

The Church in the New Testament

(Sunday AM — Church Campus)

Week 7: Doctrinal Unity-- Acts 15:1–21

The Jerusalem council described in Acts 15 was one of the most critical moments in the history of the early church. A question had arisen that threatened to divide the church and distort the gospel itself: must Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved?

Some from Judea insisted that they must. Paul and Barnabas strongly disagreed. The matter was serious enough that it was brought before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for resolution. After careful discussion, testimony from Peter about God’s work among the Gentiles, and a report from Paul and Barnabas about signs and wonders among the nations, James stood and proposed a solution grounded in Scripture.

The decision was clear: Gentiles were not required to keep the law of Moses to be saved. Salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, received by faith in Him — for Jew and Gentile alike. The dispute was not whether salvation requires obedience (Peter had already commanded the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house to be baptized, Acts 10:47–48) but whether the law of Moses could be added as a second gospel. The council said no. At the same time, the apostles and elders, speaking by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), bound four commands on Gentile Christians: to abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. These were not cultural preferences but apostolic commands — commands that honored God, protected against returning to pagan practice, and preserved fellowship with Jewish brethren. The whole account teaches the church how to handle doctrinal questions: with careful study of Scripture, respectful discussion, apostolic authority, and a commitment to truth that does not sacrifice unity.

Group Discussion: Why was the question of whether Gentiles must keep the law of Moses so important? What was really at stake—and how does this relate to the sufficiency of the gospel today?

Personal Reflection: Are there areas where you or your congregation might be adding human requirements to the gospel that God has not required? How does this passage help us distinguish between God’s commands and human traditions?

Read Acts 15:1–21

Study Questions

1. In verse 1, some men from Judea teach that Gentiles cannot be saved “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses.” Why was this teaching a direct threat to the gospel?

2. Verse 2 says Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and debate” with these teachers. Is strong disagreement over doctrine appropriate? When is it necessary?
3. The church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders (v. 2). What does this decision teach about how doctrinal disputes should be resolved in the church?
4. In verse 5, some believers from the Pharisee party insist that Gentiles must keep the law of Moses. Why was this position attractive to some, and why was it ultimately wrong?
5. In verses 7–11, Peter recounts how God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles and argues that salvation is “through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” How does Peter’s testimony settle the question?
6. Verses 12–13 describe the assembly listening to Paul and Barnabas and then to James. What does this deliberative process teach about how churches should handle disagreements?
7. In verses 14–18, James appeals to Scripture (Amos 9:11–12) to confirm that God always intended to include the Gentiles. Why is Scripture—rather than experience or opinion—the final authority in doctrinal matters?
8. The council’s letter asks Gentiles to “abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood” (vv. 19–20). What was the purpose of these instructions?
9. How does this passage guard against two opposite dangers: adding human requirements to the gospel and ignoring the need for sensitivity toward other believers?
10. Looking at Acts 15:1–21 as a whole, what model does this passage provide for maintaining doctrinal unity in the church while addressing legitimate questions and disagreements?