

Lesson: Debating Requirements: The Jerusalem Council

Lesson Overview

Biblical Passage

Acts 15:6-12, 15:22-30

Supporting Passages

Acts 10:1-48; 11:1-18; 15:1-5; 15:13-21; 15:31-35

Memory Verse

Acts 15:8-9

Table Talk Question

How should the Church resolve major disagreements?

Biblical Truth

Church leaders worked quickly to resolve conflict that threatened the spread of the gospel to all people.

Context

The gospel spread quickly among Gentiles. The Church's first major controversy arose over whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised in order to become followers of Christ. The Jerusalem Council convened to address this disagreement. As the leaders heard about what God had done through Barnabas, Paul, and Peter as well as what had already been revealed in the Scriptures, they clearly saw God's hand reaching out to Gentiles. What could have been a major breach in the Church became an opportunity for leaders to open their hearts to the work of God.

Commentary

Investigation

In the middle of the first century, a dispute arose in the church at Antioch that could have thwarted the spread of the gospel. A group of Judeans told the Christians at Antioch that they needed to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabas argued otherwise. This was not a trivial dispute. Circumcision as a prerequisite for salvation would have been a huge stumbling block for the Gentiles, who found the practice unnecessary and offensive. Church leaders in Jerusalem could not afford to ignore the dispute, for it had implications far beyond the church at Antioch. So they met in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. How they resolved it is an example to us today.

Too often, churches are ripped apart by disputes. Such disagreements can begin with personality clashes between members, loss of trust in church leaders, financial problems, or differing opinions about the direction that the church should take. When such disputes arise, church leaders and laypeople must work together to find God's solution. If the issue is not addressed, it becomes a festering wound that can cripple a church and prevent it from carrying out its mission.

Importance

This lesson emphatically teaches the Essential Truth that Salvation is by Faith Alone. The Law couldn't save the Jews. Only the grace of Jesus Christ could. How absurd it was that the Jews wanted to impose the same legalistic requirements on the Gentile converts. There is no one who is capable of earning salvation or righteousness by deeds alone.

This lesson also touches on other Essential Truths: Jesus is God and Savior and People are God's Treasure.

Interpretation

Acts 15:6 The church at Antioch had appointed Paul and Barnabas and some other believers to go to Jerusalem to discuss the circumcision question with the apostles and elders (Acts 15:1-2). Paul and Barnabas did not believe that circumcision was necessary for salvation. The Pharisees, however, argued that the Gentiles had to follow the Law of Moses and be circumcised if they wanted to be saved. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and all of his descendants (Gen. 17:9-14).

Acts 15:7 Peter shared that he had had a life-changing experience while staying in Joppa (see Acts 10). One day, while praying on the roof of his house, he became hungry. As he waited for the meal to be prepared, he fell into a trance and saw a vision of a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. On the sheet were all kinds of animals, including hoofed animals, reptiles, and birds. Although the voice of the Lord instructed him to kill the animals and eat them, Peter resisted because he had never eaten anything that was forbidden by the Law (Lev. 11). The voice declared that Peter had no right to

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call something impure that God had made clean. Peter saw the same vision three times. He interpreted the vision to mean that he should not consider the Gentiles impure or unclean.

When Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, was prompted by God to send for Peter, the apostle went to see him without raising any objections despite the fact that it was against Mosaic Law for a Jew to visit a Gentile. An angel had told Cornelius that Peter had received a word from the Lord. Recognizing that this was a divine appointment, Peter eagerly shared the *gospel* with Cornelius and his friends and relatives.

Acts 15:8-9 When Peter shared the gospel with Cornelius and the other Gentiles, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone who heard his message, and the Gentiles began to speak in tongues (Acts 10:44-48). This astonished the Jewish Christians who were present. Since the Gentiles had received the same gift that the Jewish believers had on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4), Peter had them baptized.

Acts 15:10 Peter referred to the Law as a yoke. Jesus once chastised the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law because they "tied up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they were not willing to lift a finger to move them" (Matt. 23:4). Even the most devout Jews had never been able to follow the Law perfectly, so why should the Gentiles be expected to succeed where the Jews had failed? To force Gentile believers to be circumcised was both burdensome and unnecessary for their salvation.

Acts 15:11 Peter clarified the doctrine of salvation by insisting that only through the *grace* of Jesus Christ can anyone be saved. Paul reiterated this point throughout his letters. He wrote to the Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

Acts 15:12 After Peter had made the case for salvation by grace alone, Paul and Barnabas recounted God's miraculous works among the Gentiles. These two men had been commissioned for ministry by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) and had made what would later be known as Paul's first missionary journey. During their journey, Gentiles had warmly received the gospel of Jesus Christ, and new churches were established throughout the region. The Lord had confirmed their message with signs and wonders (Acts 14:3), including Paul's healing of a man who had been crippled since birth (Acts 14:8-10).

Acts 15:22-23 After considering the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, a church leader named James spoke up (Acts 15:13-21). James, the brother of Jesus, cited Scripture, quoting the prophet Amos (Acts 15:16-18) to bolster the argument that the church should welcome Gentiles to the faith and not put roadblocks in their way.

The other church leaders agreed with James' assessment, and they prepared a letter explaining their decision. Two leaders from Jerusalem were appointed to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to the church at Antioch deliver this important letter.

Acts 15:24-27 In the letter, Jerusalem believers underscored that they knew Paul and Barnabas had been threatened by Jews for attempting to convert the Gentiles. They had been persecuted in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:50). Paul had been stoned and left for dead in Iconium (Acts 14:19).

Acts 15:28-30 The decision not to require the Gentiles to be circumcised was made under the Holy Spirit's leadership. The Gentiles did not need to be circumcised in order to be saved. The early [Church], however, did lay out four requirements for the Gentiles to follow. Obeying these requirements was not a pathway to salvation, since salvation comes through the grace of Jesus Christ alone. The purpose of these requirements was to build unity within the Church between Jews and Gentiles.

These four requirements came from divine directives that the Jews believed were in place before God gave Moses the Law (Barker, 1985). Just as the Gentiles found circumcision to be abhorrent, the Jews were offended by certain Gentile practices, such as eating food that had been polluted by idols. Since God had forbidden Moses to eat meat that still had blood in it (Gen. 9:4), consuming blood or eating a strangled animal (which would have still had its blood) was forbidden. Sexual immorality was associated with many pagan religious festivals, so it was important that Gentile Christians distance themselves from this sin. By avoiding these four things, Gentile Christians would set themselves apart from other Gentiles as followers of Christ, and they could live at peace with the Jewish Christians.

Implications

Even though the apostles and believers faced persecution for their faith in Christ, the Church began to grow rapidly. As the gospel spread beyond the Jewish nation to the Gentiles, conflict within the Church threatened its survival. When Jewish believers began to demand that Gentile believers undergo circumcision and follow the Law of Moses, Church leaders had to react quickly to the conflict. In a meeting known as the Jerusalem Council, the apostles and elders from the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch met to reconcile their differences. As they discussed the issue, they examined Scripture and evidence of God's work through the Holy Spirit among the Gentile believers. They quickly understood that [Salvation is By Faith Alone] because the Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles as soon as they professed Christ—even though the Gentiles

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were uncircumcised and unfamiliar with the Law of Moses. By acting quickly and decisively, the leaders of the Church made sure that this conflict didn't threaten the mission and growth of the Church.

Churches across the world face similar challenges today. Not only are churches threatened by outside forces, but many face conflicts caused by their own members. When conflicts are allowed to escalate, believers square off against other believers, often arguing over things that are totally irrelevant to the faith. As they bicker among themselves, they fail to show God's love to the world outside their doors. Instead of drawing people to faith in Christ, they leave people wondering why faith is important if Christ's followers cannot get along with each other. Believers would do well to follow the example set by the leaders of the early Church. Christians can respond to conflict by drawing together the people involved in the conflict, seeking guidance from Scripture and the Holy Spirit, agreeing upon a course of action, and clearly communicating the outcome with others. As you teach this lesson, encourage learners to serve as peacemakers within their church. Suggest that seeking biblical guidance is a valid method of resolving conflict wherever it occurs—at home, at work, among friends and family. Urge learners to see conflict as the opportunity to reveal God's love and power to others.

- How did the leaders of the Jewish and Gentile churches react to the conflict? What can we learn from them to guide our response to conflict?
- Do conflicts ever "take care of themselves" or "quietly go away"? What happens when a conflict is ignored?
- What role did faith play in helping the spiritual leaders of the churches reach a solution? What role does my faith play when I have to address a conflict with someone?
- How are churches strengthened when they solve conflicts and promote reconciliation? How are churches weakened when small conflicts are allowed to become major battles?

Free Thought

"Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal."

—Martin Luther King Jr.