

# The Council at Jerusalem



## Ice-Breaker

What were some of the expected, extra-biblical rules you were supposed to follow in the church where you grew up? When you became a Christian?



## Scripture Passage

Acts 15:1-21

**15** Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup>This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

<sup>5</sup>Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup>After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

<sup>12</sup>The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. <sup>13</sup>When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simon<sup>a</sup> has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. <sup>15</sup>The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

<sup>16</sup>"After this I will return

and rebuild David's fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,

and I will restore it,

<sup>17</sup>that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who bear my name,

says the Lord, who does these things<sup>b</sup>

<sup>18</sup>that have been known for ages.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>19</sup>"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

<sup>20</sup>Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

a [14] Greek Simeon, a variant of Simon; that is, Peter

b [17] Amos 9:11,12

c [17,18] Some manuscripts things'-- | [18] known to the Lord for ages is his work



## Bible Study

1. What other things would these teachers say the Gentiles must do (vv. 1,5 see Mark 2:16,18,24; 7:1-5)?
2. If you were a Gentile hearing that these regulations were required, how would you feel about your new faith? As a strict Jew, why would these rules be important to you?
3. What is the main issue as Paul sees it (vv. 1-2; see Galatians 2:21; 3:5,10-14)?
4. How would you describe Peter's struggle with this issue (vv. 7-11; see 10:28,34-35; Galatians 2:11-13)? How does Paul's teaching in Galatians 2:15-16 show its influence on Peter here?
5. Knowing Paul's Pharisaic background (26:5) and Peter's desire to keep the law (10:14), how would their testimony carry the day?
6. What has led James to change his mind?
7. What is the significance of the council's decision in light of 1:8? Why were the conditions of verse 20 added (see 1 Corinthians 8)?



## Reference Notes

**15:1-4** The controversy surrounding circumcision stirred up such a debate that the church felt it necessary to call together the recognized leaders from Jerusalem and Antioch to settle the issue. This is considered to be the first Church Council.

**15:5 *the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.*** The resistance to allowing Gentiles into the church originated with Jewish Christians who had formerly been Pharisees. This small but influential sect was widely respected for its adherence to the Old Testament Law and traditions. Their concern arose from a genuine desire to insure that God's honor was not violated through disregard of his Law. To them, the offer of the Gospel apart from the Law was inconceivable, since for centuries their people had been taught to look to the Law to discern God's will. Paul's ministry seemed like a slap in Israel's face; an unthinkable rejection of all the covenant responsibilities of God's chosen people. It was to protect the honor of God that they insisted converted Gentiles needed to adopt Jewish customs. Unless Gentiles did so, any Jew associating with such a convert would become ceremonially unclean. How could Jews possibly even share in the Lord's Supper (often connected to an actual meal) when the presence of Gentiles among them would mean defilement? The only reasonable solution these believers could see was that Gentiles needed to become Jewish. Only then could both the purity and unity of the church be maintained.

**15:7-8** As part of the discussion, Peter recounts his experience with Cornelius which may have occurred 10 or more years earlier (Acts 10:1-11:18). The fact that Cornelius experienced the presence of the Spirit in the same way the disciples did was proof to Peter that God accepted the Gentiles quite apart from the practice of Jewish law.

**15:9-11** It is by faith in Jesus that one is made pure by God. The fact that it has to be that way is made plain by the fact that neither Israel as a nation nor any Jew as an individual ever managed to live up to all the demands of the Law. This affirmation of God's intent to save Gentiles through faith in Jesus is Peter's last statement in Acts.

**15:9 purified their hearts by faith.** What counts before God is a pure heart, not external conformity to the Law. Since this was the message of David (Psalm 51), the prophets (Isaiah 1:13-17), and Jesus (Mark 7:1-23), it should not come as a surprise to the Jews that God accepted Cornelius and other Gentiles simply by virtue of their faith in him.

**15:12** Peter's recounting of his experience with Cornelius prepared the church to hear the firsthand reports of the work of Barnabas and Paul (see Acts 14:3).

**15:13-21** James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, and the ultimate decision as to the position of the Jerusalem church was his to make. Since in Galatians 2:11-13 James appears to have represented those who believed that Gentiles could not be considered equal members of the church with Jews, it may be that this council was the turning point when he realized the scope of Jesus' mission. James' affirmation of God's plan to save all types of people through faith in Jesus is his last statement in Acts as well.

**15:15 The words of the prophets.** James' quote is primarily rooted in the Septuagint version of Amos 9:11-12. The Old Testament books of Hosea through Malachi were contained on a single scroll; to quote one prophet was to assume the support of the others.

**15:16-18** The original context of the prophecy was the anticipation of the destruction of Israel (722 B.C.), after which God would one day return the nation to its former glory as in David's day. James sees that the way God is rebuilding "David's ... tent" (a symbol of God's presence with Israel) is by establishing his church, made up of all types of people who seek God. The differences between the Septuagint version quoted here and what is found in our Old Testament are a result of adding a d to the Hebrew word *yiresu* (possessing) to obtain *yirdresu* (seeking), and a dispute about whether the Hebrew word *dm* should be vocalized as Edom (the name of a country south of Israel) or as adam (the Hebrew word for humanity). In either case, the point is that God's new people will include Gentiles as well as Jews.

**15:20 telling them to abstain.** These considerations sum up the laws in Leviticus 17-18 that applied to Israel and all foreigners who lived within her borders. **food polluted by idols.** In Gentile areas meat was sold only after the animal had been sacrificed as part of a worship service to an idol. The eating of such food was later to be a source of controversy between Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome (Romans 14:1-8) and Corinth (1 Corinthians 8). **sexual immorality.** This may be related to "the pollution of idols" since idolatry sometimes involved ritual prostitution (1 Corinthians 6:12-20). **meat of strangled animals and from blood.** Jews were forbidden to eat meat that had any blood in it (Leviticus 17:10-14). Gentiles would make the sharing of meals with Jewish believers easier if they would respect this tradition.

## Caring Time

1. What roles do experience, theology and practical considerations play in the decision-making process of this council? What issues, now troubling your church, could be resolved by looking at them with these three perspectives?
2. Is there some area of your faith where you feel like Peter&Ntilde;going back and forth because you are not sure of what is right? How could verse 11 relate to this concern?
3. What additions to the Gospel might a new believer encounter in your church? What should you do about that?

