


**The Jerusalem Council**  
The Relationship of the Law and Circumcision to Salvation

**A Study in Acts Chapter 15**



**S**o God, who knows the heart,  
acknowledged them by giving them the  
Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and  
made no distinction between us and  
them, purifying their hearts by faith.

*~Acts 15:8-9 NKJV*

**By Dr. John C. Whitcomb  
and  
George Zeller**

Published by:

**Whitcomb Ministries**

(317-250-5469)

[www.whitcombministries.org](http://www.whitcombministries.org)

and

**The Middletown Bible Church**

349 East Street

Middletown, CT 06457

(860-346-0907)

[www.middletownbiblechurch.org](http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org)

# Acts Chapter 15

## The Council at Jerusalem: Is Salvation by Law or by Grace?

### Introduction

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1). Charles Woodbridge has summarized the importance of this pivotal chapter:

This chapter is the Christian’s emancipation proclamation....The clash was between salvation by works and by faith, between merit and grace, the bondage of legalism and the liberty of the gospel, external ritual and internal trust in the Redeemer....In many respects this chapter is epochal. Its major affirmation of the principle of grace is fundamental.<sup>1</sup>

### Acts 15:1

The false teachers are introduced. They were from Judea, most probably from Jerusalem. They came down to Antioch from Jerusalem, a distance of about 300 miles. Geographically, Jerusalem was at a high elevation, and to get to Antioch, they would need to come down. These false teachers were not officially sent by the Jerusalem church as Acts 15:24 makes clear. As they arrived at Antioch they taught the believers, and made this bold announcement: “Unless you are circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). They taught this false doctrine and they continued to teach it (perfect tense). Paul and Barnabas, on the contrary, did not insist on circumcision for Gentile believers.

This is the first time that the Church faced a doctrinal attack from within, from professing believers (compare Acts 20:29-30). Previously, the attacks had come from without, primarily from unbelieving Jews.

Circumcision was a God-instituted observance which began in the days of Abraham, as seen in Genesis 17. From the time of Abraham onward, it was an extremely serious matter to reject, to repudiate, to deny or to minimize the necessity of circumcision for every Hebrew male. Those who did not follow God’s circumcision law would be cut off from the congregation of Israel.<sup>2</sup> This is

---

<sup>1</sup>Charles J. Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths from the Book of Acts*, pages 93-94, 98.

<sup>2</sup>Even in Abraham’s day, prior to the law of Moses, circumcision was mandatory: “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut

hard for us to understand as Christians living today because we have been freed, by the grace of God, from the law for so many centuries. It is hard for us to comprehend what these first century Jews were thinking. They were teaching that you cannot be saved if you have not been circumcised according to the law of Moses. If this were the case, then Paul and Barnabas would have been false teachers because they did not insist or preach that Jews or Gentiles be circumcised as a requirement for salvation. The implication was this: if you follow Paul and Barnabas, then you cannot be saved because they are teaching contrary to the law of Moses.

These Judaisers were saying, “Faith alone is insufficient. All Gentile believers are lost if they fail to submit to circumcision and become like Jews.” The dispute was not over whether Jesus was the Son of God, the true Messiah of Israel. Rather, the dispute focused on what a person must do in order to be saved.

## **Acts 15:2**

The church at Antioch determined that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem in order to resolve this vital question which needed serious clarification. How could the gospel message go forth if there were two competing injunctions as to what a person must do to be saved?

“No small dissension and disputation” means that they had a major dissension and disputation. This was a fierce argument and debate. “Dissension” means a difference of opinion, a strong disagreement leading to a heated debate. The same word is used in Acts 23:7,10 of a strong disagreement between the Pharisees and Sadducees over the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, a doctrine which the Sadducees denied. The word is also used to describe Barabbas who was guilty of sedition (Luke 23:19). “Paul saw this false doctrine in its true light as sedition, insurrection, high treason against God. He dealt with it accordingly.”<sup>3</sup>

“Disputation” refers to a questioning or debate over a controversial matter. The word is used in John 3:25 of a question that arose between some of John the Baptist’s disciples and the Jews about purifying. It is also used in 1 Timothy 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:23 and Titus 3:9 of foolish and unprofitable questions which God’s people are to avoid.

This fifteenth chapter of Acts begins with a dispute and ends with a dispute (see Acts 15:39). The first dispute was doctrinal; the second was procedural, involving a disagreement over missionary policy. The first dispute was solved in this chapter; the second dispute was solved in time, and the parties involved (Paul, Barnabas and Mark) eventually ended up on good terms.

With some fear and trembling, Paul and Barnabas headed southward and uphill to Jerusalem, a trip of about 300 miles. They perhaps wondered how they would be received by the Apostles, and the elders of the first church ever established. Indeed, these false teachers came from Judea, the very region where Jerusalem was located.

---

off from his people; he hath broken My covenant” (Gen. 17:14). To reject or to minimize the importance of circumcision was very serious.

<sup>3</sup>John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 288.

Keep in mind some of the recent events which had transpired. Even the Apostle Peter, according to Paul in Galatians chapter 2, had departed from the Jerusalem church and had come to Antioch. Peter was amazed at the great number of Gentile believers that were part of the Antioch assembly. Peter was eating with these Gentiles and having table fellowship with men who were 100 percent pure Gentiles. These Gentiles were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and they had no connection with Judaism at all (Gal. 2:12).

Yet, very soon Peter began to act differently towards these Gentiles. Certain men came from Jerusalem and saw what Peter was doing. Peter, no doubt, saw their expression of horror, and he was immediately overwhelmed with a sense of guilt (compare Acts 10:28). Peter then abandoned his Gentile Christian friends, and moved over to the Jewish group to fellowship with them. The Apostle Paul immediately saw a colossal problem with Peter's behavior. A serious church split was developing and even Barnabas was being led astray by Peter's dissimulation (double-dealing duplicity). Peter was pretending to entertain one set of intentions (treating Jewish and Gentile believers the same) while later acting under the influence of others (certain Jewish believers). In the end it was not the truth of the gospel that guided his actions, but rather the fear of the Jews (Gal. 2:11-14). Paul confronted Peter right to his face and condemned him for his actions. If Paul had not done this, then the true Church of Jesus Christ might have been in danger of being split.

Thankfully Peter had repented of these actions by the time the events of Acts 15 took place.<sup>4</sup> He admitted that he was wrong because he, by this time, had embraced Paul's position completely. Perhaps Paul, as he came to Jerusalem, did not fully realize that Peter would stand with him. He may have had questions as to what Peter might say or what James, the leader of the Jerusalem church might say. How would all of this work out? God was preparing the way.

Paul and Barnabas were not going to change their message. Their first missionary journey had taught them much as they saw the great work God had accomplished in the hearts of Gentiles. God was with them as they reached multitudes of Gentiles with the gospel message.

### **Acts 15:3**

As they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, they declared the conversion of the Gentiles. These Gentiles were converted without first having to become Jews, without having to be circumcised and without having to keep the law of Moses. Their reports caused the brethren to greatly rejoice. Phoenician Christians included many who were pure Gentiles, and Samaritan Christians, who were half Jews and half Gentiles. Both of these groups were thrilled to know that they were fully saved and legitimate members of the body of Christ. They were acceptable before God, and Barnabas and Paul had confirmed that fact. Praise the Lord!

---

<sup>4</sup>How the events of Acts 15 harmonize with the events described in the book of Galatians has been debated among Bible scholars. Whitcomb and F. F. Bruce are of the persuasion that Galatians was written prior to the Jerusalem Council because that Epistle makes no allusion to this Council or to the letter that was sent out from this Council. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, page 298 and following.

“There was great joy in Samaria when they themselves were converted in 8:8; there was again joy when they heard of Gentiles being converted as well.”<sup>5</sup>

#### **Acts 15:4**

Paul and Barnabas received a warm reception by the Jerusalem believers, the Apostles and the elders. They were able to share with these brethren all the things that God had done on their first missionary journey which included a major outreach to the Gentiles. So at first they were welcomed by the Jerusalem assembly, but it was not long before other men rose up to promote a false and divisive doctrine (verse 5).

#### **Acts 15:5**

The Pharisees that were causing this problem were believers in Jesus Christ. They were born again Christians. The term “believed” is in the perfect tense indicating that they had believed in the past with abiding results into the present. It appears they were genuinely saved. The controversy which arose is difficult for us to fathom because we do not see this kind of tension today. Yet, in the early stages of church history this was a huge issue. The false doctrine was twofold: 1) Gentile believers need to be circumcised; 2) Gentile believers need to keep the law of Moses. In other words, Gentiles, in order to be saved, must become like Jews. This was a complex problem because these Pharisees had a Biblical basis for what they were saying. The Bible they had was the Old Testament, and these Jews had mastered the Old Testament. These men could quote much of the Old Testament verbatim by memory. These Pharisees were not ignorant people; they were Biblically literate. They were convinced that salvation was of the Jews, and to be saved a Gentile must submit to Jewish circumcision and obey the regulations found in the law of Moses. They considered the Christian faith to be a movement within Judaism and that Gentile converts must conform to Judaism.

There seems to be a clear distinction between the false teachers of verse 1 and the believing Pharisees mentioned in this verse. The legalists of verse 1 were insisting that circumcision was necessary for salvation, thus indicating that they had a serious misunderstanding of salvation by grace. With such a misunderstanding of salvation, it is hard to argue that they were saved. The legalistic Pharisees mentioned in verse 5 are described as believers. It seems that they were requiring saved Gentiles to put themselves under the law after they had believed. Whether the works of the law are required for salvation or for sanctification, both involve serious error that have huge consequences. Scofield said the following:

The test of the gospel is grace. If the message excludes grace, or mingles law with grace as the means of justification or sanctification, or denies the fact or guilt of sin which alone gives grace its occasion and opportunity, it is “another” gospel, and the preacher of it is under the anathema of God.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>J. Anderson, *What the Bible Teaches—Acts*, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup>Scofield note in the Scofield Reference Bible under Galatians 1:6.

## **Acts 15:6**

The Apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. The result of their deliberations would affect the future history of the Church. This matter directly affected the doctrine of salvation, and they had to get this right. To have deviated from the true gospel of the grace of God at this point would have been disastrous.

## **Acts 15:7**

Notice what it does not say: “And Peter, being the first Pope, made an ex cathedra pronouncement which ended all discussion!” No, Peter was just one of the Apostles, though usually the spokesperson for them. James, Paul and Barnabas also had a great influence on this important gathering.

After much discussion and much disputing (questioning, debate), finally Peter rose up to speak. He did not have the first word because there was much discussion before he spoke, and he did not have the last word because Barnabas, Paul and James spoke after him.

“A good while ago,” actually refers to the events in the household of Cornelius which took place about ten years earlier. Cornelius and the Gentiles heard the gospel which Peter spoke and they believed in Christ without being circumcised and without becoming Jews. They all knew about this because this matter had been settled in Acts chapter 11. Remember, Peter had several Jewish witnesses that observed what took place in Caesarea (Acts 10:45; 11). Why wasn’t the problem settled back then? Apparently they all agreed that what happened with Cornelius was a God-allowed exception, but they were not ready to see it as the general rule for worldwide evangelism. Cornelius was an exceptional man who loved the Jewish nation and so they thought that God had made an exception only in his case. “Let’s not carry this exception too far. Certainly this cannot be God’s method of evangelism for all Gentiles.”

The end of verse 7 shows the amazing simplicity of the true gospel. Lost people simply need to hear the word of the gospel (Rom. 10:17; Eph. 1:13) and believe (Acts 16:31; 1 Cor. 1:21). Notice that Peter says nothing of circumcision and obedience to the Mosaic law.

In this verse we have the last mention of Peter’s name found in the book of Acts. We never hear his name mentioned again in this book. Paul will increase and Peter will decrease, as far as the attention that these men receive in Luke’s record.

## **Acts 15:8**

Peter reminded them that God confirmed that Cornelius and those with him could be saved without becoming Jews. The Holy Spirit was given to these Gentile believers even though they had not been circumcised. What God did for these Gentiles was just as legitimate as what God had done for the Jews at Pentecost. The Gentiles in Caesarea received the Spirit and became full-fledged members of the body of Christ, just as the Jews in Jerusalem did on the day of Pentecost.

## Acts 15:9

God purified the hearts of Cornelius and those with him **by faith**, and Jewish circumcision was not required. God did not purify their hearts by requiring them to keep the law. When the Gentiles were first saved, they were saved by faith only, not by faith plus circumcision, and not by faith plus Mosaic law keeping.

The concept of heart circumcision was something clearly taught in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4 etc.). God had told them repeatedly that to be circumcised outwardly in the flesh was not enough. They also must have a corresponding heart circumcision. If the heart is not circumcised, then the person is totally unacceptable to God. This was an Old Testament doctrine that was clearly enunciated, but not often understood by the Jews.

It is true that the Jews had to perform many outward ordinances, but outward observances must correspond to and match inward realities. Offering sacrifice was essential, but it was not isolated from a heart relationship to the God to whom the sacrifice was offered. Thus in Old Testament Israelite worship, it was necessary to have these two elements: 1) the outward ceremony or ordinance commanded by God; 2) the inward heart attitude required by God. Today in the Church we do not have the outward ritual which was strictly required of those who were under the law of Moses. In Judaism people had to know and love the Lord and believe in Him, but also they had to obey Him as required by the law of Moses (the sacrificial system, circumcision, etc.). There were hundreds of laws that had to be observed.

The Jewish man under the law could **not** say, “Well, I believe in God and thus I do not bother with all these legalistic outward requirements.” And he certainly could **not** say, “I have obeyed the laws, so I do not need to believe in God.” Both were required to be pleasing to God. Today, the true Church of our Lord Jesus Christ is to honor all of Christ’s commandments (Matt. 28:20). We do not have numerous outward observances that the Jews were required to keep. Certainly the two Christian ordinances of Christian baptism and observing the bread and the cup should be obediently followed.

In Old Testament times, if one believed in God in his heart but failed to perform the physical ordinances which were required, then he could be put to death. Just remember what happened to Moses one night in an inn on the way back to Egypt through Sinai with his wife Zipporah (Exodus 4:24-26). God “sought to kill him” that night. Why? He had failed to circumcise his younger son. Zipporah, who may not have been a believer, despised this ordinance. In essence God was saying to Moses: “If you do not obey Me, how do you expect Israel to obey Me?” Zipporah then reluctantly performed the circumcision and blamed it all on Moses, calling him “a bloody husband.” In the Church today we do not have this kind of outward involvement with ordinances which to the Old Testament Jew was a life and death matter.

These believing Pharisees did not wish to neglect the ordinance of circumcision. “If you are expecting these Gentiles to believe in God and do not expect them also to do the required ordinances, they will be killed and we also will be responsible for not insisting that they be circumcised! In fact, we cannot even consider them to be saved if they fail to be circumcised.”

Peter said, “God knows their hearts.” These people were circumcised in their hearts, though they had not been circumcised outwardly. Peter made it clear that the hearts of both Jews and Gentiles

are purified in only one way, “by faith.” Our hearts are cleansed and purified and we are acceptable to a holy God and able to enter His holy presence forever and ever. By what means does this take place? It is by faith only. This was a shock to the Jewish mindset. Yet, as Paul explained in Romans chapter 4, Abraham was saved by faith long before he was told to be circumcised. He was saved and justified before he was circumcised. It was clear from Genesis 15 that Abraham was justified (saved) long before circumcision of the flesh was introduced by God in Genesis 17. Paul made a big point of this important chronology. Every saved person before Abraham was saved by faith without the ordinance of circumcision.

Peter: “And put **no difference** between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (Acts 15:9).

Paul: “For there is **no difference** between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him” (Romans 10:12).

### Acts 15:10

Peter spoke in a very strong manner, having learned his lesson at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). He tells them, “You are tempting God! You are putting a legal yoke of bondage upon the believers which neither our fathers nor we are able to bear. The law has become an intolerable burden, especially with all the Jewish man-made regulations added to it. If God has accepted these Gentile believers apart from the rite of circumcision, then why are you insisting upon circumcision and other Mosaic observances?” We can almost hear Paul and Barnabas saying, “Amen, Brother Peter!” Peter shared that the Jewish forefathers as well as the present generation of Jews were not able to bear the yoke of the law. The law was burdensome.<sup>7</sup> See Galatians 5:1 where the “yoke of bondage” also refers to the law. This raises the question, “Why did God give the law if nobody could bear it?” Fourteen hundred years of obedience to the law was required, and yet nobody could bear it. Paul answers this question in Galatians and Romans. The law was never meant to be a means of salvation, but was intended to be a strict schoolmaster to remind the Jews day and night of God’s requirements (Gal. 3:24) and to manifest the exceeding sinfulness of sin and sinfulness of man (Gal. 3:19; Rom. 7:7,13). They were required to obey 613 commandments, including the greatest commandment of all, to love the Lord their God with all their hearts. How many Jews could successfully bear and obey that command? The greatest commandment condemns everyone of us.

Thus, the Jew was to become frustrated and desperate to the point where he would say, “I need a Savior!” This was the purpose of the law. It was meant to drive people to desperation so that they might recognize their utter sinfulness and their need for God’s help. Their sin could not be dealt with apart from the grace of God, such as was pictured in the sacrificial system which was also part of God’s law. These animals sacrifices could never take away sin, but they could cover sins from immediate judgment and became a corporate reminder of the fact that an innocent being must be their substitute. “You have sinned and the animal has not, and you must have a connection with something innocent that has blood in its body.” Ultimately this all pointed to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In a nutshell, this legal bondage covered all fourteen hundred years of Israel’s history, from Moses to Christ.

Peter admitted that even the Jews were not able to keep God’s holy law. Perhaps Peter remembered our Lord’s words, “Did not Moses give you the law, and yet none of you keepeth the law?” (John

---

<sup>7</sup>Contrast believers under grace: Matthew 11:29-30; 1 John 5:3; James 1:25.



7:19).

### **Acts 15:11**

Peter put his total focus, not on the law, but on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, for by grace we are saved (Eph. 2:8). “We (the Jews) shall be saved, even as they (the Gentiles).” From a Jewish perspective Peter had it backwards, did he not? He did **not** say, “They (the Gentiles) shall be saved even as we (the Jews).” Peter was thankful for the grace of God by which the Jews could be saved, in the very same way Gentiles are saved. That is, the Jews needed to learn how to be saved by following the Gentile example. This is illustrated below:

**The message of the believing Jewish Pharisees:  
“Gentiles need to become like Jews and be saved by  
the law (circumcision, etc).”**

**Peter’s message: “Jews need to become like Gentiles  
and be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.”**

This is one of the clearest statements in the entire Bible that salvation is by grace! “Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved!” These are Peter’s last recorded words in the book of Acts. What a clear testimony they are to the doctrine of salvation by grace and not by the works of the law!

### **Acts 15:12**

Peter finished his presentation and all eyes were now on Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas and Paul did not give any doctrinal pronouncements. Their part was simply to testify as to what God had done. They spoke of the great work which God had accomplished among the Gentiles. They had preached to the Gentiles the gospel of the grace of God and God had confirmed their ministry by sign miracles (“wonders”). If they had been preaching a false gospel, then certainly God would not have confirmed their ministry in such a way.

Notice that Barnabas is mentioned first, probably because he was the original messenger from the church of Jerusalem (Acts 11:22). However, Paul was clearly the main spokesman and leader of their missionary team. It was wise for these two men to give their testimonies because no one could argue against what God had done through these two servants of Christ.

### **Acts 15:13**

We do not know how long Barnabas and Paul spoke. They may have given a lengthy report. This Jerusalem Council could have lasted several days; we just are not told. After they had finished speaking of their missionary trip, it was time for James to speak. James, the half brother of the Lord Jesus, was the leader of the Jerusalem church. James had come to know Christ as his Savior after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:7). Prior to the cross, the Lord’s brothers were unbelievers (John 7:5). Think of the credibility that James must have had as one who had lived with

Jesus for almost three decades. The regenerated James was famous for his godliness, for his self-discipline, and for his prayer life. He was highly admired and appreciated by the Jews in Jerusalem. He had quite the reputation among them.

### **Acts 15:14**

“Simeon” or “Simon” is a reference to Peter, as James refers back to what Peter had said. The expression “at the first” refers to Peter’s ministry to Cornelius ten years earlier. The term “visit” can refer to a visitation of judgment (Psalm 88:33; Jer. 9:25; 11:22) or, as in this case, a visitation of blessing. According to Thayer the word means “to look upon in order to help or to benefit, equivalent to *to look after, have a care for, provide for.*” God in great mercy (Eph. 2:4-5) reached out to the Gentiles, those who were “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). God graciously visited these people and made them trophies of His grace (Eph. 2:7).

God took out “a people” for His Name. God has more than one people. Jesus said, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold” (John 10:16). There are wide concentric circles among God’s people. The inner circle at the beginning was made up of Hebrew Christians. Later Samaritan Christians were brought into the fold (Acts 8). After that, Gentiles Christians were added (Acts 10). The circles were getting wider and wider. There is amazing diversity within the unity of the body of Christ. James was highlighting God’s present work among the Gentiles.

The visiting of the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name began with Cornelius and those Gentiles who were saved with him. That was only the beginning. Barnabas and Paul had just told about the wonderful outreach to the Gentiles that took place during their first missionary journey (Acts 15:12). This outreach to Gentiles would continue with Paul’s subsequent missionary journeys. All of this was in fulfillment of the worldwide outreach which Christ had predicted in Acts 1:8. So it is not unreasonable to say that during this entire Church age, God is visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His Name. How well did God accomplish this mission? In Revelation 5:9 we learn that redeemed Gentiles have come from “every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.”

It is helpful to note that the term “Church” (Greek–ekklesia) means “called out.” The Church is God’s called out assembly (1 Peter 2:9).

### **What is God Doing During This Present Age?**

1. He is building His Church (Matthew 16:18).
2. He is adding to His Church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:47).
3. He is visiting the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name (Acts 15:14).
4. He is baptizing believers into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13).
5. He is doing a special work among the Gentiles until the full number of the Gentiles has come in (Romans 11:25), at which time His Church will be removed from earth (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18); then the King will return shortly (Rom. 11:25; Acts 15:16).

## Acts 15:15

James provided Old Testament Scripture to shed light on this important issue, and he quoted primarily from the book of Amos (Amos 9:11-12). James is saying that what God was doing with the Gentiles, beginning with Peter's ministry in Caesarea, was in agreement with what the prophet Amos had said hundreds of years earlier, as well as what other prophets had said (consider Isaiah 45:21 and Zechariah 8:22).<sup>8</sup>

The word "agree" comes from the Greek verb sumphōneō from which we get our English word "symphony." In a symphony, musical instruments sound together to form beautiful music. What Amos and other prophets wrote was in harmony with what James had said about God visiting the Gentiles to call out of them a people for His Name. There was no disagreement. The words of the prophets were in full agreement with what James announced. Notice what James did not say. He did not say that God's present work among the Gentiles was the fulfillment of what Amos and other prophets had written. Amos spoke of the future Kingdom, after the return of Christ, when God would do a saving work among the Gentiles. It is a blatant error to equate the present Church age with the future Kingdom age. Yet, as will be shown, there were similarities between what was happening in James' day with what will happen in the Kingdom in the future.

James looked on contemporary events as God's first visitation of **the Gentiles**. He felt this first visitation was in perfect harmony with what Amos predicted—the future visitation of **the Gentiles** when Christ returns as King. The two events *agree* though they are not identical.<sup>9</sup>

## Acts 15:16

"After these things I will return." After God visits the Gentile nations to call out a people for His name, Jesus Christ will return to be King over the earth. This is similar to the teaching of Romans 11:25-26. After the full number of Gentiles comes in, the Deliverer will come out of Zion. Arno Gaebelein summarizes these verses as follows:

God gives the Gospel to the Gentiles through the preaching of the Gospel, a people is called out for His Name. The Church is this outcalled people. The Lord Jesus Christ returns after God's purpose in this age has been accomplished. The result of His return will be the setting up of the tabernacle of David, that is, the promised Kingdom. After He has come again the nations of the world will seek the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

The context in Amos chapter 9 refers to the coming tribulation which will greatly affect the nation Israel. However, James wanted his hearers to know that even though many Gentiles were coming to know the Lord, God was not through with His chosen nation Israel. God is not endorsing

---

<sup>8</sup>See William Kelly's excellent comments under the Amos passage and also his comments on Acts 15.

<sup>9</sup>William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, p. 1629.

<sup>10</sup>Arno Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 268-269.

“replacement theology.” God is not replacing Israel with the Church. As Paul explains in Romans chapter 11, the branches of the original olive tree from the Abrahamic root were broken off. Nevertheless, some day Israel will be restored to prominence in God’s program for this earth. The tabernacle of David is “fallen down” and is in “ruins” due to Israel’s unbelief. For over two thousand years the Jewish people have been without a Davidic king and since 70 A.D. have been without a Jewish temple, without a functional priesthood and without animal sacrifices. Yet, God promised that the tabernacle of David would be built again and restored, and the nation would have a glorious future under their Messiah-King.

Jesus had predicted the ruins of which Amos spoke: “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate....There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down” (Matt. 23:38; 24:2). All this was fulfilled in A. D. 70. James was in agreement with Amos and also with the Lord Jesus. But do not think for one minute that God is finished forever with Israel! This was all meant to be an encouragement to these Jewish believers in this early stage of Church history. A significant trend was beginning as more and more Gentiles would be saved, and by comparison, fewer and fewer Jews. Before long, the Church would be made up primarily of Gentiles, with the Jews forming a significant minority.

Before 70 A. D. God was very patient with the Jewish people in order to wean them off their earthly ritual system that was once owned of God and under which God had once placed them. The Gentiles were never said to be under this system as evident from the teachings in the book of Galatians. The book of Hebrews was that last call, so to speak, to have the Jewish Christians separate once-for-all from that earthly Jewish system, with the A.D. 70 destruction of the temple right around the corner.

It took years for the Jewish Christians to fathom the magnitude of this change. They did not adjust to it all at once. God helped to quicken this adjustment period by allowing the Romans to destroy the Temple under General Titus in 70 A. D. Dr. Alva McClain taught that during the time between the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem, there were occasional re-offers of the Kingdom, especially by Peter in Acts 3.<sup>11</sup> More opportunities were given to the Jewish people to repent and to embrace Christ as their promised Messiah. These offers were genuine, but it was still contingent on the acceptance of Christ by the nation, which never took place. This was a transition period.

James looked ahead to the future and saw that the Temple would be ruined and Israel would be dispersed throughout the world. Yet, this disastrous situation would not last forever. Today Gentiles can be legitimate believers in Christ without having to become Jews and without having to be circumcised. However, in the future Israel will make a comeback, the Temple will be rebuilt, sacrifices will again be offered (Ezekiel 40-48), and twelve thousand Levites will be chosen by God and identified (Revelation chapter 7).

There will once again be sacrifices and oblations, which after three and a half years the Antichrist will stop. Sacrifices will be reinstated when Jesus returns at the beginning of the Kingdom age. People will not be saved by those animal sacrifices, just as they were not saved by them in Old Testament times, but there will once again be an Israelite theocracy. There will be certain changes, but it will once again be an Israelite program. Church-age ordinances will not be observed during this period of earth history. Jewish ordinances will be observed once again with some modifications. This is a tremendous shock and offense to many theologians today. God will remove the Church,

---

<sup>11</sup>There is no evidence of any re-offer of the kingdom after Acts 7.

and Israel will once again be restored, contrary to the teachings of replacement theology. Yet, God's promise is sure: "I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up." The same promise is made in Luke 1:32-33, showing that Christ will rule on David's throne.

### **Acts 15:17**

It should be no surprise that God has a program for Gentiles now, because He will most certainly have a program for Gentiles in the Millennium. Indeed, God made provision for Gentle salvation during Old Testament times as well (just ask Rahab, Ruth, Nebuchadnezzar and many others).

That Gentiles will be saved in the Millennial Kingdom is made very clear in many passages. Consider Isaiah 2:2; 11:10; 42:1-3; 49:6; 52:15; 60:5; 65:1; 66:23; etc.). God desires millennial salvation and blessing not just for His people Israel, but also for the residue or the rest of mankind—the Gentiles.<sup>12</sup>

Notice the difference between Gentile salvation in this present Church age and Gentile salvation during the Millennium. Today God is taking out of the Gentiles a people for His Name, indicating that most of the world's Gentile population will remain unsaved. However, from this great mass of people, God will take out some for His Name (Acts 15:14). In the Kingdom "all the Gentiles" (Acts 15:17) will be saved. Every Gentile who enters the Kingdom will be saved and all others will be excluded from the Kingdom (Matt. 25:31-46).

So in this remarkable message given by James we have good news for both Jews and Gentiles.

**The good news for Jews:** During this Church age the gospel went to the Jews first (Rom. 1:16) and the Jewish people can be members of Christ's Church. Indeed the early Church was almost exclusively Jewish in makeup. Yet it would soon become evident that the majority of the nation would not believe and most of the nation would be hardened and blind (2 Cor. 3:13-16; Rom. 11:25). Yet, God has a wonderful future for the nation and there is coming a day when their blindness will be removed, they will embrace their Saviour (Rom. 11:25-26; Matt. 23:39), and they will play a prominent role in the Kingdom (Matt. 19:28; Zech. 8:23). "Jewish national hopes have been postponed, but they have not been cancelled."<sup>13</sup>

**The good news for Gentiles:** During this Church age God has opened up the door of faith to the Gentiles, beginning with Peter's ministry with Cornelius and his household. During this present age, God is visiting the nations calling out a people for His Name. During the Kingdom age saved Gentiles will enter the Kingdom (Matt. 25:34) and Gentiles will be saved during the Kingdom as well (Acts 15:17).

How do these verses strengthen the argument of James? The issue at the Jerusalem Council involved

---

<sup>12</sup>Some identify "the residue of men" as the believing Jewish remnant at the end of the tribulation that seeks the Lord and recognizes Christ as its long-awaited Messiah. See John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup>John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 296.

how to handle Gentile converts. The legalistic Pharisees wanted to put them under the law of Moses. That is, to be saved, Gentiles would have to become like Jews. And yet, James quoted from Amos showing that even in the Kingdom there would be saved Gentiles who would maintain their ethnic identity and not become Jews. In the Church there are saved Jews and saved Gentiles, united together into one body, but Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to be saved. They just need to believe on Christ. In the Kingdom, there will be saved Jews and saved Gentiles, and the Gentiles will not need to become Jews in order to be saved. They will maintain their Gentile identity.<sup>14</sup> “James’s point is that the prophet said Gentiles will be in the Kingdom without becoming Jewish proselytes. Therefore there is no need for them to become proselytes in the present age.”<sup>15</sup>

## Acts 15:18

This statement could be taken in a negative sense: “Men, these things are difficult to think through, but trust me, God knows what He is doing even if we do not!” The secret things belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29). What is God doing with these Gentiles? How long will this go on? What will happen to us Hebrew Christians here in Jerusalem? We don’t know, but God does and we can leave these mysteries with Him. Paul ends Romans chapter 11 in a similar way. God’s ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33)! We can see certain things but there are other things we are not sure about. But God says, “Trust Me; I do not make mistakes; I know what I am doing. Just follow Me.”

Another possibility is that James was beginning to reveal new truth, truth which had been known to God from the beginning. God in this present age is visiting the Gentile nations and calling out a people for His Name! This was a major change in God’s program. Prior to this God’s program centered in His nation Israel which was intended to be God’s witness on earth (Isaiah 43:10).

Today there is a "mystery" aspect of the gospel which was unknown in other ages but which now forms the very core of the gospel preaching of this age: “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel . . . that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:5-8).

In this present age there is a distinctive element to the content of the gospel which is called "the mystery of the gospel" (see Eph. 6:19 and compare Col. 1:26-27; 4:3). This new revelation is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise (Eph. 3:6). Such equality—Jew and Gentile united together in one body—was previously unknown. The distinctive message of the Church is that Jew and Gentile alike may believe the gospel and be united together into **one body** (1 Cor. 12:13) for the purpose of manifesting and bearing witness to Christ who is the sovereign Head of this unique and living organism!

Dispensational writers have long recognized the distinctive element of gospel preaching in this Church age:

---

<sup>14</sup>One difference between this present age and the Millennium is this: Today Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing as members of the body of Christ (Eph. 3:6; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). In the Kingdom the Jews will apparently have an elevated status (Zech. 8:23).

<sup>15</sup>John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Acts 13-28*, p. 69.

The idea that Gentiles should be on exactly the same plane as Israelites and, furthermore, in the intimate relationship as being members of the same body, is absolutely foreign to the Old Testament. According to Isaiah 61:5,6, the Gentiles are pictured as being the servants and Israel as the priests of God. While it is true that the Gentiles were promised blessings in the future millennial kingdom, they are never given equality with the Jews in the Old Testament.<sup>16</sup>

The Old Testament does predict Gentile blessing for the millennial period (Isa. 61:5-6; 2:1-4), but the blessings do not include equality with the Jews as is true today in the Body of Christ. Great blessing is promised Gentiles in the predictions of the Old Testament, but not on the basis of equality of position with the Jews. This equality is the point of the mystery revealed to the apostles and prophets in New Testament times.<sup>17</sup>

Romans, more than any other Epistle, helps us to understand God's purpose and program for Israel, in light of what God is doing today among the Gentiles and in light of what God will do in the future (Romans 9-11). Mystery truth is not developed in Romans as much as it is developed in Ephesians and Colossians, but the Epistle to the Romans does touch on some of these things. The uniqueness of being in the body of Christ is treated in Romans 12 and the unique oneness and identification with Christ that both Jews and Gentiles enjoy by virtue of being "in Christ" is wonderfully treated in Romans 6. The glorious and precious mystery of "Christ in you" (Col. 1:26-27) is touched upon in Romans 8:9-10. The union of the believer with Christ, likened to a marriage relationship (Eph. 5:29-32), is presented in Romans 7:1-4. The many riches that Jews and Gentiles alike share in Christ are wonderfully set forth in Romans 8. The mystery of Israel's partial and temporary blindness is set forth in Romans 11:25. Thus the book of Romans contributes in a significant way to our understanding of mystery truth. May God help us to be good and faithful stewards of these things (1 Cor. 4:1-2)!

All these mystery truths, which had been hidden for centuries and not revealed until after the Church had formed, had been known by God from the very beginning, locked up in His loving heart.

### **Acts 15:19**

How thankful Paul and Barnabas must have been to hear the conclusion of James' speech. The decision was made not to trouble the believing Gentiles. They did not want to burden them with Jewish regulations and ordinances, and did not wish to insist upon circumcision or conformity to the law of Moses.

### **Acts 15:20**

The Jewish brethren that made up this Council wanted the Gentiles to abstain from certain things that would be particularly offensive to Jewish brethren. Four things are listed in this verse that were

---

<sup>16</sup>John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 134.

asked of Gentile believers. We see these same four things repeated in verse 29. To “abstain from pollutions” is equivalent to “abstain from meats offered to idols” (verse 29). That is, they were to abstain from any participation in idolatrous rituals, including partaking of foods that were polluted or contaminated by idols. Often the meat markets would sell meat that had been used in idolatrous sacrifices for a lesser price than other meat. Such foods would be ritually unclean, but not intrinsically unclean (1 Cor. 8:8; Rom. 14:14,20). The Babylonian Captivity served to set the Jews free from the sin of idolatry which had led to that captivity. To eat meats associated with idols would have been very offensive to them.

“Things strangled” were meats from which the blood had not been properly removed. Such meat was considered a delicacy by many pagans. **Blood** refers to the pagan custom of using blood as a food.<sup>18</sup> The heathen would drink blood and mingle it with their food at idolatrous feasts. They would also drink it at their sacrifices.

Fornication was a problem for Jews and Gentiles alike. However, the Gentiles carried this sin to unusual extremes. Fornication was part of their religious observances and temple worship, and they would defile their bodies with both humans and beasts. Such temples were fornication centers where all manner of illicit sexual intercourse took place. Female and male prostitutes were provided, and there was little shame in such religious fornication. It was commonly practiced, and yet such conduct was especially odious and detestable to the Jews. Obviously non-religious fornication must be avoided by the Gentiles as well (1 Thess. 4:3). For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of this term “fornication,” see Appendix 1.

### **Acts 15:21**

This verse shows the amazing influence of Judaism in the Roman Empire in the first century. There were synagogues everywhere, in every city, and the words of Moses were read. Practically everywhere Paul went on his missionary journeys there was a synagogue. Millions of Jews were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Wherever the Gentile believers would be, they would find Jews as their neighbors. Believing Gentiles needed to be mindful of their Jewish neighbors and act accordingly.

### **Acts 15:22**

The proposal pleased the Apostles and elders, along with the whole assembly. Notice how the entire church was involved with these important matters. The leadership was careful not to act without the knowledge and participation of all the brethren. It was a decision that they could all approve of and offer a hearty “Amen.”

They decided to send additional men from Jerusalem along with Paul and Barnabas in order to give these Gentiles the Jewish perspective of what happened at this great conference. Judas and Silas were chosen. Silas would later become a key part of Paul’s team for his second missionary journey (Acts 15:40). Silas was a great and godly servant of the Lord. Some think that Judas Barsabas was

---

<sup>18</sup>*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Everett Harrison, editor, p. 1152.



the brother of Joseph Barsabas, one of the two men who were nominated to replace Judas Iscariot as an Apostle (Acts 1:23). So these four men journeyed to Antioch bringing with them a letter from the Jerusalem Council.

### **Acts 15:23**

The content of the letter is found in verses 23-29. Notice that their message was not just for the believers in Antioch, where this false teaching arose, but also for those in Syria and Cilicia. Antioch was the capital of Syria. Why were there believers in Cilicia? Cilicia was the home province of Paul with Tarsus as its capitol. Apparently, when Paul was in Tarsus for many years he was winning people to the Lord, and churches were formed as a result.

The content of this letter has been aptly summed up by Arno Gaebelein:

It is a most wonderful document, brief and extremely tactful. Much might have been said in the denunciation of these false teachers, but all this is carefully avoided and only the most essential matter is presented. And yet it is firm and decisive. How different from present day ecclesiastical rulings, letters concerning the question of fellowship, etc., with their bitter party spirit and unchristian rejection of brethren!<sup>19</sup>

### **Acts 15:24**

This communication did not mince words about the false teaching that was being spread by the Judaizers. These false teachers told the Gentiles that they must be circumcised and keep the law, but no such commandment or message had been sanctioned or authorized by the Jerusalem Apostles or elders. The souls of the believers were being *troubled*. This word is used elsewhere of believers having their souls subverted by evil doctrine (see Gal. 1:7; 5:10). The verb “subvert” means “to pack up baggage, hence from a military point of view, to dismantle a town, to plunder; here it is used metaphorically of unsettling or subverting the souls of believers” (Vine). The believers were becoming very upset in their souls because of these teachings.

If these legalistic Pharisees had said that they were official representatives of the church in Jerusalem, then they had lied. They did not represent the church in Jerusalem. These men were completely repudiated and silenced, at least for a while. We will learn in a later chapter in Acts that these legalists were just temporarily subdued. The problem would crop up again. False doctrine demands eternal vigilance because it tends to rear up its ugly head again and again.

“They went out from us.” Paul later explained how false teaching can arise from men coming right out of one’s local church: “Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

---

<sup>19</sup>Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 270.

## **Acts 15:25-26**

Paul and Barnabas were affectionately referred to as “beloved.” Paul was addressed in a similar way by Peter, “our beloved brother Paul” (2 Pet. 3:15). The chosen men sent with Barnabas and Paul were Judas and Silas (Acts 15:22,27). He is consistently called “Silas” in the book of Acts, but is called “Silvanus” in 2 Corinthians, the Thessalonian Epistles, and 1 Peter.

Barnabas and Paul had hazarded and risked their lives for the sake of the gospel, having been greatly persecuted on their first missionary journey. The term “hazarded their lives” literally means they gave over their lives or handed over their lives. They were willing to put their lives in great danger for the sake of the gospel. They did this again and again on their first missionary journey. Not only were they persecuted by unbelieving Jews, but they were also troubled by believing Jews who were promulgating false teachings.

## **Acts 15:27**

Sending the letter was not enough. They also wanted Judas and Silas to be present to communicate these same things in person. It is a good reminder for us. Often the easier thing to do is to send off a letter or an email, but a personal visit, if possible, is far more effective, especially when dealing with delicate matters. Written communications can be easily misunderstood.

## **Acts 15:28**

What a wonderful arrangement! It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Every congregational business meeting should end in such a way, as the believers are led by the Holy Spirit to do what is right in God’s sight.

The Lord Jesus, the Head of the Church, is to have preeminence (first place) in all things. We need to be "holding the Head" (Col. 2:19), meaning we are to lay hold on Christ, making sure that we give Him His rightful place in our local assembly and in our hearts.

Sometimes church business meetings can bring out the worst in professing believers. Sadly, carnality is often on display. Some leaders, like Diotrefes, love to promote themselves and insist on having their own way, even if it is detrimental to the assembly (3 John 9).

Lehman Strauss' very first pastorate was in Pennsylvania. Soon the time came to have a business meeting. The church constitution stated that the Pastor was to be in charge of the meeting. Pastor Strauss was willing to do this, but he knew he was very young and inexperienced. As the day of the meeting arrived, an idea came to the mind of this faithful man of God. He began the meeting in an unusual way.

As the congregation watched, he started the meeting by taking an empty chair and setting it in the midst of all the people. He then told them, "This chair represents the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the invisible Head of this assembly. I am not the head; I am just one of the members. May we all remember that He is present in our midst, and everything we do and say should be to please and glorify Him, as we seek His mind and direction." What a tremendous object lesson

and reminder! "And hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22).

A. T. Pierson has commented on the counsel and approval of the Holy Spirit as so beautifully expressed in this verse:

And now, as they draw up their "deliverance," and formally issue letters conveying their final verdict, they boldly treat the Holy Spirit *as One of their number*—a fellow-counselor, who unites with them in the announcement of a joint conclusion; as though He, the Spirit of God, had sat with them in their deliberations, had with them counseled as chief Adviser, and now unites with them in this deliverance, sealing their conclusions with His approval.

What a radical revolution would take place in all church assemblies if the sense of the Spirit's presence were actually felt, and if everything were said and done as in His presence!...We could mention by name at least one church of Christ where for a score of years the sense of the Spirit's presence has been habitually and sedulously cultivated; where everything is done as unto the Lord and before Him; where disciples tread softly, as in the unseen Presence; where nothing would be done or countenanced which was felt to be out of harmony with His mind or not in positive accord with His leading; where clamor and confusion would be deemed an insult to His majestic dignity, and all insubordination an assault upon His rightful sovereignty; where His mind is first of all inquired after and waited for, as an inquirer awaits the response of an oracle before taking a step at a crisis; where a certain *atmosphere* prevails which is fragrant with His presence and inspiring with His vitality. Of the conclusions reached by such a body of disciples it might be even now no irreverence, where it written, "*It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us.*"<sup>20</sup>

The Jerusalem leaders (Apostles and elders) did not want to burden the Gentiles beyond these four necessary things (requirements) mentioned in verses 20 and 29.

### **Acts 15:29**

- 1) Abstain from Meats offered to idols. Gentiles might not have a problem eating such meats, but the Jews did not wish to be connected with idolatry in any way.
- 2) Abstain from blood. See Genesis 9:4 and Leviticus 17:10. Don't eat anything with blood. Blood is a symbol of something very precious, namely **life**. The life of the flesh is in the blood (Lev. 17:11). When Christ's blood was shed, His life was poured out.
- 3) Abstain from things strangled, that is, from things improperly drained of blood.

---

<sup>20</sup>A. T. Pierson, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, pages 107, 109-111. Every Pastor and local church leader should read this chapter by A. T. Pierson. It would radically change the way in which church business is carried out.

4) Abstain from fornication. Dr. Whitcomb believed that “fornication” as used in this passage should be understood in a limited and restricted sense, involving unlawful sex and marriage between close relatives which was forbidden by God. For example, the Jews were not to marry a first cousin, etc. These were limits which God laid down in Leviticus 18:6-17 prohibiting marriages to those who were close relatives. According to Whitcomb, it is hard to understand how it could refer merely to fornication in general because every Gentile believer knew that fornication was not the will of God (1 Thess. 4:1-7). So, according to Dr. Whitcomb, this involves a special Jewish perspective on Leviticus 18 pertaining to unlawful marriages between relatives.<sup>21</sup> These matters are discussed in more detail in Appendix 1.

The effects of the decision of the Jerusalem Council were far-reaching. In the first place, it freed the gospel from any entanglement with Judaism and Israelite institutions. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, and the missionary outreach to Jewish people could progress side by side without conflict. Secondly, attitudes toward Paul within Jewish Christianity were clarified. While some of the Jewish believers probably became even more opposed to Paul, others such as John Mark seemed to become more reconciled to him. John Mark was probably listening to the Council’s decisions and was attracted to Paul and Barnabas, having never before seen these men in such a clear light. The Jerusalem Council showed what these men were really doing for God, and John Mark was probably excited about joining them for their next trip.

Also as the result of the Council, Silas apparently was very pleased to join himself with Paul in the second missionary journey in order to win Gentiles to Christ! He wanted to be part of this Gentile outreach program.

The third result of the Jerusalem Council was that its decision had the effect of antagonizing many unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem. From this time onward, the Christian mission within the nation (in and around Jerusalem) faced growing difficulties. There was an increasing zeal against Rome within the nation, as Jews during the next two decades would become more violent against Roman government officials, seeking to throw off the Roman yoke that was upon them. All of this proved to be very difficult for the life and ministry of the Jerusalem church.

As the result of this Council, theologians have made this conclusion: James, along with others, made a magnanimous choice, one of the most marvelous decisions in the history of the Church, but it ended in the final destruction of the church in Jerusalem. What should they have done? Wasn’t this the will of God? Was the will of God to destroy the church in Jerusalem? This is a very heavy question. When the godless Jews in Jerusalem became suspicious that these Christian Jews were pro-Gentile compromisers, this led to the downfall of the Jerusalem church. The same Jews who were determined to free themselves from the Roman yoke were also determined to destroy these saved Jews whom they considered to be compromising their Jewish faith. When Jerusalem collapsed in A. D. 70, the Christian Jews fled to another area to escape with their lives, and the church in Jerusalem disappeared and never recovered.

---

<sup>21</sup>See Appendix 1 where these four commands or requirements (“these necessary things”—verse 28) are discussed in greater detail and an alternative understanding for the term “fornication” is provided.

### **Acts 15:30**

Those who were dismissed referred to Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Judas. These men went to Antioch and delivered this letter to them.

### **Acts 15:31**

The believers at Antioch, being mostly Gentiles, rejoiced in the decision made by the Jerusalem Council and received comfort and encouragement from the letter.

### **Acts 15:32**

The decision made by the Jerusalem Council was very well received. Note that Judas and Silas had the gift of prophecy. This means that when they spoke as prophets their message was inspired speech, that is, it was nothing less than the Word of God. Their message came directly from the mouth of God.<sup>22</sup>

### **Acts 15:33**

These men continued to remain in Antioch for a period of time and then Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem to give a report to the Apostles. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch.

### **Acts 15:34**

There is an apparent contradiction between this verse and the previous verse. In verse 33 it seems that Judas and Silas returned to Jerusalem, but in verse 34 we are told that Silas remained in Antioch. In the Greek manuscripts there is not much textual support for verse 34 and you will find it missing from most modern translations.<sup>23</sup> It could be that an early scribe added these words to try to explain how Silas could have been with Paul in Antioch to join him for his second missionary journey (verse 40). The better explanation is that Silas did return to Jerusalem, as verse 33 implies, and then he was called back to Antioch sometime later and was able to join Paul for the second missionary journey.

### **Acts 15:35**

The church in Antioch was in good hands. God provided this assembly with excellent Bible teachers—Paul, Barnabas and Silas, along with many others (Acts 13:1). It was a key church of the first century and was characterized by sound doctrine, intolerance of false doctrine, and a zeal for

---

<sup>22</sup>For the Biblical definition of a prophet, see <https://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/doctrine/charis04.htm>

<sup>23</sup>The translations by John Darby and William Kelly both omit this verse, not believing it to be part of the original God-breathed text.

missionary outreach. Would to God that today's churches were like the assembly at Antioch.

### **Acts 15:36**

It had been a while since the first missionary journey. The focus of the church had been on doctrinal matters which thankfully had been resolved by the Jerusalem Council. Paul sensed that now was the time to go forth again. So Paul initiated a return trip to follow up on those who had come to know the Lord and to see how they were doing. New believers need follow-up work and Spirit-guided discipleship. When people come to know the Lord it is not the end of their spiritual journey; it is just the beginning. Then comes the massive task of teaching them to observe all things that our Lord has commanded them (Matt. 28:19-20).

The churches Paul wanted to visit were located in what we would now call eastern Turkey. Paul was very concerned about these churches for at least two reasons: 1) The believers in these churches were being persecuted by unsaved Jews; 2) These believers were being attacked by false doctrine coming from certain believing Jews who were legalists. They were teaching that one must obey the law in order to be saved and sanctified. Paul had been so concerned about this that he wrote his letter to the Galatians to deal with these issues. When he wrote to the Galatians, the Jerusalem Council had not yet occurred, but once the Jerusalem Council had made its decision, Paul could then give these churches the official decision coming from the Apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem church. This confirmed that what Paul had written to them in the book of Galatians was correct. The believers needed to understand that they were not under the law as a means of salvation or as a rule of life.<sup>24</sup> They were under Christ and under grace, and part of an entirely new program. Paul needed to inform the believers with respect to these important truths.

### **Acts 15:37**

Barnabas was determined to take John Mark on this second missionary journey. John was a young cousin or nephew to Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and Barnabas had confidence in him. Barnabas believed that with patience and love they could restore Mark to a profitable ministry. He wanted to give Mark an opportunity to prove himself.

### **Acts 15:38**

Paul was equally determined not to take John Mark with them because he had abandoned them on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:13). Luke does not provide a detailed explanation as to why Mark departed from them, yet it was obvious that Paul was not happy with what Mark had done. Paul felt that the work was too dangerous for a man who had proved himself to be a failure.

---

<sup>24</sup>See George Zeller's study, *What is the Believer's Rule of Life?:*  
<https://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/doctrine/rulelife.htm>

### **Acts 15:39**

The contention was very sharp between Paul and Barnabas. This is quite an amazing statement when we consider how close these two men were. Together they risked their lives on their first missionary journey. These men were dear friends and had bonded together for years as they ministered together. Indeed, Barnabas was the man who encouraged the Apostles in Jerusalem to embrace Paul and not to fear him (Acts 9:27).

This sharp contention resulted in a separation: “they departed asunder one from the other.” The word “departed” is the Greek word from which we get our English word “paroxysm.” It was a very deep division.

Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus which was his home country (Acts 4:36), and it was also the island where the first missionary journey had started (Acts 13:4).

### **Acts 15:40**

Paul chose Silas to whom we were introduced in Acts 15:22. Silas was a prophet, receiving direct communication from God (Acts 15:32). He also was a Roman citizen, as was Paul, and this would prove helpful (Acts 16:37). Silas also had a close relationship with Peter, as seen from 1 Peter 5:12.

Paul and Silas were recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. It does not say that Barnabas and John Mark were recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. We should probably not make too much of this omission, because in God’s providence He was certainly able to use the labors of Barnabas and John Mark also. It would be wrong to assume that they were under some kind of divine curse or under some kind of church discipline. The main focus in these chapters is upon Paul and his co-workers. As the result of this split there were two gospel teams instead of one. From this episode some might conclude: “Praise the Lord for church splits! Let’s split all of our churches and multiply and spread the gospel in this way!” No, we should not go that far. Working together in harmony is always the best policy. “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:18).

Keep in mind that this was a serious disagreement over ministry policy. It was not a disagreement over any doctrinal or moral issues.

### **Acts 15:41**

Thus began the second missionary journey. Syria was the region north of Jerusalem on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Antioch was its capital. Cilicia was a region in Asia Minor, its capital being Tarsus, Paul’s home town. Paul’s initial plan was to visit every place where he had gone on the first missionary journey and to see how the brethren were doing (verse 36). Yet God was in charge, not Paul, and God wanted the gospel to go to other regions as well, and to new cities.

## The Contention Between Paul and Barnabas and the Restoration of John Mark

As already mentioned, this was not a doctrinal disagreement. There was nothing doctrinal in this dispute. It was a policy disagreement.

Did they pray? Did they consult the Lord? We are not told whether they prayed or not, and we should be careful about arguing a point from silence. We do know that it is possible for even great men of God to fail to consult God. An example would be Joshua who was fooled by the Gibeonites because he did not consult the Lord (Joshua chapter 9).

**Paul's position:** "I will not endorse a missionary who is a proven failure. Mark had his chance to prove himself but he let us down and deserted us."

**Barnabas' position:** "I am committed to the restoration of this missionary who has failed, especially since I know this man personally and I love this man. He's not only my companion, but he's my relative. I want to give him a second chance."

Did anything positive come out of this? God can work all things together for good and the division and separation resulted in two missionary teams instead of one.

What do we make of all this? Dr. Whitcomb has suggested that there is a sense in which both men may have been right. Barnabas may have been right because Mark was eventually restored. We learn later that John Mark eventually became profitable to the Apostle Paul (2 Tim. 4:11). Also God used Mark as the human author of one of the four Gospels, most probably working with Peter on that project.

On the other hand, Paul exercised good wisdom because even though Mark eventually was restored, it did not happen instantly. A man must be given time to recover and become a vessel fit for the Master's use. Sometimes after a failure one must wait a while as God works in a man's heart.

It has also been suggested that both men could have been wrong. Perhaps Paul was too resentful against Mark and perhaps Barnabas was too eager to support his relative. Perhaps Paul was too hard on Mark and perhaps Barnabas was too soft on Mark. We are not told too much about this dispute so we need to be careful about reaching dogmatic conclusions. Some think Paul was more right than Barnabas because it's hard to find too many examples in Scripture where Paul was wrong. Yet we just are not told too many details about this unfortunate separation.

After this terrible split, we never read about Barnabas again in the book of Acts. He's never mentioned from this point on. What should we make of this? Some make too much of it by concluding that Barnabas was wrong, was put on the shelf, and God had no more use for him. His ministry, from God's perspective, came to a complete and total end. However, we must be careful not to go beyond what is written. Remember, the last half of Acts is all about the Apostle Paul's ministry and if Barnabas were no longer with Paul, then we should not be surprised if his name is not mentioned.

Also, because a man's name is not mentioned, does not, in itself, indicate that he is not serving the Lord. A prime example of this is found in Acts 1:13. The name of the eleven Apostles are listed



and then later in this chapter Matthias is appointed as the twelfth Apostle. Out of these twelve men, nine of these men from this point on never have their names mentioned in the book of Acts, nor in the entire New Testament. The only names that are mentioned after Acts chapter 1 are Peter, James and John. Yet surely these other nine had fruitful ministries, even though God never mentions them and does not describe their work.

We should also note that Paul mentions Barnabas later, once in 1 Corinthians 9, which is about five years after this split, and once in Colossians 4, which is about thirteen years after this split. In both of these passages there is no indication that he was at odds with Barnabas. Apparently they both served the Lord, respected each other, but they no longer worked together as a team.

It is wonderful that God used Mark after his failure. He was damaged goods, but God ended up using him. It is so amazing that God can use you and me, when we think of how imperfect we are and how defective we are as instruments.

There is a poem by Myra Brooks Welch entitled *The Touch of the Master's Hand*. It describes an old violin which was “battered and scarred” and was being sold at an auction. This instrument was in such poor condition that the highest bid was only \$3:00. Just in time, a master violinist stepped forward, dusted off the instrument, tightened the strings and played a most beautiful melody. After that, the violin sold for three thousand dollars. What made the difference? The instrument was the same, but it was the touch of the master's hand! Like the violin, we are very marred and imperfect, but God can use us.

Once a great warrior was painted with his hand resting on his face, as if in contemplation. But the real purpose was to hide an ugly scar on his cheek. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, was photographed and painted standing in such a position that his withered arm would not appear. Franklin Roosevelt was crippled by polio and was paralyzed from the waist down, but those around him were very careful not to have the President photographed in his wheelchair. When he did make public appearances they had ways of making him look less crippled than he really was. We all try, to some extent, to disguise our imperfections, but nothing is hidden from our God. Everything is naked and open before His eyes, and our sins, shortcomings and faults are known to Him.

The good news is that God uses flawed people. God uses failures like John Mark. He's the God of the unsuccessful and the imperfect. He is the God of the flawed, the defective and the damaged.

Consider the following: Moses didn't want to speak to Pharaoh; Moses was not eloquent and he was slow and hesitant in his speech. Abraham lied about his wife. Jacob was a deceiver. John Mark was a deserter. David had an affair and tried to cover it up by having an innocent man killed. Abraham was too old. David was too young. Peter was afraid of a servant girl and denied his Lord. Paul was a murderer and a blasphemer. Jonah ran from God and was disobedient. Gideon and Thomas both doubted. Elijah ran away. Martha was a worrier. Noah got drunk. Samson had all kinds of problems especially with women. Joshua failed to consult the Lord. Solomon's list of failures is too lengthy to recite. And we could go on and on. Isn't it amazing that God could use people like this?

God's people are not an impressive lot, but Jesus is a very impressive Saviour. He is superb in who He is and in all that He does.

We are so flawed that each one of us is unworthy to be called into the service of the Lord Jesus. But

be of good cheer, because there is no bruised reed whom Christ cannot restore and heal. Not one of His people has gone beyond His grace. Not one of us is useless. All we need is the touch of the Master's hand.

Is there anything more useless than a piece of bone from a dead donkey? There was perhaps an old, exhausted donkey which just lay down and died. Along came the vultures, foxes and carnivores and they picked off chunks of flesh from the dead beast and left it a mere skeleton scorching in the flaming sun. Let me ask you, how could God use that donkey? It's seemed useless!

Then along came Samson. He needed a weapon with which to destroy God's enemies. He looked around and found the dried-up jawbone of that dead animal. With that seemingly useless and worthless jawbone, he slew a thousand Philistines (Judges 15:11-17).

Yes, you and I are imperfect, frail, in many ways useless, sinful and very flawed, but God can use us. God doesn't go down to Perfect Street to choose His material. God can and does use the unusable. How can God use me? Let me start here: "Lord, I present myself to You. My will, my time, my talents, my tongue, my property, my reputation, my entire being....to be and to do anything You require of me now. As I have given myself to You, I am no longer my own. But all that I have is Yours and belongs to You. I believe that You will accept the offering I bring. I bring just me. I trust in You to work in me all the good pleasure of Your will. I am willing to receive what You give, to lack what You withhold, to relinquish what You take, to surrender what You claim, to suffer what You ordain, to do what You command, to wait on Your will, to rest in You, to delight in You, to rejoice in You, to abide in Your love. Lord, have Thine own way."

# Appendix 1

## The Four Things the Gentiles Were Asked to Abstain From With Special Emphasis on the Meaning of “Fornication”

*Note: This appendix is written by George Zeller and presents a position which differs, in some respects, from what Dr. Whitcomb taught.*

| Acts 15:20                           | Acts 15:29                              |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Abstain from pollutions of idols. | 1. Abstain from meats offered to idols. |
| 2. Abstain from fornication.         | 2. Abstain from blood.                  |
| 3. Abstain from things strangled.    | 3. Abstain from things strangled.       |
| 4. Abstain from blood.               | 4. Abstain from fornication.            |

Notice that even though the order is different, each verse contains the same four things that the Gentiles were to abstain from, for the sake of the Jews.

The word “fornication” is a general word referring to any kind of illicit sexual intercourse. It could refer to premarital sex, to adultery, to homosexuality, to lesbianism, to incest (1 Cor. 5:1) and to pagan temple worship which involved heathen orgies of all kinds.

Some commentators see a very restrictive meaning of the word “fornication” as it is used in Acts 15:20,29. They believe that the Jerusalem Council was referring to things that are mentioned in Leviticus chapters 17-18. Leviticus chapter 17 teaches that the blood of an animal must not be eaten (as Gentiles would often do) and that the blood should be drained from the animal before eating it. (Putting an animal to death by “strangling” would not drain the blood.) Leviticus chapter 18 (verses 6-17) forbids sexual intercourse or marriage between those who are close of kin. Thus, some define “fornication” in Acts 15 as referring to an incestuous relationship (intercourse with those close of kin). They argue in this way: Since all four of these things are mentioned in Leviticus 17-18, then the definition of “fornication” in Acts 15 must refer to abstaining from sexual relations with those close of kin.

What are the problems with this view? First, not all four things are mentioned in Leviticus 17-18 because in these two chapters nothing is said about abstaining from meats offered to idols.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Leviticus 17:7 warns against pagan idol worship but nothing is said about abstaining from meats.

Second, while it is true that the blood prohibition is found in Leviticus 17, it is also true that the prohibition against eating the blood of animals is found in Genesis 9:4, a commandment given to all of Noah's descendants. Both Jews and Gentiles should continue to observe what God commanded after the great flood.

Third, lexical support for the narrow definition of "fornication" is thin. Thayer says, "used properly, of illicit sexual intercourse in general (Demosthenes, 403, 27; 433, 25): Acts 15:20, 29; Acts 21:25 (that this meaning must be adopted in these passages will surprise no one who has learned from 1 Corinthians 6:12ff how leniently converts from among the heathen regarded this vice and how lightly they indulged in it; accordingly, **all other interpretations of the term, such as of marriages within the prohibited degrees and the like, are to be rejected**)" [Emphasis mine]. Arndt and Gingrich (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*) define the term as "every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse," and no mention is made of the narrow definition relating to intercourse between close of kin. Likewise, Vine does not mention this restricted definition.

Fourth, the letter sent to the Gentiles simply mentions fornication and does not explain what the term means. It seems quite unreasonable to think that the Gentiles, totally unfamiliar with the laws of Leviticus 18, would have understood the term in the restricted, narrow sense. When Paul, for example, forbids fornication as in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and Ephesians 5:5 ("whoremonger") and Colossians 3:5, the Gentiles knew exactly what he meant and they did not interpret it to mean some very specific form of fornication relating to next of kin.

Fifth, there is no clear-cut case anywhere in the New Testament where "fornication" means sexual relations between near of kin. Those who give it this meaning assume it to be true, but have not proven it to be so.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, it is best to understand the term to refer to illicit sexual intercourse in general, especially since the Gentiles freely practiced this sin even as part of their religious temple worship. "Fornication was so widely practiced among pagans, even under the guise of religion, that an admonition to Gentile Christians to pay particular attention to avoiding this sin was certainly not unwarranted."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup>It is interesting to note that certain Bible students have taken this narrow definition of "fornication" (intercourse between near of kin) in Acts 15:20,29 (as they understand it) and have transferred this meaning to the divorce exception clauses found in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9. They argue that Matthew was written to the Jews and that the Jews would have understood "fornication" in the narrow sense based on Leviticus 18. This results in an extremely strict view of divorce whereby essentially all divorce for any reason is forbidden, unless you have married a near of kin. If so, that marriage needs to be annulled since it was forbidden by Leviticus 18. See Charles C. Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," *Grace Theological Journal* 3.2 (1982), pages 177-192, and J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth* [Bethany House], 1981, chapter 6.

<sup>27</sup>Homer A. Kent Jr., *From Jerusalem to Rome—Studies in Acts*, p. 127.