspective of those on the wrong side of this argument so that we can feel the dilemma more keenly:

That was the question the conservative group of Jewish Christians raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. Jesus was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews. Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?²

From these concerns, men came down to Antioch—an early hub of the church to mix both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:20–26)—demanding that all Gentiles be circumcised: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (v. 1). Lenski notes not only that these teachers *personalized* the doctrine (“*you* cannot be saved”) as well as the full effect of this teaching: “All the uncircumcised Gentile Christians in Antioch were thus pronounced unsaved. Faith in Jesus

¹ Bock, *Acts*, 486.

² Polhill, *Acts*, 321.

Christ was not enough to save, circumcision must be added.”³

It is significant, then, that the present passage is at the very center of the book:

Acts 15:1–35 stands at the very center of the book. Not only is this true of its position halfway through the text, but it is also central in the development of the total plot of the book. The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there (chaps. 1–5). Through the Hellenists especially it had spread to Samaria and all of the land of the Jews (chaps. 6–9). Through the witness of Peter to Cornelius, the outreach of the Antioch church, and especially through the first major mission completed by Paul and Barnabas, the gospel had broken through to the Gentiles (chaps. 10–14). All the preliminary steps had been taken for a major effort to reach the Gentile world. The precedents had been established; the first major successes among the Gentiles had been witnessed. The stage was set for Paul’s mission to the heart of the Greco-Roman world as *the* missionary to the Gentiles.⁴

Although the gospel of justification by faith alone has been clear since the beginning of the Book of Acts (e.g., Acts 2:38–39), the practical implications of that doctrine conflict sharply with the assumptions that some Jews have carried about the ongoing role of the Jewish ceremonial law. For the gospel to continue forward to the ends of the earth, these questions must be addressed now, at the beginning of the controversy. Although controversies in the church can be more troubling than persecution from without due to the dilemmas posed to the consciences of believers on different sides,⁵ nevertheless the church could never have shared unity if there were two distinct paths to salvation for Jews and for Gentiles.⁶

It is not surprising that Paul and Barnabas would become the first line of defense for the purity of the gospel of justification by faith alone (v. 2), given their involvement in preaching this gospel to Gentiles on their recent missionary journey (e.g., Acts 13:38–39). Lenski explains the significance of this doctrine well: “A bridge to heaven that is built 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way, and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away.”⁷ If the entirety of our salvation does not rest upon Christ, then we have no salvation at all. In our weakness and sinfulness, we will corrupt requirement that rests on our performance. Christ alone saves, and we receive his salvation by faith alone, or we cannot be saved. No good works—whether by observing Jewish ceremonial laws or by trying generally in our day to be a good person—can save us.

In light of its significance, the church appoints “Barnabas and some of the others...to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question” (v. 2). Sending questions up to synods

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 592.

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 320.

⁵ On this point, see Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:32–33.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 591.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 593.

and assemblies of officers of the church has been a valuable method of settling questions troubling the church throughout history. Calvin writes, “To the same end were all holy synods assembled since the beginning, that grave men, and such as were well exercised in the word of God, might decide controversies, not after their own pleasure, but according to the authority of God.”⁸ On their way to this council, Paul and Barnabas met with other churches along the way, declaring God’s work among the Gentiles and bringing great joy. This is notable, in that we see the whole church evaluating these questions on the way to the Jerusalem Council: “Instead of meeting Judaizing objections to the entrance of pagans into the church, the apostles caused only great joy to all the brethren, ‘all’ being significantly added. Judaistic ideas were foreign to all these brethren.”⁹ Today, what presbyteries do to oversee the doctrine and practices of churches in a region, and what the General Assembly does to oversee the presbyteries, is in direct continuity with what happens here in Acts 15. The only difference is that we have only elders, whereas the early church had apostles and elders to consult.

Upon arrival in Jerusalem, “they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them” (v. 4). Yet, there were others who opposed Paul and Barnabas: “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses’” (v. 5). In this, we note that the whole church is gathered to hear the report of Paul and Barnabas, even while only the apostles and elders will formally consider the questions that these issues pose (v. 6). One principle that we will see throughout this passage is how biblical polity appoints leaders to answer questions of doctrine in light of the Word of God, and yet these leaders do not make their determinations about public doctrinal controversies in secret.¹⁰ Rather, both their deliberations and their conclusions are public, conducted with the edification of the whole church in view—both to strengthen faithful believers, and to correct those in error.

Notably, the term here translated as “party” (αἰρέσεως, *haireseōs*) is the word from which we get our word “heresy”;¹¹ however, the original term is “not a perjorative term here equal to our sense of heresy.... The term is used descriptively of the Sadducees in Acts 5:17, of the Pharisees in 26:5, and of the Christians in 24:5, 14 and 28:22.”¹² Again, we must do our best to put ourselves in the shoes of those who attended this early council to understand its drama. While we find it odd to see a party of the Pharisees within the church, we should understand this group in light of their own context:

Pharisees, as believers in the doctrine of the resurrection, could become Christians without

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:40.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 596–97.

¹⁰ “Luke saith, not that all the whole Church was gathered together, but those who did excel in doctrine and judgment, and those who, according to their office, were competent judges in this matter. It may be, indeed, that the disputation was had in presence of the people. But lest any man should think that the common people were suffered hand over head to handle the matter, Luke doth plainly make mention of the apostles and elders, as it was more meet that they should hear the matter and to decide it.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:44.)

¹¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 599–600.

¹² Bock, *Acts*, 496.

relinquishing their distinctive beliefs; to what they already believed they added the belief that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead and thus divinely proclaimed to be Lord and Messiah. But if their Christianity did not amount to more than this, they remained legalists at heart—unlike their illustrious fellow-Pharisee Paul, whose whole outlook was radically reoriented by his revolutionary conversion.¹³

In every age, including our own, believers must beware the temptation to smuggle cultural assumptions into Christianity. Though they may seem natural to us within our contexts, they must be scrutinized carefully according to the light of God’s Word, since the artifacts of human culture all too often keep us from embracing the full sweep of the heavenly culture brought by the gospel.

Salvation By Faith Alone (Acts 15:6–11)

As the Council convened, Luke tells us that “the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter” (v. 6). As noted earlier, it is the officers of the church who engage in the deliberations. Luke tells us that “much debate” takes place (v. 7a), signifying a great deal of confusion and differences of opinion. After this period of discussion, which surely must have included many speeches from the party of the Pharisees (v. 5), Luke records three different speeches: Peter’s (vv. 7–11), a summary of Barnabas’s and Paul’s speech (v. 12), and then James’s (vv. 12–21). Peterson writes, “Three speeches together present a single perspective on God’s purpose.”¹⁴ The order of the speeches reflected here represents the natural order of the narrative of the Book of Acts as a whole, beginning with Peter (the first apostle to bring the gospel to the Gentiles), continuing with the experiences of Barnabas, and concluding with a Scriptural declaration that ultimately will open the door to evangelistic work to the ends of the earth.

As Peter stands to speak, he addresses the gathered officers with the a standard “Men, brothers” (ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί; *andres adelphoi*) that he had used earlier to address the gathered church in Acts 1:16, and then the crowd at Pentecost (Acts 2:29, 37; see also 7:2; 13:15, 26, 38). In this speech, Peter reminds the gathered church of the work that God had done in and through him: “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith” (vv. 7b–9). Peter can remind these elders about this work (“you know”), since Peter had gone to Jerusalem to defend his actions from criticisms of going to, and eating with, uncircumcised men (Acts 11:3). After hearing this report, those in Jerusalem “fell silent” (Acts 11:18a)—just as the apostles and elders will do Peter concludes his speech (v. 12a)—and “they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18b).

The key points about which Peter wishes to remind these officers in the Jerusalem church is that (1) God gave “them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us”, and (2) that God “cleansed their hearts by faith” (v. 9). Those facts are not in question (Acts 11:18); however, Peter believes that these elders have not understood the plain implications of that action. They recognized God’s actions in

¹³ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 305.

¹⁴ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 424.

cleansing these Gentiles directly, by faith, but they did not understand that, in doing so, God had bypassed circumcision altogether. Again, this is a foreign idea to our minds, so it is important to try to understand their perspective: “For the Jew circumcision was a mark of sanctity and purity, of belonging to God’s people and being acceptable to him. But in Cornelius God had shown Peter that true purity comes not by an external mark but by faith.”¹⁵ They did not see the contradiction in (1) acknowledging that God had freely received these Gentiles without circumcision, but (2) also arguing that these Gentiles needed to do be circumcised *before* God would save them. Thus, Peter is drawing out this logic carefully: “if God accepted these Gentiles and cleansed their hearts by His Holy Spirit as soon as they believed the gospel, why should further conditions now be imposed on them which God Himself plainly did not require?”¹⁶

Beyond merely stating that the Gentiles did not need circumcision, he reminds these Jewish believers that circumcision had never had the kind of effect on their forefathers that would insist upon its practice for Gentiles: “Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10). Circumcision was never appointed as the effective agent to sanctify God’s people, so there is no need for Gentiles to receive circumcision.¹⁷ Indeed, the Old Testament is full of stories of Jews who were faithless in spite of being circumcised. If circumcision could not ensure the obedience of Jews, then what benefit can circumcision have for Gentiles? Rather, for both Jews and Gentiles, the only saving solution has always been faith alone in Christ alone: “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (v. 11). This point deserves to reverberate in our own understanding of salvation since, as Bock observes, “This is the last we see of Peter in Acts.”¹⁸

Wisdom for Fellowship (Acts 15:12–21)

Again, Peter’s speech here has the same effect as his speech before many of the same people back in Acts 11:18a: “all the assembly fell silent” (v. 12a). After this, the (silent) assembly “listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12b). What began with Peter has continued with Barnabas and Paul, signifying that Peter’s account was not somehow unique. Rather, they bore witness to the work of God that had only accelerated the progress of the gospel among the

¹⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 326–27.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 306–07.

¹⁷ “For God had respect always unto the inward cleanness of the heart; and the ceremonies were given to the old [ancient] people only for this cause, that they might help their faith. So that cleanness, as touching figures and exercises, was only for a time, until the coming of Christ, which hath no place among us at this day; like as there remaineth from the very beginning of the world unto the end the same true worship of God, to wit, the spiritual worship; yet is there great difference in the visible form. Now, we see that the fathers did not obtain righteousness by ceremonies, neither were they therefore pure before God, but by the cleanness of the heart. For the ceremonies of themselves were of no importance to justify them; but they were only helps, which did accidentally (that I may so term it) purge them; yet so that the fathers and we had the same truth. Now, when Christ came, all that which was accidental did vanish away; and, therefore, seeing the shadows be driven away, there remaineth the bare and plain pureness of the heart.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:48–49.)

¹⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 501.

Gentiles—all without requiring circumcision. Perhaps Luke does not flesh out this speech since he has already narrated the details of that missionary journey for us in the Book of Acts.

After the apostles “finished speaking” (lit., “fell silent”), James stood up to speak. This James is not the Apostle James, the brother of John, since John’s brother was killed by Herod earlier (Acts 12:2). So, this James is not one of the apostles, but one of the elders present in the Jerusalem Council. James here appears as the president or moderator of the council, the *primus inter pares* (first among equals), following the example of the Jewish Sanhedrin.¹⁹ He does not make the final decision, but his words carry great persuasive authority so that his proposal will seem “good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church” to implement his plan (Acts 15:22–29).

Since James has been in Jerusalem, and not on the front lines of the missionary expansion of the gospel, he cannot add to the experiences of Peter, Barnabas, or Paul. Instead, he begins simply by noting that “Simeon [i.e., *Simon* Peter] has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name” (v. 14). The primary contribution of James’s speech, then, is to connect what these apostles were experiencing with the prophecies of Scripture itself.²⁰ In recent years, some have pointed to the inclusion of the Gentiles as alleged proof that the Holy Spirit is now doing a new work to incorporate those given over to various kinds of sexual perversions as authentic believers. “If these profess faith in Christ, who are we to refuse their admittance into the church,” so the argument goes. Yet, they do not (and cannot) appeal to the Scriptures in the way that James does, since the Scriptures always anticipated the inclusion of the Gentiles—but not the inclusion of those who stubbornly persist in unrepentant sin of any kind, sexual or otherwise. Thus, James points out that “the words of the prophets agree” with what Peter, Barnabas, and Paul have been seeing (v. 15).

Specifically, James cites Amos 9:11–12: “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old” (vv. 16–18). This quotation explicitly connects the restoration of *Israel* with the inclusion of the *Gentiles*.²¹ Amos speaks of “the tent of David,” a unique reference that is never used as a synonym for the “house of David.” The reference seems to refer to the *tabernacle*; as the Scriptures speak of “the temple of Solomon,” so here Amos speaks of “the tent/tabernacle of David.”²² Here, then, is the place of the worship of God’s people, a place where the uncircumcised were forbidden from entering (Gen. 17:9–14; Isa. 52:1; Ezek. 44:7–9). James’s interpretation of this text is clear: “The messianic temple, the restored ‘tent of David,’ is the community of all people who believe in Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Savior, people who as a result of their faith in Jesus belong to

¹⁹ See the *Nasi* (“prince”) throughout *Tractate Sanhedrin*, e.g., 5a. See also Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 309.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 608.

²¹ Polhill, *Acts*, 330.

²² “Ἡ σκηνὴ Δαυιδ, “the Tabernacle of David,” cannot be “the house of David,” David’s descendants, either in general or as a royal line. Σκηνή is never employed in that sense. In Jesus, risen and glorified, the throne and the kingdom or rule of David were raised up and established forever. That had been done years ago and was not being done now. “Tabernacle” refers to the Tabernacle of David’s time before Solomon was permitted to build the Temple. In that Tabernacle David worshipped with Israel. It thus stood for the church.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 609.)

Yahweh.”²³

While each of these named speakers insist that the actions of God and the words of God declare that salvation comes by faith alone in Christ alone, nevertheless James recognizes that some Gentile practices will cause significant division within the church: “Therefore my judgment is²⁴ that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (vv. 19–21). That last verse is important to understand James’s motivations: everywhere Gentiles are, there are also likely synagogues of Jews who have heard Moses preached. Although the yoke of the Mosaic law should not be laid directly on Gentiles, neither should Gentile believers needlessly offend Jews in their midst.

The primary focus seems to be avoiding any hint of idolatry or immorality in practices that were common among Gentiles, but abhorred among Jews.²⁵ The “things polluted by idols” is later more clearly described as *food* sacrificed to idols” (v. 29; cf. 1 Cor. 8–10). The word for “sexual immorality” may refer to the more ceremonial sexual purity laws, especially related to “marriage within degrees of blood-relationship or affinity forbidden by the legislation of Lev. 18.”²⁶ Or, James may have been addressing clearly moral categories of sexual immorality, since “Gentiles sexual mores were lax compared to Jewish standards, and it was one of the areas where Jews saw themselves most radically differentiated from Gentiles. The boundary between ritual and ethical law is not always distinct, and sexual morality is one of those areas where it is most blurred.”²⁷ The references to “what has been strangled, and from blood” both refer to pagan practices of eating blood, since strangling an animal was a way of killing it without draining the blood.²⁸ As with the other elements, this touches on the boundaries of ceremonial and moral, since blood *per se* is not entirely forbidden under the new covenant; however, much blood eating was directly tied to pagan practices of trying to partake of the life of the animal by eating its blood (Lev. 17:11). These prohibitions, therefore, are moral to a degree; however, they also aim at reducing conflict between Jews and Gentiles who will live together in the church.

Discussion Questions

1. Why would these men from Judea believe that circumcision is required for salvation (v. 1)? Why would it have been difficult for the early church to understand the basis on which Gentiles could be drawn into the people of God apart from being circumcised? Why did Paul and Barnabas fiercely

²³ Schnabel, *Acts*, 641.

²⁴ “The formulation ἐγὼ κρίνω [*ego krinō*], *ego censeo*, ‘I for my part judge,’ intends to present to the assembly the question as to whether they on their part judge the same. According to our way of speaking, James is offering a resolution to the assembly for adoption; so in v. 22 we see that adoption promptly followed” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 612–13.)

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:71.

²⁶ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 315.

²⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, 331.

²⁸ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 311.

oppose this teaching (v. 2a)? Why send delegates to Jerusalem about the question (v. 2b)? How did the rest of the church respond to the news of God's salvation of Gentiles (v. 3)?

2. Although the whole church was with the apostles and elders when Paul and Barnabas arrived (v. 4), why did only the apostles and elders gather to consider the question (v. 6)? What does Peter imply when he reminds the assembly that God gave his Holy Spirit to Gentiles (v. 8)? Why was it important that God cleansed their hearts not by ceremonies, but merely by faith (v. 9)? Why is it essential for us to believe that salvation is by grace alone, and not by works (v. 11)?

3. Who is James (v. 13)? Is he an apostle or an elder? Why does he quote the Scriptures in the consideration of this matter (vv. 16–18)? What clarity does Amos 9:11–12 add to the debate? What kind of wisdom does James offer for handling barriers to fellowship in vv. 19–21? What example does James set for how the church should make decisions in the cases and controversies of our own day?

4. What kind of example does Acts 15 set for how the church ought to answer doctrinal questions? What do we see about the importance of a plurality of elders (since apostles are no longer living)? What is the role of in-person, gathering together and debate for sorting through these questions? How do we see the Scriptures consulted? What kind of authority do the officers of the church have to answer questions of doctrine and of wisdom for the leadership of the church?