

The Jerusalem Council



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 15; Gal. 2:11–13; Exod. 12:43–49; Rom. 3:30; Lev. 18:30; Rev. 2:14, 20.*

Memory Text: “‘We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are’” (*Acts 15:11, NIV*).

After more than two years, Paul and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch. Because the whole church there had been involved in sending them out as missionaries, it was natural that they would give a report to the church. The report's emphasis, however, was not on what they had accomplished but on what God Himself had done through them.

The object of the report, of course, was the success of the mission among the Gentiles, though many Jews had also come to faith. Since the episode of Cornelius, however, the conversion of uncircumcised Gentiles had become an issue (*Acts 11:1–18*), but now that large numbers of them were being admitted to church membership, things became particularly complicated. Many believers in Jerusalem were not happy. For them, Gentiles would need first to be circumcised, that is, to become Jewish proselytes in order to become part of God's people and have fellowship with them.

Acts 15 is all about the Gentile problem reaching a critical level and about the church working together to find a solution. The Jerusalem Council was a turning point in the history of the apostolic church in relation to its worldwide mission.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 25.

The Point at Issue

From the beginning, the church at Antioch consisted of both (Hellenistic) Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles (*Acts 11:19–21, Gal. 2:11–13*) who apparently lived in peaceful fellowship with each other. That fellowship, however, was shattered by the arrival of a group of believers from Jerusalem.

Read Acts 15:1–5. What was the problem the church was facing?

Traditionally called Judaizers, those individuals from Judea were possibly the same ones identified in verse 5 as believing Pharisees. The presence of Pharisees in the church should not surprise us, as Paul himself had been a Pharisee prior to his conversion (*Phil. 3:5*). This group seems to have gone to Antioch on their own initiative (*Acts 15:24*), though another episode that also took place in Antioch some time later shows that most Jews, including the apostles, were not very comfortable with the presence of uncircumcised Gentiles in the church (*Gal. 2:11–13*).

In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul does not speak positively about the Judaizers, dubbing them as troublemakers (*Gal. 1:7, 5:10, ESV*) and “false brothers” (*Gal. 2:4, ESV*) whose real motive was to undermine the spiritual freedom of the gospel and bring the Gentile converts into the slavery of legalism.

Their point was rather simple: unless the Gentiles were circumcised and kept all the other Jewish ceremonial laws, they could not be saved. Salvation—so they believed—was to be found only within God’s covenant community and, according to the Old Testament, there was no other way to become part of God’s chosen people except through circumcision (*Gen. 17:9–14, Exod. 12:48*). In short, Gentiles could be saved only if they first became Jewish proselytes.

Paul and Barnabas, of course, could not agree with such requirements, which went against the very nature of the gospel. The aggressive approach of the Judean visitors, however, generated a heated discussion; the word in Acts 15:2 (*stasis*) has the sense of “conflict” or “dissension.” Yet, the matter was too important to be dealt with at the local level only. The unity of the church was at stake. The brethren of Antioch then decided to send a number of delegates to Jerusalem, including Paul and Barnabas, to find a solution.

Put yourself in the position of the Judaizers. What arguments could you make for your case?

Circumcision

One of the great issues in this conflict was circumcision. This was not a human institution (*contrast Matt. 15:2, 9*). Rather, it had been commanded by God Himself as a sign of His covenant with Abraham's descendants as His chosen people (*Gen. 17:9–14*).

Read Exodus 12:43–49. In addition to Israelite males, who else was supposed to be circumcised?

The blessings of the covenant were not restricted to born Israelites but were extended to any slave or sojourning stranger who wished to experience it, as long as he were to be circumcised. After circumcision, the stranger would have the same status before God as the born Israelite: “He shall be as a native of the land” (*Exod. 12:48, NKJV*).

Circumcision, therefore, was indispensable (for a male) to be a full member of God's covenant community. And because Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, it seemed natural that the Judaizers would insist that no Gentile could benefit from His salvation without first becoming a Jew.

Read Romans 3:30, 1 Corinthians 7:18, and Galatians 3:28, 5:6. What was Paul's understanding of circumcision?

By saying that no Gentile could be saved without first joining Judaism, these men were mixing up two distinct concepts: covenant and salvation. Being a member of God's covenant community did not guarantee salvation (*Jer. 4:4, 9:25*). In addition, Abraham himself was saved (justified) by faith, which happened before, and not because, he was circumcised (*Rom. 4:9–13*). Salvation has always been by faith, whereas the covenant was a gracious provision through which God would make Himself and His saving plan known to the entire world. Israel had been chosen for this purpose (*Gen. 12:1–3*).

The problem, however, was that by too closely associating covenant and salvation, these believers came to view circumcision as meritorious. God's saving grace, however, does not operate where human works operate. So, to impose circumcision on believing Gentiles as a means of salvation was to distort the gospel's truth (*Gal. 1:7, 2:3–5*), nullify God's grace (*Gal. 2:21*), and make Jesus of no benefit (*Gal. 5:2*). Furthermore, it was a denial of the universal character of salvation (*Col. 3:11, Titus 2:11*). Paul could never agree to this type of thinking.

What's the danger of thinking that salvation comes from merely being a member of the right church?

The Debate

Read Acts 15:7–11. What was Peter’s contribution to the debate in Jerusalem?

Luke, of course, does not report all the proceedings of the meeting. It would be interesting to know, for example, the supporting arguments of the Judaizers (*Acts 15:5*), as well as Paul’s and Barnabas’s responses (*Acts 15:12*). The fact that we have only Peter’s and James’s speeches shows the importance of these men among the apostles.

In his speech, Peter addressed the apostles and elders, reminding them of his experience with Cornelius years before. In essence, his argument was the same one that he had used before the brethren in Jerusalem (*Acts 11:4–17*). God Himself had shown His approval of Cornelius’s conversion (even though he was an uncircumcised Gentile) by giving him and his household the same gift of the Spirit that He had given the apostles at Pentecost.

In His divine providence, God had used no less a person than Peter to convince the Judean believers that He makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles with regard to salvation. Even if they lacked the purifying benefits of Old Covenant rules and regulations, the believing Gentiles could no longer be considered unclean, because God Himself had cleansed their hearts. Peter’s final statement sounded very similar to what we would expect from Paul: “ ‘We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are’ ” (*Acts 15:11, NIV*).

Read Acts 15:13–21. What solution to the Gentile problem did James propose?

James’s speech suggests he was in a position of authority (*compare with Acts 12:17; 21:18; Gal. 2:9, 12*). Irrespective of what he might have understood by the rebuilding of David’s tabernacle, which in Amos’s prophecy refers to the restoration of David’s dynasty (*Amos 9:11, 12*), James’s main purpose was to demonstrate that God had already provided for Gentiles to join, in a sense, a reconstituted “people of God,” and thus they could be incorporated into Israel.

Because of this, his decision was that no further restrictions should be imposed on Gentile converts, other than those that normally would be required from foreigners who wished to live in the land of Israel.

The Apostolic Decree

Read Acts 15:28, 29. What four prohibitions did the council decide to impose on Gentile converts?

The main issue for which the council had been convened was satisfactorily resolved. Because salvation is by grace, believing Gentiles were exempted from circumcision when they joined the church. Yet, they should abstain from four things: (1) meat offered in sacrifice to idols in pagan rituals and then served in a temple feast or sold in the market; (2) blood consumption; (3) meat of strangled animals, that is, meat whose blood had not been drained; and (4) sexual immorality in its various forms.

Most Christians today treat the dietary prohibitions (prohibitions 1–3) as temporary recommendations. Because those things were particularly repulsive to Jews, the prohibitions—they argue—were intended only to bridge the gap between Jewish and Gentile believers. It also often is claimed that all other Old Testament laws, including the Levitical food laws (*Leviticus 11*) and the Sabbath commandment (*Exod. 20:8–11*), which are absent from the list, are no longer binding for Christians.

The so-called apostolic decree, however, was neither temporary nor a new code of Christian ethics that excluded everything else related to the Old Testament. In fact, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 15:28*), the apostles and elders of the church reproduced the regulations of *Leviticus 17–18* only concerning Israel's resident aliens.

In the context of *Leviticus*, these prohibitions mean the renunciation of paganism. Any foreigner who wished to live in Israel had to abdicate those pagan practices to which he or she had grown accustomed (*Lev. 18:30*). Likewise, any believing Gentile who wished to join the church was required to take a firm stand against paganism.

This, however, was just the first step. Once in, he or she naturally was expected to do God's will by obeying those commandments that are universal, pre-Mosaic, and not intrinsically ceremonial, such as the Sabbath (*Gen. 2:1–3*) and following the differentiation between clean and unclean food (*Gen. 7:2*).

That the decree was not temporary is clear, for example, from *Revelation 2:14, 20*, where the first and the last prohibitions are repeated, implicitly contemplating the other two, as well. In fact, historical evidence shows that the decree was still considered normative by Christians long after the New Testament period.

When disputes arise, how can we learn to sit together, to listen to each other, and in a spirit of respect and humility work through the issues?

The Letter From Jerusalem

Read Acts 15:22–29. What additional measures were taken by the Jerusalem church concerning the council’s decision?

The first measure was to write a letter to the Gentile believers in order to inform them of what had been decided. The letter, written in the name of the apostles and elders of Jerusalem, was an official document that reflected the ascendancy of the Jerusalem church—certainly because of the apostles’ leadership—over the other Christian communities. Written in A.D. 49, which is the most probable date of the council, this letter is one of the earliest Christian documents we have.

The Jerusalem church also decided to appoint two delegates, Judas Barsabas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch; their assignment was to carry the letter and confirm its content.

Read Acts 15:30–33. How did the church in Antioch react to the letter?

When the letter was read, the church was filled with great joy because of the encouraging message: circumcision was not to be required from Gentile converts. They also raised no objection to the demands of the letter (the fourfold apostolic decree). The first most serious division in the early church was thus reconciled, at least in theory.

At the close of the council, Paul’s gospel was fully recognized by the church leaders in Jerusalem, who extended to him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship as a sign of acceptance and trust (*Gal. 2:9*). Yet, those Jewish Christians who continued to live by the Jewish law would still find it highly problematic to have table fellowship with the Gentiles, who, for all intents and purposes, did remain ritually unclean.

This issue is shown, for example, by the incident involving Peter in Galatians 2:11–14. “Even the disciples,” says Ellen G. White, “were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 197.

Be honest with yourself: how difficult is it for you to have fellowship with believers from other races, cultures, and even social classes? How can you be purged of this decidedly anti-gospel attitude?

Further Thought: “The Jewish converts generally were not inclined to move as rapidly as the providence of God opened the way. From the result of the apostles’ labors among the Gentiles it was evident that the converts among the latter people would far exceed the Jewish converts in number. The Jews feared that if the restrictions and ceremonies of their law were not made obligatory upon the Gentiles as a condition of church fellowship, the national peculiarities of the Jews, which had hitherto kept them distinct from all other people, would finally disappear from among those who received the gospel message.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 189.

“The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally allowed their minds to revert to the peculiar privileges of the Jews as a nation. When they saw the Christian church departing from the ceremonies and traditions of Judaism, and perceived that the peculiar sacredness with which the Jewish customs had been invested would soon be lost sight of in the light of the new faith, many grew indignant with Paul as the one who had, in a large measure, caused this change. Even the disciples were not all prepared to accept willingly the decision of the council. Some were zealous for the ceremonial law, and they regarded Paul with disfavor because they thought that his principles in regard to the obligations of the Jewish law were lax.”—Page 197.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go back to Monday’s final question. How do we understand the fact that belonging to the “right” church does not guarantee salvation? For example, certainly ancient Israel was the “right church,” but that does not mean everyone in it was saved. If being in the true church does not guarantee salvation, then what is the advantage of being a part of it?
- 2 How to accept uncircumcised Gentiles into the community of faith was one of the first most important administrative issues faced by the early church. What might be some comparable issues in our church today, and what does the example of Acts 15 teach us on how to deal with them?
- 3 In class, have some people take the position of the Jews who insisted that Gentiles must become Jewish proselytes first before joining the church, which they saw (and rightly so) as an extension of the covenant promises made to Israel. What are their arguments, and how can you respond? How could a debate like this show us why issues that today seem so clear-cut could, in a different time, seem much more difficult than they do to us now?

One More Question

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Byongju Lee looked with puzzlement at the poem that someone had texted him. He didn't recognize the phone number. Many people might have deleted the message as a wrong number, but not Lee. He texted back, "Who is this?"

His cell phone rang. "Who is this?" a woman's voice asked. "You texted me first," Lee replied. It turned out that the caller had wanted to text the poem to a friend but had misdialled the number by a single digit.

Many people might have hung up at that point, but not Lee. He asked one more question, "Are you a poet?"

"No, I'm an elementary school teacher. I write poems as a hobby."

"Oh really?" Lee said. He thought he recognized her accent and asked one more question. "Do you live in Busan?" he said, referring to South Korea's second-largest city.

"No, I live in Jinju," the woman said.

"I actually graduated from high school in Jinju," Lee said.

The woman asked which one and eagerly shared that she had studied up the street from his school. Then the woman asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm a church pastor," Lee said.

"Which denomination?"

The question made Lee think that the woman wasn't a Buddhist, the second-largest faith group, comprising 15 percent of the population. Christians account for 27 percent of the population of 51 million.

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist pastor," Lee said.

"I see," the woman said. "Do you know Noah's Ark?"

Lee was surprised. Noah's Ark is a local Adventist offshoot.

The woman explained that she had worshiped briefly with a Noah's Ark group two decades earlier. She had left the group convinced of one thing—that the biblical Sabbath is not on Sunday.

That evening, Lee sent the woman a follow-up text message. "It was great to meet you today!" he wrote. A year later, she was baptized.



Evangelism is easy, Lee said. "If I had ignored the text message, maybe she wouldn't have become a church member," he explained. "But I tried to form a relationship by asking just one more question."

BYONGJU LEE, 51, left, is the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director for the Adventist Church's Korean Union Conference in Seoul, South Korea.

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Acts 15:8, 9*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Observe how changing the criteria for being part of God’s covenantal family can be a challenging experience.

Feel: Emotionally identify with the struggle to allow into God’s family those whom he or she once thought it was his or her religious responsibility to avoid.

Do: Apply lessons learned from the Jerusalem Council that align with both the inclusivity of the gospel and the maintenance of holiness.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Gentiles Can Stay Gentiles.

A How does the Jerusalem Council shape our theology of mission to people groups radically different from our own?

B What are some situations today that parallel the Gentile/circumcision issue of the early church? What are some *invalid* comparisons?

II. Feel: No Difference Between Us and Them

A As Adventists, how can we avoid a superiority complex while still counting ourselves a privileged people?

B Knowing that change is difficult, how can we let the Spirit keep our emotions in check?

III. Do: Keeping Pace With God

A Some Christians can hinder the mission of the church in the name of purity. What response can be given to this subtle pitfall?

B To maintain unity, what would have been the respective responsibilities of the “winners” and the “losers” at the Jerusalem Council?

▶ **Summary:** God’s church must always strive to keep in step with Him in order to be an extension of His will. Outdated applications and egos must be put aside for the sake of the Spirit’s saving activity.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Acts 15:1–21*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Even amid crisis, God’s will can triumph through His people as they listen to, and heed, the testimony of the Spirit’s activity and the confirmation of the prophetic scriptures.

Just for Teachers: Something remarkable took place at the Jerusalem Council that you as a teacher should strive to communicate to your class. Ingrained theological, biblical, and sociological principles and practices that had been reinforced for millennia were now about to “officially” shift. God had been progressively altering His people’s view of the Gentile world from the time of Jesus’ ministry up through the experiences of Peter’s and Paul’s witness of the Spirit’s baptism of Gentiles. It could be said that the Jerusalem Council is the climactic miracle of how God changes (and continues to change) the heart of a people.

Opening Discussion: If we could read the whole Bible through in one sitting, we might become more aware of just how differently God and humans have been engaging each other throughout history: direct contact in the Garden of Eden; offering sacrifices on personally built altars; ceasing sacrifices on personally built altars (*Lev. 17:3, 4*); meeting God in His temple; the cessation of all temple services, from old covenant to new covenant; God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus, thereby superseding all past revelations; and the list goes on. The change God made by dropping circumcision as a covenantal requirement for Gentiles was not out of character in light of salvation history. The events leading up to, and enacted, at the Jerusalem Council demonstrate how God’s larger intentions inform church practice.

Discussion Question: What principles from Acts 15 help us understand what is permanent versus what is temporary in Scripture?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Acts 15 may present some challenging themes for Sabbath School students. There are explicit commands in the Old Testament to circumcise Gentiles (and of course, those of Hebrew

lineage). The fact that these commandments are now overturned in the New Testament era reveals that Scripture is not to be understood simply as a compilation of commandments. Help your class appreciate how the broader perspective of the story of Israel informed the Jerusalem Council's decision.

Bible Commentary

I. The Debate *(Review Acts 15:1–7 with your class.)*

One can almost hear the list of Scriptures the believing Pharisees must have marshaled as they debated the Gentile/circumcision issue (*Acts 15:5, 7*). The texts on circumcision are clear, imperative, and often specifically include the “foreigner” (*Gen. 17:12–14, 27; Exod. 12:44, 48; Josh. 5:4–9*). There are no texts to the contrary. Textually, their argument would appear airtight. Also, common sense could argue that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, coming to the Jewish nation as foretold in the prophetic scriptures of the Jewish religion. Is it so farfetched to say that one must become a Jew in order to benefit from a Jewish Savior? The rite of circumcision would accomplish just that.

Consider This: If the Pharisees had been Protestants, they might have appealed to *sola Scriptura* for their support. How would you respond to this reasoning?

II. Testimony, Scripture, and the Story of Israel *(Review Acts 15:7–21 with your class.)*

For first-century Jews, the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth in the last days coincides with the coming Messiah (*Mark 1:14, 15; Heb. 1:1, 2*), the restoration of the Davidic monarchy (*Isa. 9:6, 7; Matt. 21:9*), the renewal of the covenant (*Jer. 31:31–34*), and the spiritual/national salvation of the nation of Israel (*Isa. 66:17–24, Acts 1:6*). The end-time activity of the Holy Spirit was integral to that collage of events (*Isa. 32:14–18, Luke 4:17–21; compare with Isa. 61:6, Acts 2:17*). So, when Peter testified that the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles (*Acts 15:8*), it reinforced the idea that God's last-day salvation for Israel was operative and was miraculously sweeping in the nations (that is, the Gentiles) *as prophesied*. The drawing and influx of Gentiles into Israel (*Isa. 49:6, 60:1–3, Jer. 33:9, Mic. 4:2, etc.*), and thereby into her saving covenant relationship with Yahweh, is well attested in the prophets (which James is about to reference). So, although Peter is not quoting any specific text, his testimony regarding the giving of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles invokes

the entire salvific story of Israel and places the event in context. In effect, the story of Israel had moved way beyond circumcising a Gentile here or there, or compassing “sea and land to make one proselyte” (*Matt. 23:15*). God’s kingdom was about to become a worldwide phenomenon, bursting the confines of any ethnic or national boundaries (*Acts 1:8*), and the Pharisee may still have been hung up on the fact that Abraham circumcised all those in his household. God was initiating the “last act” of the great drama of Israel’s prophetic destiny; conversely, some of the believers were still theologically stuck in “Act 1.”

Salvation is expressed historically and prophetically, but also internally. It was *always* meant to include the heart. Peter brings God into the conference proceedings because only He can testify concerning the heart. God “bore witness to them [the Gentiles], by giving them the Holy Spirit” (*Acts 15:8, ESV*). But what was He testifying about them? Precisely that their hearts had been “cleansed . . . by faith” (*Acts 15:9, ESV*). This “cleansing of the heart,” in conjunction with the question of circumcision, reverberates with the ancient call for circumcised hearts (*Deut. 10:16, 30:6, Jer. 4:4*). Paul would later highlight this connection in referring to the true Jew as possessing a circumcised heart “in the Spirit” (*Rom. 2:29, NKJV*). But if God already had testified that the Gentiles *had been circumcised/cleansed in heart* and the evidence of this spiritual circumcision was no less than a Gentile Pentecost, it is no wonder Peter warns against “putting God to the test,” as though God had not disclosed His intentions in the matter.

Peter ends on a theme he began with. God put “no difference between us [circumcised Jews] and them [uncircumcised Gentiles]” in the giving of the Spirit. Likewise, both the circumcised and the uncircumcised will be saved “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (*Acts 15:9, 11*).

The evidence had been given. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had testified that the prophetic drama of God among Gentiles was being fulfilled in their ministries. It was James, however, who would confirm that their testimony was aligned with the prophetic script by citing the prophets. God would take from the Gentiles “a people for his name” (*Acts 15:14, ESV*).

Consider This: Testimony, Scripture, and the story of Israel were in full display in the debate at Jerusalem. How is a narrative reading of the Old Testament (that is, reading the Old Testament as a story) superior to an all-or-nothing approach to understanding Scripture, which advocates that either all Old Testament requirements are still in force or none are?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Some Christians rely more heavily on a subjective “spirit” experience to know God’s will. Others take an objective

approach and rely more heavily on the Bible. Acts 15 shows us that these two principles need to coordinate. Though the Pharisee party probably had more *explicit* texts regarding circumcising Gentiles, the apostles had both witnessed the Spirit baptism of Gentiles *and* had scriptures to contextualize and interpret that experience. Challenge the class to think hard about balancing personal experience with biblical interpretation and vice versa.

Thought Questions: Picture yourself sitting at the Jerusalem Council, listening carefully to the arguments. Pretend you don't know the "right" position. Be honest: do you possess a view on the relationship between Scripture and experience that fits better with the pro- or anti-circumcision party? What does that view tell you about yourself?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Because we as Seventh-day Adventists hold to Sabbath and dietary laws that the majority of the Christian world considers obsolete, we will continually be in the position of proposing and defending a hermeneutic that shows we are "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Understanding God's will in terms of the developing story of God's people (a narrative approach) has been suggested here as being helpful to clarify the thorny issue of Old Testament law application. The fact that an "all or nothing" approach to Old Testament law cannot be sustained is made plain by an honest reading of the New Testament use of the Old Testament. Even James in Acts 15, though adjudicating that circumcision is obsolete, affirmed four other Torah requirements as binding on Gentile converts (Acts 15:20). Present to the class that the multiple angles emerging from the Jerusalem Council support Adventist hermeneutics, and find out from the class whether any of the principles discussed here would have helped them in their past witnessing.

Activity: Sabbath, pork, jewelry, tithing, Ellen G. White, the heavenly sanctuary . . . let's face it, Adventists believe a bunch of things that most other Christians don't. Think of a discussion you had defending a uniquely distinctive or, relatively speaking, controversial position we hold. How could you have used lessons learned from the Jerusalem Council to bolster your position?