



ACTS 15

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL: A TURNING POINT IN CHURCH HISTORY

As the gospel spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea into Gentile nations, a significant conflict arose in the early church centered around how Gentiles should enter the Christian community. Should they be required to follow the Jewish law, including circumcision? Or could they simply come without adhering to Jewish laws and customs? Both groups agreed that Gentiles are part of God's plan but a resolution for this conflict would be critical for the unity and growth of the early church.

The tension came to a head in a city named Antioch. Some men from Judea, representing the law-keeping faction, debated Paul and Barnabas. The issue had grown so contentious that an appeal was made to get help in settling this matter once and for all. This resulted in a gathering known as the Jerusalem Council between those ministering to the Gentiles (Paul and Barnabas) and the Jewish leadership (represented by Peter and James). It took place around 49 AD in Jerusalem and marked a pivotal moment in the formation of the early church.

For the reader of Acts, the Jerusalem Council signals a major narrative shift in the book. Following the pattern set in Acts 1:8, the first twelve chapters focus on the church's growth in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. From Acts 13 onward, the gospel begins to spread to the ends of the earth. After chapter 15, Peter and the Jerusalem church fade into the background while an account of Paul's missionary journeys comes to the forefront. Before the gospel can spread further, one crucial question must be answered: How can Gentiles enter the church?

The meeting began well. Paul and Barnabas were warmly welcomed by the church and its leaders (Acts 15:4). But the conflict quickly surfaced. After much discussion, Peter stood to speak. He recalled “the early days,” referring to his experience with Cornelius, a Gentile who received the gospel (Acts 10). Though only five chapters back in Acts, a full decade had passed since that event. Peter reminded them all that Gentiles are “saved through the grace of our Lord Jesus,” not through the law. At this, the room fell silent (Acts 15:11–12).

Paul and Barnabas then shared stories of God’s miraculous work among the Gentiles. Finally, James, the half-brother of Jesus, and a respected leader of the Jerusalem church, spoke up. Known as “James the Just” for his strict adherence to the Jewish law, he was likely expected to side with the law-keeping group. But instead, quoting Amos 9:11–12, James declared his judgment: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19).

With that, the decision was made. Gentile believers were not required to follow the Jewish law to be part of the church. God’s grace is sufficient for Jew and Gentile alike.

A letter was written to communicate the council’s decision, urging Gentile believers to be considerate of their Jewish brothers and sisters by avoiding certain practices that could cause offense. This letter, carried to Antioch by trusted messengers, is the only formal decree recorded in the book of Acts.

The importance of this moment cannot be overstated. The Jerusalem Council provided a powerful example of resolving conflict in the church:

- Believers welcomed one another in fellowship.
- They shared stories of how God was changing the lives of people.
- They gathered to discuss and debate the matter honestly.
- They listened to personal testimony and reflected on scripture.
- And finally, they reached a decision that promoted unity and advanced the mission.

The mission to the Gentiles now had the clear and unified support of the church leadership in Jerusalem. Paul and his companions could continue their ministry without the burden of debating circumcision and law-keeping as they spread the message of the gospel throughout the Roman empire.