



## Acts 15:1-21 - Can I get a Witness?

### Wk. 44 "The Jerusalem Council - The Gospel of Grace and Christian Unity" By Mike Clark 07/30/2023

**Acts 15:1-21** *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup> So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

*<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

*<sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,*

*<sup>16</sup> "After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
and I will restore it,*

*<sup>17</sup> that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from of old.'*

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."*



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## INTRODUCTION –

Acts 15 is a central chapter in terms of both its location in Acts and the theological issue it presents.

Interestingly, Acts 1-14 has 12,385 words and Acts 15-28 has about 12,502 words, so we are right in the middle of the book. We've reached the halfway mark.

Throughout church history, the church's leaders have met together to settle doctrinal issues.

There have been 7 councils in the first few centuries of church history:

The 2 most significant:

1. Nicea (325)
2. Chalcedon (451)

Both were about the person and nature of Christ.

Both condemned erroneous teaching and clarified biblical teaching.

The Jerusalem Council is an event that Luke attaches the highest importance, it's really as epoch-making, in his eyes, as the conversion of Paul or the preaching of the gospel to Cornelius and his household.

Acts 15 is a very important passage of Scripture.

**BECAUSE** this is the early church's first major doctrinal problem that they had to settle.

It regards salvation itself:

What must a person do to be saved?

Is salvation by Law or Grace?

And this is still something Christians have trouble with.

This council should have settled this issue once and for all, but people still insert the law into the Gospel of grace to this day.

False teachers have plagued the church throughout its history. They are emissaries of Satan. Both Peter and Paul warned of false teacher's influence on the church.

*2 Peter 2:1 - But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*



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*Acts 20:29-30 – <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

The most destructive of heresies is the teaching that salvation is by human works because it damns people to hell.

In this text, it's Jewish legalism and ritualism that is attempted to be enforced on Gentile converts.

**BUT**, Paul and Barnabas are going to argue strongly that works cannot be included in salvation, but is wholly of grace.

**THE PROBLEM** was that there was beginning to be a massive entrance of Gentiles into the church. It was very disturbing to the Jewish believers.

Many of them believed that to become Christians, they must first become Jewish proselytes because they saw Christianity as the culmination of Judaism.

The Jews thought that Gentiles were short-circuiting the process and becoming Christians without first becoming Jewish proselytes.

This shocked and overwhelmed them.

They could not conceive that pagans could simply enter the church and immediately be on an equal basis with the Jewish believers.

It seemed unfair to those who had devoted their entire lives to keeping God's law!

Plus, they feared that it would erode away their Jewish culture & traditions.

**SO:** This was an issue of inclusion and equality.

Well, with all of those concerns, conflict was inevitable!

As long as the Gentile converts were few & were already Jewish proselytes, the issue could be avoided.

**BUT** by the time of the Jerusalem Council, the matter came to a head.

**NOTICE:** The question was **NOT WHETHER** God wanted to save Gentiles, **BUT HOW** they were to be saved.



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#### Could they enter the Kingdom of God directly, without first coming through Judaism?

#### THAT WAS THE QUESTION DEALT WITH IN THIS COUNCIL

This is no small question!

Of all the heresies that could creep into the church, this is the most damning, because it teaches a false Gospel.

It misleads people about the way of salvation!

The progress of the council breaks down into 4 sections: Dissension, Discussion, Decision, Development. Today we'll look at 3 of the 4 sections.

#### 1. The Dissension (vs 1-5)

*Acts 15:1-5* But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup> So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."

When Paul and Barnabas returned home from their 1<sup>st</sup> missionary journey, they arrived home to find some men teaching the Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised in order to be saved.

These men came from Judea and were carrying this spiritual plague to Antioch and they are essentially telling them that their salvation was invalid.

These might have been the men mentioned in –

*Galatians 2:4* - Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery.



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These self-appointed guardians of legalism arrived to straighten out the Antioch believer's theology.

Their teaching and actions posed a grave threat to the truth of the gospel as well as to the unity of the church.

These teachers are later called "Judaizers" (legalists).

Paul talks further about this in Galatians 2:11-12 when Peter refused to eat with Gentiles and then in Galatians 5:2-6. So, these teachings & actions prove a grave threat to the Gospel!

And so, the danger of a split between Gentiles and Jews was real!

These men were causing an uproar in the Antioch church. Gentiles who thought themselves to have been saved already through faith alone in Christ were now being informed that their salvation was invalid!

And some of us may have experienced that in our own day, whether it's a works-based system like Roman Catholicism or the cults like Jehovah's witnesses or Mormonism.

People from these systems may have tried to tell you that you can't get to heaven without works.

Well Paul and Barnabas were not happy! Like the good shepherds that they were, they came to the defense of their flock.

This was a serious & significant matter. This was driving a wedge of false teaching in the church.

So they had a serious debate about the matter. They had a great dissension with the legalists. They fought furiously for the truth and against the wedge being driven between Jew and Gentile in the church.

Now, we don't know the details of the argument, but it probably went along this line of reasoning:

- Circumcision was the sign of the covenant with Abraham
- It predated the Law of Moses
- To be among the people of God, a person has to partake of the sign of the Abrahamic covenant & thereby be tied to the promises made to him.



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- If anything in the Law should be followed, it should be that sign.

#### Well, Paul and Barnabas took another view:

- Let the Gentiles in without circumcision.
- Gentiles do not need to become Jewish in order to become Christians
  - This is exactly what Paul argues in Galatians!
- Salvation is by grace alone apart from the works of the Law
  - Abraham was saved BEFORE circumcision!

The debate is significant enough that they realize that one community cannot resolve it alone.

SO, they call for a meeting with the church leaders in Jerusalem, the God-ordained leaders of the church, that is the apostles & elders.

So Paul and Barnabas and some others, which possibly included Titus according to Galatians 2, head for Jerusalem.

ON their way up to Jerusalem, they shared the news about Gentile conversions with other Christians in Phoenicia & Samaria.

These were largely Hellenistic Jews who were more open to Gentile conversion which resulted in more joy!

Paul and Barnabas were building support as they went. Not only the Antioch church but also the brothers from Phoenicia and Samaria supported the apostolic doctrine of salvation by faith alone for both Jews and Gentiles.

It must have been a moving scene! Picture Paul and Barnabas telling all that God had accomplished, their struggles and triumphs for the cause of Christ.

But not everyone was pleased with Paul & Barnabas' account!

Some converted Pharisees were appalled that Gentiles were not observing the Law of Moses.

Paul had similar roots, but he doesn't share their view of things.

Although both groups manifested legalism, these believing Pharisees were different from the Judaizers of verse 1.



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More than likely the men of verse 1 were not true believers since they taught that circumcision was required for salvation.

Those who believe that ceremony or ritual plays a part in salvation have denied the truth that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the including, including circumcision as Romans 3:28 tells us.

But these pharisees are described as having believed which implies that they didn't argue that circumcision was necessary for salvation, but that believers were still obligated to keep the law.

To them circumcision and keeping the law were not a means of salvation, but obedience required after salvation.

So, these Pharisees make 2 demands:

1. Keep circumcision
2. Keep the Law of Moses

They are arguing that such compliance is of divine necessity. Under the Mosaic Covenant, they would be right! They would have to become Jewish proselytes.

They were still committed to the ceremonial law, which had been set aside in Christ.

They were much like the weaker brothers of Romans 14:1-10, who held to dietary laws, rituals, and sabbath codes for conscience's sake.

They had not yet realized the liberating truth that the ceremonial and ritual shadows of the Old Covenant had passed away.

Pharisees, unlike their rivals the Sadducees, could become Christians and retain many of their distinctive beliefs. They believed in the literal interpretation of Scripture, a literal resurrection, life after death, and the existence of angels.

But the council will deliberate and suggest that a new era with new means of administration had come - A New Covenant!

New Covenant believers are freed from the unbearable burden of keeping all the Old Testament ritual.

We saw this back in Acts 10:13-15 and it's here in Acts 15:10.





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And yet, at the same time 1 Corinthians 9:21 tells us we are not without the Law, but under the law of Christ."

There is no license to sin in Christian liberty.

#### 2. Discussion (v 6-18)

*Acts 15:6-18 - <sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

*<sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,*

*<sup>16</sup> "After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
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<sup>17</sup> that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from of old."*

**So, the apostles and elders meet about this issue. We don't know how many of the original apostles were present.**

**But after receiving the men from Antioch, they all came together PRIVATELY to discuss the matter. I want you to notice that this was not an open church meeting.**

**The LEADERS, not the congregation, would decide this explosive and potentially divisive matter.**

**AND EVEN THEN they could only reach a decision "after much debate."**





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**Luke doesn't satisfy our curiosity by giving us an account of that meeting.**

**We can only imagine what it must have been like with learned and godly men passionately pleading their cases.**

**Luke only resumes the account when the leaders called the congregation together to hear their leader's decision.**

**That decision was announced in a series of speeches by Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James.**

**NOTICE: Each one of them expounded the truth that salvation is wholly God's sovereign grace through faith, apart from any law-keeping.**

**Taken together, these speeches constitute one of the strongest defenses of that truth in Scripture.**

**Acts 15 has well been said that it is "The Magna Carta, Latin for "Great Charter of Freedoms," of the Christian Church."**

**As these men rise to speak, they make the case that salvation is wholly of grace by several proofs:**

**Peter is the first speaker and told them that past revelation proves salvation is by grace alone (v. 7).**

**Peter begins by taking the assembled believers back to the early days of the church, going back possibly a decade in time.**

**He reminded them that God made a choice, that through his ministry the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.**

**The issue was settled when God saved Cornelius and his household apart from circumcision, law-keeping, and ritual.**

**His point was simple and direct – the legalists had no right to require of the Gentiles what God had not! The matter was already divinely settled.**

**Peter then declares that the gift of the Spirit proves that salvation is by grace.**

**Peter skillfully anticipates and refutes a possible objection to his first point.**



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The Judaizers could have argued that since Cornelius and the others did not meet their legalistic requirements for salvation, they couldn't really have been saved.

Peter demolishes that potential argument by pointing out that God, who knows the heart, bore witness that their salvation was genuine.

He did so by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to the Jewish Christians.

What's important here is that God gave the Spirit without any circumcision being done. God accepted Gentiles as they were when the Spirit came.

The theological implication here is that the Spirit would not have come to indwell Gentiles unless they are completely accepted and cleansed.

The gift of the Holy Spirit belongs only to the truly redeemed.

**Romans 8:9** - You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Now in case someone raised the question whether they did receive the Spirit, Peter went on to remind them that God made no distinction between us and them.

The Gentiles received the same phenomenon, speaking in tongues or languages, as the Jewish believers had at Pentecost.

That proved they had received the Spirit, which in turn affirmed that their salvation was genuine.

Next, Peter argues that the cleansing of the Gentile believer's hearts by faith alone offers a further proof of salvation by grace.

Those purified of their sins are obviously saved, and God doesn't cleanse people who are not truly saved.

Such cleansing only comes by God's grace. Since the Gentile believers had already been cleansed of their sins by grace alone, what more could the law and ritual add?

The issue of sin had been dealt with and justification granted.

Peter then declares that the inability of the Law to save proves salvation is by grace.



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Peter warns the Judaizers not to put God to the test. It wasn't their place to challenge or question God's gracious gospel.

The idea of testing God is a strong warning similar to Exodus 17:2 when the people of Israel were testing God by complaining about not having water.

Those who are complaining can't trust God and follow God's way, so they will test God's goodness. It's God and God's way that is being challenged.

He pointed out the foolishness of placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither their fathers nor they had been able to bear.

The description of the law as a heavy, chafing yoke was a fitting one.

Jesus described the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees in –

*Matthew 23:4 - They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger.*

And I'm sure Peter had learned to rejoice in His Lord and Savior's easy yoke.

*Matthew 11:29-30 - <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

It was foolish of the legalists to expect Gentiles to shoulder a burden that they themselves found too heavy to bear and rejoiced to be free from.

It was equally wrong to impose on the Gentiles what hadn't worked for the Jews.

Not one of Peter's Jewish listeners had been saved by the law, purified from their sins by the law, or received the Holy Spirit by keeping the law.

Since keeping the law couldn't do any of those vital things for them, why require it of the Gentiles?

Peter closed his speech with a ringing affirmation of the glorious truth that salvation is solely by grace.

We believe, he declared that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, in the same way as they also are.



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Peter's theme is grace and grace alone. Whether Jews or Gentiles, there has always been and always will be only one way of salvation!

The apostle did not believe in self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is more dangerous than some people's opens sins. Speaking about self-righteousness, Jesus said -

**Matthew 21:31** - "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.

Peter takes the crown from off the head of man in all respects and gives all glory to the grace of God.

He extols God, the Gracious Sovereign, who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy and who will have compassion on whom He will have compassion.

The world says do your best and it will be ok with you. The world says we all must live as well as we can, and in the end, it will be well with us. Everyone is born a Pharisee.

No, away with such thinking! We believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we will be saved.

Not through our good works, not through anything that we do, not by merit of anything which we feel or perform, or promise to perform, but by grace, by the free favor of God.

If you have lived a good, moral life, thank God for it but don't trust in your morality to justify you before a holy God. You have to be saved the same way as the worst of criminals is saved.

Because in heart, if not in life, you've sinned in the same way.

We are saved by the gracious act of a bountiful God! Saved by a gift, not by wages.

We're saved by God's love, not by our own merits or works. Salvation is of grace and of the Lord from first to last!



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Those who preach or teach any other way except that of trusting in the grace of God through Jesus Christ alone preach another gospel and as Paul says, let him be anathema, let him be accursed, let him be damned.

The multitude are now silent because they are unable to contradict Peter's points.

Peter now disappears from the narrative of Acts.

And now Paul and Barnabas took the stage and would add further evidence which could only support Peter's argument.

They would argue that the fact of miracles proves that salvation is by grace in verse 12.

They began relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Those miraculous signs and wonders confirmed that Paul and Barnabas were God's spokesman.

*2 Corinthians 12:12 – The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.*

Paul and Barnabas taught salvation by grace back as we saw back in Acts 13:38-39 and the miracles God performed through them confirmed the truthfulness of that teaching.

*Hebrews 2:3-4 - How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, <sup>4</sup> while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*

In contrast, the Judaizers could have produced no miracles to support their teaching.

God doesn't confirm false teaching by granting miracles, which is so applicable in today's church to the many so-called miracle workers with aberrant theology.

I mean if God were to do perform these same kinds of miracles and wonders today, He certainly wouldn't do it through people with bad theology.



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Like Peter's arguments, the evidence presented by Paul and Barnabas was undeniable.

Their teaching that salvation was by grace alone was stamped unarguably with God's approval.

The eyes of all now turn to James, the brother of our Lord.

James then gives the decision on the matter: Why James?

He's head of the Jerusalem Church (12:17). James was widely respected and if the early church were organized as a kind of Nazarene Sanhedrin, James would have been the president.

The church's readiness to recognize his leadership was due more to his personal character and record than to his blood relationship to the Lord.

When he said listen to me, they listened.

James spoke up and gave the final speech and demonstrated that prophetic promise proves salvation is by grace.

He reminded his listeners that Simeon, which is the Hebrew or Aramaic form of Peter's personal name, had related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

Now in the OT the nations or Gentiles stand in contrast to the people, that is Israel.

**Deut. 14:2** - For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

But notice that when James uses the same two terms here, he doesn't speak of God's taking a people in contrast to the Gentiles, but of his taking a people consisting of the Gentiles.

What James states concisely here is implied through the NT.

**1 Peter 2:9** - But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.



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**Titus 2:14** - Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

James summarized Peter's point – that God had saved Gentiles by grace years earlier and he then reinforced that point by noting that with this the words of the Prophets agree.

The OT foretold that God would save Gentiles, and James quoted Amos 9:11-12 to prove it.

His quotation differs from the Masoretic text of the Hebrew OT.

Some have speculated that he quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, yet his quotation doesn't exactly match the Septuagint either.

But James, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is certainly giving the sense of the passage as God intended it to be understood, as NT writers often do with OT texts.

James says that according to Amos, God is going to rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen.

He's going to rebuild its ruins and restore it and the rest of mankind will seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.

James's point is not just about this one passage from Amos, rather, this passage reflects what the prophets teach in general, or what the book of the Prophets as a whole teaches.

James is stressing fulfillment, for the prophets agree with what Peter has described.

So, Gentiles will be saved as Gentiles, without first becoming Jews, or else verse 17 would make no sense.

The passage in Amos clearly speaks of those outside the covenant community of Israel being saved, with no mention of their first becoming Jewish proselytes.

James reassured his Jewish audience that the inclusion of Gentiles into the church didn't abrogate God's plan for Israel.





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The goal of this rebuilding work is to allow the rest of humanity, not just Jews, to seek God.

This fulfills not only the promise to David about his line but also a commitment to Abraham that through his seed the world would experience blessing.

So, James' 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.

The Gentile mission then is the work of God: He has made it known in advance from of old, that is these things were revealed and now He's brought it to pass.

His speech is a fitting conclusion to the speeches in defense of salvation by grace.

Peter began by stressing that Gentiles in the past were saved by grace alone and James concluded by showing that that will also be the case in the future.

Therefore, Gentile salvation in the present must also be by grace alone.

### 3. Decision (v.19-21)

*Acts 15:19-21 - <sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."*

2 pronged:

- A. Jews are not to trouble the Gentiles
- B. Gentiles are not to trouble the Jews

### A. Jews are not to trouble the Gentiles (v. 19)

The evidence presented for proving that salvation was by grace alone was conclusive.

Jews are NOT to tell Gentiles that they have to be circumcised or to keep ANY other law in order to be saved.

Keeping the law & observing rituals are not requirements for salvation.



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When he rules that Jewish believers should not trouble Gentile converts, he repeats in different terms Peter's protest against placing an intolerable yoke on those converts' necks.

SO: The Judaizers were to be FORBIDDEN to "trouble" the Gentiles by teaching anything contrary to salvation by grace alone.

SO: That issue is settled! This is a major breakthrough on a major issue that troubled the early church.

This should have settled the issue once and for all, but sadly this is a problem that persists to this very day, though in different forms.

#### B. Gentiles are not to trouble the Jews (v. 20-21)

Now, why would the apostles & elders write instructions to the Gentiles?  
What was the danger James anticipated might occur among the Gentiles that he needed to prevent?

The Gentiles, reveling in their freedom in Christ from the requirements of the Law of Moses, would pressure Jewish believers to exercise that same liberty and violate their consciences.

They might cause them to be offended, and to even stumble into sin. They might cause an uproar and division in the church.

SO: They are to be SENSITIVE to Jewish sensibilities!  
(Not everyone is at liberty to practice all matters of freedom)

Rom 14:13-23 – Debatable issues (not directly addressed in Scripture)

v. 14 – Some see it as wrong, some don't

v. 18 – Serving Christ in this way is acceptable to God & approved by men

v. 19 – Pursue practices that promote peace (Acts 15)

v. 20 – not wrong to eat, but it is wrong to eat in certain circumstances

That's the approach in Acts 15

There are 4 practices that James tells the Gentiles to abstain from:

NOTICE THOUGH: these 4 practices were violations of the Mosaic Law.

ALL are ceremonial practices for external purity. (you'll see in a moment)



## Acts 15:1-21 - Can I get a Witness?

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**BUT they were not requiring the Gentiles to keep them as under the Law**

**WHY?**

**B/C they're not!**

**That's just been determined! (v. 19)**

**NO There was something altogether at stake:**

**2 Reasons for it:**

**1. UNITY – so as to not offend their Jewish brothers & sisters in Christ  
to do these would be to ABUSE their freedom in Christ**

***1 Pet 2:16-17 -- 16 Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. 17 Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood.***

**2. CREDIBILITY – with unbelieving Jews they sought to win to Christ**

**4 practices:**

**1. Things contaminated by idols**

**What does this refer to? - Food first offered to idols and then sold in temple butcher shops**

**Idolatry was a repulsive, blasphemous matter to Jews. The OT was replete with warnings against it.**

**SO: Jews sought to avoid any association with it whatsoever! Including not eating meat that had been offered to idols. EVEN THOUGH – not actual idolatry!**

**This was a serious issue to the early church! (cf. Rom. 14:1-12, 1 Cor. 8:4-13)**

**2. Fornication**

**This describes sexual sin in general - *Pornea* - BDAG – “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.”**

**PROBABLY a reference to all of the irregular marriages listed in Lev. 18.  
Particularly: marriages within degrees of blood-relationship or affinity that was forbidden to Jews in the Mosaic Law**



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SO, the issue here is to Jewish sensibilities. BE CAREFUL to do nothing offensive to Jews in this regard.

IF that interpretation is correct, then all 4 of these are related to ceremonial laws in Leviticus 17-18.

3 of which are dietary issues that could inhibit Jew-Gentile common meals (cf. Gal 2).

3. what is strangled – eating meat without blood drained from it first

4. blood – eating it.

SO: these last 2 are dietary laws specifically addressed in the OT.

They are not imposing these as laws on the Gentile Christians to become Kosher, BUT as catalysts for unity and fellowship.

To abstain would be a courteous and temporary concession to Jewish consciences, ESPECIALLY since circumcision had been declared unnecessary, THEREBY securing the truth of the Gospel and the equality of all men.

SO, the abstention being recommended here is not to be understood as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others (Jewish converts) who still regarded such foods and relationships as unlawful and wrong before God.

It just offended the sensibilities of Jews. YOU and I must be sensitive to such things!

Would this list make much sense to most churches today?

No – this was a specific situation that needed specific things addressed.

These do not form a list for all churches for all times.

If James were to write a letter to the church today, I wonder what kinds of things he might include? (I think this would vary even from church to church!)

Finally, James urged that this policy would not work to the detriment of Israel's mission in the Gentile world; there was still ample opportunity for Gentiles to learn the law of Moses.

It was read publicly every sabbath in synagogues throughout the civilized world.



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But with regard to Gentile converts to Christianity, Moses, so to speak, would suffer no loss, in failing to obtain the allegiance of those who had never been his.

This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the believing Pharisees, in whose eyes it was specially important that the whole Torah should be taught among the Gentiles.

This, James said, was being attended to already by the synagogues.

Well we've seen how Peter, Barnabas, Paul and James have made the strong case that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

**Ephesians 2:8-10** - <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are saved by grace and not by works, but for good works.

And some of those good works are those things done in love in preference for another believer and making accommodations not to offend our brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so may we be faithful to the high calling that the Lord has called each of us to.

PRAYER –

Lord God, thank you for time in your Word this morning.

Father, we're thankful that salvation is by grace through faith; and even faith is a gift from You. We can't believe on our own, we rely solely on You to turn our hearts to You.

Lord I pray for those who have never trusted in Jesus alone, help them to accept the free gift of salvation, and not add anything to it, and to rest in the freeness of it; and to know that salvation is not by works, but it's for good works which You have prepared beforehand that we should walk in them, once we have truly been saved.

If that's you today, and you have understood that salvation is all of grace, but have never trusted in Jesus alone for your salvation, I plead with you - Go to Him at this moment with your soul and may God enable you to obtain complete salvation.



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If you are led to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter how black the past may have been for you, the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse you from all sin.

I pray that you will come in faith to the cross and that God's grace compels you to enter into a state of full dependence upon Jesus and into a state of salvation.

We pray in Jesus name, Amen.

**BENEDICTION – Hebrews 13:20-21 - <sup>20</sup> Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, <sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.**