

Acts 15

The purpose of the meeting in Jerusalem was to correct the religious position of the majority in the Jerusalem church, including, most if not all of the apostles, as well as James the Lord's brother. The idea Paul needed their approval in any manner is wrong, except in the limited sense of his hoping to retain unity of the Christian movement. Paul did not need the "council" they needed him to clarify and straighten out their thinking

(1) Paul was converted in 37 A.D. (cf: Acts 9:2 was in 37AD & + Galatians 2:1 was 14 years later = about 50AD) chronologically, the date is about 50AD

Galatians 2:1-14 Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with [*me*] also. 2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. (he desired to remove every suspicion which might exist in the minds of others that he was laboring or had labored in vain;)3 But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: 4 And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: 5 To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. 6 But of these who seemed to be somewhat, (whatsoever they were, it maketh no matter to me: God accepteth no man's person:) for they who seemed [*to be somewhat*] in conference added nothing to me: 7 But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as [*the gospel*] of the circumcision [*was*] unto Peter; 8 (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:) 9 And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we [*should go*] unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision. 10 Only [*they would*] that we should remember the poor; the same which I also was forward to do. 11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. 12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. 13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. 14 But

when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before [*them*] all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

The slight variations in Acts & Galatians are from Paul's reporting in Galatians conversations which took place in Jerusalem privately with, James, Cephas and John, evidently before the formal meeting was convened. As far as Paul was concerned, the issue had already been decided before they had the "council". It should also be noted that Paul's withstanding Peter was an event that took place "in Antioch" prior to their coming to Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11), and does not belong to the Jerusalem meeting.

The council was in error, NOT the apostle Paul. Although brethren appointed Paul to go to Jerusalem, it was God who sent him (Galatians 2:2), not to permit the council to approve of Paul's preaching, but in order to correct the shameful failure of apostles and elders in that city to admit the Gentiles, without any restrictions, into the Christian fellowship. In Galatians, Paul flatly affirmed that: They ... imparted nothing to me; but contrariwise ... when they perceived the grace that was given unto me ... they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship (Galatians 2:6-9).

Paul was an Apostle had fully as much authority as any Apostle or anyone in the Jerusalem church; and it would have been shameful for the great apostle who for years had already been preaching God's will regarding circumcision and the law of Moses, both had been nailed to the cross of Christ and totally done away with ... to have submitted the issue to the Jewish political party in Jerusalem, bolstered as it was by James and the apostles. No! Paul never did any such thing; but through God's revelation, went up there to correct them, bring reconciliation, and bring them into line with the will of God.

Paul was the instrument by which the Holy Spirit guided the apostles (the Twelve) into all truth, especially on this question of relationship between Judaism and church of Christ.

Galatians was Paul's first epistle, written almost immediately after meeting in Jerusalem, hence saying to them,

Galatians 1:6-9 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel 7 Which is not another; but there be

some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any [*man*] preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

This would give the epistle a date of about 50 A.D.

Acts 15:1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, [*and said*], Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

Acts 15 is the most important issue with greatest consequences in the primitive growing Church. Material for this study is found in 15:1-16:4 and the first two chapters of Galatians especially 2:1-14. The Judizers supposed that the Christian religion was intended to perfect the Law of Moses rather than supersede it.

The issue was debated, clarified and resolved in a well arraigned conference in Jerusalem. A letter was then written to the Gentile Churches correcting for all time the error of the Jewish legalists.

Brethren from Jerusalem came to Antioch and infiltrated the congregation with the doctrine that strict adherence to the Law of Moses was essential to Salvation. Thinking salvation was for all including Gentiles, but the basis was Christ plus the works of the Law.

Paul and Barnabas met such false teaching head on. Our salvation does not come through a cultural ritual such as circumcision. Salvation is a gift of God in Christ.

Certain men came down ... These were the same persons mentioned by Paul who had shaken the faith of young converts from the simplicity of N.T. Christianity.

Galatians 2:12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles ...” (Luke only provides a brief summary in Acts.)

Ye cannot be saved ... at this point the greatest doctrinal threat in the history of the Church confronted Christianity. James the Lord’s brother was the equivalent of the "leading elder" in Jerusalem. Presumably, he was supported, or at least not opposed, by the apostles. These men from James probably exceeded their commission by making obedience to the Mosaic Law mandatory for all Christians and James declared that "no such commandment" was given them. (Acts 15:24).

Acts 15:2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

The word translated “determined” is the same word that appears in 13:48 as “were ordained.” Arrange, according to rank, fall in line, or as many as fell in arranged themselves with Paul and Peter and got on the road to Jerusalem.

Galatians 2:2 And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain

Paul hesitated to go at all until God instructed him to go.

Galatians 1:11-12 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. 12 For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught [*it*], but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Paul did not learn his Gospel from men but “by revelation.” Paul went under God’s urging for the sake of the Gospel to save them from this false teaching. Paul clarified and confirmed for the whole church the sole basis of man’s Salvation is to be found “in Christ”.

Acts 15:3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice (FEN-iss) and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

Acts 15:4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and [*of*] the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

Three distinct groups welcome the emissaries from the Antioch Church. “The Church, the Apostles and Elders.” They were united in their welcome of them.

This verse suggests a general congregational meeting at which Paul and Barnabas recounted in detail how many things God did with them.

Acts 15:5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command [*them*] to keep the law of Moses.

The Pharisees which believed ... Here is identified the seat of the whole mischief. In Acts 6:7, Luke related how a great company of ordinary “priests became obedient to the faith”, many of whom no doubt were Pharisees. Their love of the forms, of the Temple, ritualism and ceremonies of Judaism had been brought with them into the church. Not only had they corrupted the whole church in Jerusalem and Judea, but they had followed Paul to the mission field and the recently established congregations in Galatia ... they visited and corrupted them sufficiently to call forth Paul's vehement letter to the Galatians. The representatives they sent down to Antioch were confronted by the dauntless Apostle Paul who challenged them, defeated them. Paul converted Peter and they proceeded to Jerusalem where Paul confronted the false teaching at source.

Some Pharisees could not restrain forcing the issue onto the floor for a general debate. They fought publically for the terms of the doctrine they had introduced at Antioch.

Aside from Christ himself, Christianity owes more to Paul than to any other.

Acts 15:6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

To consider ... This is a lot different from "to decide," there being no evidence whatever that this so-called council "decided" anything except that they would "trouble not" the Gentiles who had turned to God (Acts 15:19).

V:6 was a private meeting in which only the Apostles and the Elders were in this meeting. During the debate that arose at the first general meeting cooler heads called for adjournment. During this private meeting Paul, the Apostles and Elders worked out a strategy for the second meeting.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men [*and*] brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

And when there had been much disputing ... this reveals part of the planned strategy every person was given ample opportunity to say his peace, blow off his steam and argue his convictions.

Peter speech refers to the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10.

Peter had acted in good faith, baptizing Cornelius and his household without any thought of circumcision and law-keeping.

But the cunning Pharisees, in efforts to bring them all to their viewpoint, began by stressing the social issue of eating with the uncircumcised, but then moving quickly afterward to the extreme position of demanding full obligations to Moses' law as a condition of salvation. True, Peter had eaten with Cornelius ... but, through social pressure, the Pharisee-Christians were able to compromise him, cf: Galatians 2:11ff Now and after many discussions with Paul, Peter now has a better understanding of God's will. This enabled him to rise up, and pull the rug out from under the whole Pharisaical conspiracy.

Acts 15:8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as [*he did*] unto us;

Acts 15:9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Faith ... here means "the Christian faith" as distinguished from the law of Moses.

When the Gentiles came to believe in Acts 10, no suggestion was made that they obey the Law of Moses. God cleansed their heart by faith giving evidence of their acceptability by giving them the Holy Spirit.

No distinction between us ... and them ... This is one of the cornerstone doctrines of Christianity. God has only one plan, one system of human salvation, there is no partiality, no special favors, no special formula favoring any man, race or nation. The whole book of Romans was written to develop the theme of God's righteousness in treating all men and nations alike. "There is no distinction!" (Romans 3:22). The words Peter spoke here obviously made a deep impression upon the great apostle Paul and he included the quote in the book of Romans.

Acts 15:10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

The circumstances of such a dramatic change in Peter included Paul's withering denunciation of Peter at Antioch (Galatians 2:11ff). Peter "the Rock" was certainly out of character as this great issue boiled to a climax in Antioch; but his senses came back and he "came to himself." Paul playing a key part in bringing

Peter to his senses was, really, an act of God Himself.

A rooster did it the night Jesus was betrayed and Paul did it here.

“why tempt ye God ... put a yoke ...” The antecedent of the pronoun "ye" in this passage is "the apostles and elders" (Acts 15:6), indicating the near-unanimous victory the Pharisee-legalistic-Christians had accomplished in Jerusalem.

Peter had already been won over to a complete endorsement of Paul's preaching in its totality. That approval and endorsement he courageously announced to all, declaring strongly that their refusal of Paul's viewpoint would "tempt God."

Acts 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

The Gentiles are “saved” and safe in their position but are “we”

Acts 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

“... multitude kept silence ...” This thunderbolt just delivered by Peter completely silenced the Pharisaical Christian party, leaving the vast body of the Jerusalem Church, silent and ready to give full attention to the report of Barnabas and Paul.

Luke here returned to the old order of these names. The Apostles report included all recorded in the last two chapters Acts about the first Missionary Journey, and possibly a great deal more, proving beyond any question of doubt that the hand of the Lord was with Paul and Barnabas proving their teaching to be God's truth.

The presence and approval of God was proved in the unusual “signs and wonders” worked among the Gentiles. The work of Paul and Barnabas demonstrated that the Gospel was just as powerful in Gentile lives and lands as it was in Jewish.

The argument is: what God does is the ultimate explanation of what He says. God brought the first Gentiles in by faith. God works the same miracle of redemption through Barnabas and Paul.

Acts 15:13 And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men [*and*] brethren, hearken unto me:

After they had held their peace ... suggests that the report of Paul and Barnabas had received an overwhelming standing ovation as we would say today.

It may also have the meaning that all arguments had been answered, and that the Pharisee-Law of Moses Christians were left speechless.

James ... This was James the Lord Jesus' brother who occupied a very influential place among the Christians in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:14 Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

Simeon ... James here reverted to Peter's original name.

It might have been a little embarrassing to the apostle, under the circumstances, to have called him The Rock after his sinful behavior (Peter)!

The Twelve acknowledged Paul's teaching as orthodox, recognized him as the apostle to the Gentiles, conceded his demand that the Gentiles should be free from the observance of the Mosaic Law.

This formal meeting, was NOT dominated and controlled, not by the Pharisee party in Jerusalem as they had hoped, but by the Holy Ghost and the apostle Paul.

James' great message here appealed to Scripture as an effective means of achieving the unity of all concerned. The quote to "take out of them a people for his name" ... The term "people" that is used is of "God's peculiar people."

This was the usual Old Testament word designating Israel as the true people of God. The Gentiles were now included in this people. The "rebuilding of the tabernacle of David" must therefore refer to the salvation of the Jewish remnant, "the Israel within Israel" (Romans 9:8 & 11:1-5) The Jews and Gentiles in one body the Churches of Christ.

Acts 15:15 And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

Acts 15:16 After this 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:

Amos 9:11-12 In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old. 12 That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the LORD that doeth this.

The tabernacle of David that has fallen, and possessing the nation's Gentiles, was very vivid and realistic language spoken in terms that people of Amos' time could

understand, but its real meaning is that Paul and Barnabas missionary journeys went to capture God's people from among the Gentiles.

To a Jew this appeal to the Old Testament will lay fears and clinch the argument. They could accept Gentiles if the Old Testament approved.

Acts 15:17 That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

All of the Old Testament promises to Israel are fulfilled in Christ and the church. Christians are the "seed of Abraham" (Galatians 3:7 & 29). He is a Jew who is one inwardly (Romans 2:28-29).

Gentiles upon whom my name is called ... The Scripture to which James appealed in this is a free rendition of Amos 9:11, his purpose being to show that the Gentiles were prophetically included in the people of God.

Acts 15:18 Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

Acts 15:19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

My sentence ... The Order rested upon the authority of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), not upon any legislative authority of the council. That James' judgment was inspired is proved by Acts 15:28.

Despite the fact the Greek language has many verbs James could have used to command, order, or decree, none of them is used here:

The independence of the Church (Ecclesia) the autonomous Congregation of Antioch had to be respected, and yet in such a way as not to encourage disrespect of the Mother Congregation in Jerusalem (Ecclesia), or of the Lord's own apostles, or of the unity of the whole Christian body, the Churches of Christ.

Acts 15:20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and [from] fornication, and [from] things strangled, and [from] blood.

The four prohibitions here are that the Christians should refrain from: (1) pollutions of idols, (2) fornication, (3) things strangled, and (4) blood. These restrictions are binding upon all Christians.

These prohibitions do not imply that other sins of dishonesty and immorality were permitted, probably referring to sins "which were so common among the Gentiles that they were not even recognized as wrong until Christian teaching denounced them."

The principal barrier to social and religious unity among the Jewish and Gentile Christians was the low standard of moral behavior, debauchery and decadence so common among the Gentiles ... It is not that the Bible is just better than ancient idolatry ... the Bible is all together true and idolatry is all together false.

Idol feasts and Temples were shameful debaucheries, marked by nakedness, drunkenness, the most vulgar and immoral behavior, the prohibitions against pollution of idols and fornication being almost, in fact, one prohibition. In fact, it is possible that all four of these restrictions relate to idol worship.

Pseudo Clement writing in the 2nd century said: "The things which pollute both the soul and the body are these: to partake of the table of demons, (Idols) that is, to taste things sacrificed, or blood, or a carcass which is strangled."

The prohibition of eating blood (including things strangled) was announced by God in the covenant with Noah, thus:

Genesis 9:4 But flesh with the life thereof, [*which is*] the blood thereof, shall ye not eat.

This makes it clear that the denial of blood as food to man ante-dates the Mosaic Law. Thus, they are wrong who see these restrictions as a symbolical binding of the Law on Christians. This rule comes from the authority of the Holy Spirit and the New Testament Acts 15:28 not the Old Testament Law.

The controversy was resolved in favor of grace. A letter was sent to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Considering the sharpness of differences the most striking thing in this section (14:22-29) is the unity. There was absolutely NO Division between apostles, elders and the church when the meeting ended.

Acts 15:21 For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.

Many Jewish Christians were still attending the synagogues every Sabbath. It is a marvel of wisdom, forbearance and understanding that such a formidable

threat to unity could have been gloriously resolved under the influence of the Holy Spirit as was done here ...

James' Argument is what God has done with Peter, Paul and Barnabas explain the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies.

Acts 15:22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; [namely], Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

The wise precaution here was providing: dual witness with representatives of both sides, in order to forestall any recurrence of disunity. Silas may have met Paul for the first time here. Silas would prove an invaluable ally for Paul; because, he would be able to verify the recognition of Paul's apostleship by the church.

Acts 15:23 And they wrote [letters] by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren [send] greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:

The churches of south Galatia were included under Antioch, as having been established from that church.

Acts 15:24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, [Ye must] be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no [such] commandment:

They did it on their own, they did not represent us.

The words chosen for this communication were warm, sincere and complimentary, recognizing the marvelous, unselfish devotion of the missionaries who had preached to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:25 It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:27 We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell [you] the same things by mouth.

Acts 15:28 For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

The Holy Spirit is the author of this decision.

From Galatians 2:1-14 we know two points.

Even Titus was not compelled to be circumcised.

James and Cephas and John ... gave me the right hands of fellowship.

Acts 15:29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

It is of interest that the Greek New Testament omits the preposition “from” before the middle two of these four prohibitions, thus:

Abstain from idol sacrifices and blood and things strangled and from fornication.

Again, this points to a possible identification of the first three of these as elements of a single prohibition. Nestle Greek Text w/ Literal English Translation

Acts 15:30 So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:

Acts 15:31 [*Which*] when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

The tensions eating at the Antioch church are replaced by relaxed tranquility.

It was indeed an occasion worthy of great rejoicing and celebration.

The Holy Spirit had prevailed over one of the most serious threats ever encountered by the primitive apostolic church.

Acts 15:32 And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed [*them*].

The preaching of Judas and Silas produced joy in the hearts of the disciples.

Acts 15:33 And after they had tarried [*there*] a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles.

Acts 15:34 Not with-standing it pleased Silas to abide there still.

Acts 15:35 Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

This announcement of peace after the storm which leads to renewed activity with its inevitable growth.

Acts 15:36 And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, [*and see*] how they do.

The Gospel defines and confirms its universal terms.

The question of the basis of salvation has been resolved.

These next few verses review the beginning of a second organized foreign work during which the Jerusalem letter will be delivered.

Acts 15:37 And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.

Acts 15:38 But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

Acts 15:39 And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;

In this case both men were correct. Mark had good qualities which Barnabas saw. Paul saw weakness too perilous to risk failure on this second missionary journey. The result was two mission works instead of one: the enlarging of the total missionary forces and a rapid expansion of the Gospel.

Acts 15:40 And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

Barnabas & Mark never appear again in Acts. Paul becomes the central Apostle.

The love of God burst out of Jerusalem to Samaria, Cyrene, to Antioch and then flooded out to all heathenism to the barren city of Rome the capital of the world. Luke traces men as to contribute to the Gospel progress. Paul most ably taught the world visions and implemented a strategy for world conquest.

Acts 15:41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

Sources: theWord.com, Coffman, BW Johnson, McGarvey, Clarke, World Conquest