

Chapter 39: Godly Accommodation

Acts 16:1–5

After nearly an entire chapter in the Book of Acts of settling the question of whether Gentiles should be circumcised, we might imagine that the question has been settled. Immediately in Acts 16, though, we see Paul take a surprising step. Although he had been the champion against requiring circumcision of Gentiles, the Apostle Paul circumcises Timothy. Yet, after doing so, he continues on his way with Timothy and Silas, delivering the decisions of the apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem, strengthening those churches. So, is Paul pro-circumcision or anti-circumcision? The exact motivation for his actions is difficult to discern until we recognize that, *in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything* (Gal. 5:6).

Uncircumcision Counts for Nothing (Acts 16:1–3)

After departing from Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:39–40), we find Paul and Silas passing through Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41) and then coming to Derbe and Lystra (v. 1). This passage does not say much about the *mission* itself in that region. Instead, the focus is entirely on Timothy, the *minister* whom they discover and prepare for gospel ministry. Yet, we cannot forget what Paul tells us elsewhere, that both Timothy’s mother and grandmother had faithfully taught him the Scriptures (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15), seemingly “unaware” that they were “thereby preparing the boy for his future work. Paul could not have used him in his work if he had not had this early training in the Old Testament Scriptures.”¹ This gifted man was well known and approved of “by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium” (v. 2).

Before he could put that giftedness to use, however, a major obstacle stood in the way of his ministry to Jewish people: while his mother was Jewish, his father was widely known to be Greek, and Timothy himself was uncircumcised (vv. 1, 3). To address these issues, Paul “took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (v. 3). In light of Paul’s severe opposition to the Judaizers’ claims that “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1–2), and in light of the lengthy deliberations in the Jerusalem Council on the question of the necessity of circumcision, this action is surprising. Why would Paul insist so fiercely that circumcision was not required for salvation, but nevertheless circumcise Timothy in this instance?

To answer this question, we need to clarify two principles at stake. First, in Galatians 2:3, we learn that Paul refused to circumcise the Gentile Titus, though Titus performed a similar role to Timothy.² Second, as Bruce points out, Timothy’s mixed lineage raised questions of his ethnic status: “In the eyes of the Jews, Timothy was a Gentile because he was the uncircumcised son of a Greek. In Gentile eyes, however, he was practically a Jew, having been brought up in his mother’s religion.”³ Third, Luke tells us Paul’s reasoning: “because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 639.

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 640.

³ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 322.

knew that his father was a Greek.” Since Paul has been so fierce to oppose the necessity of circumcision, we should not understand “because of the Jews” as some kind of bowing to their pressure. How should we understand all of these principles together?

In this case, the only logical conclusion we can draw is that Paul circumcises Timothy not in any way for the sake of his spiritual good, but only for the sake of his ministry among the Jews. Bruce puts the reasoning well: “It was simple expediency that suggested the circumcising of one who was already a half-Jew with a view to his greater usefulness in the ministry of the gospel. In such case circumcision was merely a minor surgical operation performed for a practical purpose, and not a religious rite.”⁴ Circumcision was a cultural accommodation of a half-Jew in order that Timothy might reach the Jews without causing offense. As Paul writes elsewhere: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). In Timothy’s case, the issue did not suggest anything regarding the gospel, because he was not seeking to gain something for salvation from the circumcision. At the same time, he did not treat uncircumcision as something he needed to maintain. Rather, this was a man of Jewish descent (from his mother’s side) receiving Jewish circumcision for the sake of the Jews, and not a Gentile seeking Jewish circumcision from any belief that Christ required it. In general Paul’s principle is to avoid any Jewish ceremonies that might suggest something is lacking in Christ’s accomplished work (as though he were still under the law). At the same time, he willingly embraced anything else that would help him to reach the Jews: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law” (1 Cor. 9:20).⁵

Circumcision Counts for Nothing (Acts 16:4–5)

After Timothy’s preparation for ministry, all of them (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) continue on their way to continue the goal that Paul had articulated in the previous section: “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are” (Acts 15:36). In the context of the dispute that had arisen within Acts 15, it seems that Paul’s main concern was to close any ongoing difficulty surrounding the role of circumcision. Whatever accommodation Paul made with Timothy for the sake of the Jews, now the mission returned to dealing with the questions surrounding whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised.

So, “as they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem” (v. 4). The word for decisions is δόγματα (*dogmata*), a word that can refer to the decrees of rulers (Luke 2:1; Acts 17:7), but these decisions had been “reached” (lit., “judged”) by the apostles and the elders who were in Jerusalem. From this language, Presbyterians refine our understanding of the function of church courts of elders. When the Session of a local church, or the Presbytery of a region, or the General Assembly of a denomination gathers, those courts of the church gather to *judge* different cases. The courts of the church are not legislative to decree binding laws on the church. Rather, the courts of the church are judicial, judging whether the facts of a particular case align with Scriptural teaching

⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 322.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:90–92.

or not.⁶ Even so, these judgments were binding, and “not to be disobeyed.”⁷ Here, the apostles and elders at the Jerusalem Council had judged the question of whether Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved and responded in the negative, but also added some guidelines designed to avoid unnecessary friction between Jews and Gentiles who had been joined into one church through faith in Christ.

Notably, while these guidelines freed Gentiles from the requirement of circumcision, they nevertheless attended only to specific changes that Gentiles must make to their own practices. As we discussed in our studies of those decisions in Acts 15, the accommodations to which Gentiles were obligated may have included some ceremonial details, but they largely touched on broad moral requirements against idolatry and sexual immorality. While the Jerusalem Council employed some degree of wisdom in these decrees, they largely applied the Scriptural teaching on these matters to the specific practices of the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Christ. Therefore, we should note that this passage does not authorize the courts or councils of the church to declare new “decrees” out of nothing.⁸ Rather, the decisions of the church courts ought to be limited to the *ministerial* power of the church to apply God’s Word to specific cases of conscience.⁹

Note, then, the fruit of these deliberative decisions: “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (v. 5). These churches were strengthened because of the clarity of the teaching. They were not left to wonder whether Gentiles really were required to be circumcised. Instead, they were strengthened to understand the gospel in its purity and to know how to love their neighbor.

Discussion Questions

1. Who was Timothy? Who had his mother and grandmother been (v. 1; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15)? Who was his father (v. 1)? How did those at Lystra and Iconium regard him (v. 2)? What had been his status regarding circumcision (v. 3)? How might that status have hindered his ministry among the Jews (v. 3)? Why does Paul circumcise Timothy (v. 3)? Is this an example of Paul being led astray by hypocrisy (Gal. 2:13)? Why or why not?
2. What were the “decisions” that Paul, Silas, and Timothy delivered to the churches (v. 4)? What does the word “decisions” mean? How does the meaning of the word “reached” shift by knowing that the root word has to do with “judging”? What is the role of the courts of the church (sessions, presbyteries, general assemblies)? How do these courts of the church avoid legislating commandments for believers? What do they do when they judge cases?
3. What benefits do these “decisions” bring to the churches (v. 5)? How do the decisions judged by

⁶ Lenski suggests translating these phrases as reaching/judging “resolutions” together, as opposed to the “decrees” that an individual ruler would issue (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 641–42.)

⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, 666.

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:93–95.

⁹ For more, see “All Church Power is Only Ministerial and Declarative,” by Jacob D. Gerber, November 3, 2017 (accessed July 7, 2026) <<https://jacobgerber.org/church-power-ministerial-declarative/>>

courts of the church strengthen believers in their faith? On the other hand, how can a lack of clarity about Scriptural teaching weaken people in their faith? Why would clarity on doctrinal and practical matters lead to the daily increase of the church? On the other hand, why would a lack of clarity hinder people from coming to Christ and into the church?

4. To what degree are you willing to accommodate your own life to reaching people for Christ? How does Timothy's example in being willing to be circumcised for the sake of the gospel challenge you to get out of your comfort zone to reach people where they are? On the other hand, how do you find orderliness in the church? Do you find strength in doctrinal and practical clarity, or are you irritated by impositions on your freedom? How does this passage help people on both sides?