

# ***The Book of Acts***

## ***The Jerusalem Council***

Lesson #8 for August 25, 2018

Scriptures: Acts 15; Galatians 2:11-13; Exodus 12:43-49; Romans 3:30-31; Leviticus 18:30; Revelation 2:14,20.

1. This lesson will cover the first major crisis which faced the early Christian church. After the stoning of Stephen, there was persecution and death—partly caused by Paul but also caused by others—which led to the scattering of Christians throughout the Middle East.
2. Then, as we learned in our last lesson, Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church in Antioch of Syria to carry the gospel into new areas. They traveled to the island of Cyprus and then into southern Asia Minor or what today we would call Turkey. They apparently were on that first missionary journey for about two years.
3. When they went home to Antioch of Syria, they had many stories to tell. They had not only brought about the conversion of many Jews but also a huge number of Gentiles. That, of course, upset those who believed that a person must first become a Jew before s/he could become a Christian. Key to that argument was the question of circumcision. We have already studied the story of Cornelius recorded in Acts 10 and 11:1-11. Clearly, God had said that the gospel was to be given freely to Gentiles. But, after the mission of Paul and Barnabas, this question loomed much larger. Acts 15 which we will study this week is about how they dealt with that problem.
4. We have already noted that the church in Antioch consisted of both Hellenistic Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles. (Acts 11:19-21; Galatians 2:11-13) Things were apparently going along quite smoothly and successfully until a group of believers from Jerusalem arrived in Antioch. They began to stir up trouble in Antioch, insisting that those who wanted to become Christians must first be circumcised and become full proselytes of Judaism. (Acts 15:1-5) This, of course, led to fierce disagreement between those visitors and several members in the church at Antioch including Paul and Barnabas. We do not know who those visitors to the church at Antioch were; but, it is possible they were some of the same converts from the Pharisees who are mentioned in Acts 15:5. No one in the church in Jerusalem authorized them to do what they did.
5. Traveling from Jerusalem to Antioch and spending a significant amount of time there would have been quite expensive. Who do you think paid for that trip? And why did they do that? Their attitude was that in matters of conscience, cost does not matter!
6. As we will learn later, Paul had ongoing battles with those Judaizing believers almost everywhere he went. It was an especially bad problem in the churches in Galatia. (See Galatians 1:7-9; 2:4-5; 5:10.) Paul was certainly convinced that those Judaizing believers were completely wrong in their approach to the gospel.
7. **These opponents of Paul had a rather simple message: In order to be saved, converts from among the Gentiles must be circumcised and must keep all the other Jewish ceremonial laws.** It is not hard to understand why some would believe that. Read Genesis 17:9-14 and Exodus 12:43-49. These passages make it very clear that if someone wanted to join the covenant group of Israelites, he must be circumcised and obey all the ceremonial laws of the Jews. The problem was that to those Jews there was a clear relationship between being a member of the covenant group and being saved.
8. There are, of course, many passages in the Old Testament talking about how the Jews were supposed to spread the gospel which is the good news about God to those in other groups.

The first of such passages is found in Genesis 12:3:

**Genesis 12:3:** “I will bless those who bless you,

But I will curse those who curse you.

And through you I will bless all the nations.”—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Genesis 12:3). New York: American Bible Society.

9. Such a stir was caused in Antioch that the cooler heads thought they should take this matter back to the church leaders in Jerusalem and make a collective decision. So, Paul and Barnabas and probably some others were sent to Jerusalem. Do you think that believers from other cities came to that conference? For example, what about the Samaritan believers?
10. This was not the first time there had been conflicts about circumcision. The passages in Genesis 17:9-14 and Exodus 12:43-49 make it clear that circumcision was God’s command to Abraham. But, look at Jesus’s own comments in response to a question from the Pharisees and teachers of the law as recorded in Matthew 15:8-9. These verses include a quotation from Isaiah 29:13 in the *Septuagint* (LXX). Was Jesus trying to change the laws that He Himself had given in the Old Testament?

**Matthew 15:2,9:**<sup>2</sup> “Why is it that your disciples disobey the teaching handed down by our ancestors? They don’t wash their hands in the proper way before they eat!...”

<sup>9</sup> “ ‘It is no use for them to worship me, because they teach human rules as though they were my laws!’ ”—*Good News Bible*.\*

11. Therefore, circumcision was thought to be 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 salvation through Him without first becoming a Jew.
12. Of course, Paul’s approach to circumcision was very different. Paul himself was circumcised. Read Romans 3:30-31; 1 Corinthians 7:18; and Galatians 3:28-29; 5:6.
13. It should be clear to us now that those Judaizing believers were mixing up two distinct concepts. They believed that in order to be saved, it was necessary to be a part of God’s covenant people. But, Jeremiah 4:4 and 9:25 demonstrate that many belonging to God’s covenant community will not be saved. Furthermore, when circumcision was first given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant he had with God, he was saved and justified by faith which was present before he was circumcised. This situation is discussed at some length in Romans 4:9-13. God had blessed the children of Israel with the provision of His Word from the days of Moses to those of Malachi. But, it is very clear from the history in the Old Testament that not all of them would be saved. Of course, the Jews believed that if one was a Jew, s/he would automatically be saved. Thus, they viewed circumcision as a kind of entrance requirement to God’s covenant, as meritorious, and as leading to salvation.

**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.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Monday, August 20. [Bold type is added.]

14. And what about us? Don’t we feel that if we are faithful Seventh-day Adventists, we are almost

automatically “on the bus” toward salvation?

15. Read Acts 15:7-11. In the Jerusalem Council, they were apparently given opportunity to clearly hear a full discussion from each side. At the end of that, Peter stood up and reminded them of what had happened with Cornelius. (See Acts 10:1-33; 11:1-18; 15:6-11.) He asserted that all the requirements of the ceremonies had already been a burden that even the Jews themselves had not been able to bear.
16. Don't you imagine that both sides in this argument presented powerful evidence supported by what they believed were unanswerable reasons why their thinking was correct? No doubt, many passages of Scripture were quoted. The fact that only the comments from Peter and James the stepbrother of Jesus are recorded, even though very briefly, suggests that they were considered to be leaders among the early church.
17. Read Acts 15:13-21. After what were probably several days of long discussions, James felt the time had come for him to stand up and draw some conclusions. James was apparently the leader of the church in Jerusalem at that time. (See Acts 12:17; 21:18; and Galatians 2:9,12.) James bolstered his arguments by quoting from Amos 9:11-12 in the *Septuagint* (LXX). Then, he suggested that a letter should be written to the churches with the conclusions that we read in Acts 15:28-29.
18. **Acts 15:28-29:** <sup>28</sup> “The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to put any other burden on you besides these necessary rules: <sup>29</sup> **eat no food that has been offered to idols; eat no blood; eat no animal that has been strangled; and keep yourselves from sexual immorality.** You will do well if you take care not to do these things. With our best wishes.”—*Good News Bible*.\* [Bold type is added.]
19. What do these restrictions have to do with salvation? Nothing! These are not some kind of criteria for the basis on which a person can be saved. Instead, they are restrictions which were very important to the Jews and which had been pointed out by God in the Old Testament that violation made one ceremonially unclean. Thus, for Gentiles who wanted to join Jewish believers in services, it was requested that they refrain from these activities.
20. Revelation 2:14,20 make it clear that sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols would remain a major issue in the Christian church for a long time. Many Christians today treat the dietary prohibitions mentioned in this letter as temporary restrictions that were to be observed because of their offensive nature to Jewish believers. They are happy to throw out all the rest of the Old Testament laws including the Levitical food laws and the Sabbath commandment even though they were not mentioned in this list; many modern Christians feel those commands are no longer binding.
21. Review Leviticus 17-18. It is clear that in the context of Leviticus, these prohibitions were specifically meant as a renunciation of paganism. If one wanted to join the covenant people of Israel, s/he had to reject those pagan practices. (Leviticus 18:30) Thus, requesting Gentiles to avoid those same practices was only a continuation of a firm stand against paganism.
22. Furthermore, Christian believers were expected to follow certain universal, pre-Mosaic, and not intrinsically-ceremonial requirements such as keeping the Sabbath. (Genesis 2:1-3) They were also expected to differentiate between clean and unclean foods, (Genesis 7:2) and abstain from the eating of blood and fat. (See Leviticus 7:25; 17:14; and Deuteronomy 12:23.) If one thinks that the Bible is foundational to his/her beliefs and that the Bible should take precedence in our country, others will call him/her a bigot!
23. The comments in Revelation 2:14,20 are part of the message to Pergamum, a church which we believe symbolized the church several hundred years after the days of the apostles.

24. What could we learn from Acts 15 and the experience in Jerusalem about resolving problems in our church today?
25. The Christian leaders in Jerusalem went beyond just writing a letter. They chose two men, Judas called Bar-sabbas and Silas, who traveled to Antioch to assure the believers that the message included in the letter was correct. James apologized for the confusion and trouble caused by the earlier, unauthorized visitors.
26. In the letter they asserted that their decisions had the approval of the Holy Spirit. On what basis did they make that claim?
27. It is interesting to note that this letter, recognizing the church in Jerusalem as the prime church, was written in A.D. 49. It is one of the earliest known Christian documents.
28. Read Acts 15:30-33. The people in Antioch were delighted to receive this letter and the resolution it suggested to that issue. How do you understand Acts 15:32 which says Judas and Silas were themselves prophets?
29. Unfortunately, we know that the decisions from this Jerusalem Council did not resolve the issues permanently.

Jerusalem was the metropolis of the Jews, and it was there that the greatest exclusiveness and bigotry were found. 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.**—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*\* 197.1. [Bold type is added.]

30. What do we know about the educational backgrounds of those at the council? Many of the disciples were “uneducated” by Jewish standards. Paul was the equivalent of a university professor! But, the disciples had had Jesus as their Teacher! Honestly, do you find it difficult to fellowship on an equality with people from other races? Cultures? Or, even social classes? How can we rid ourselves of this curse against the gospel?
31. But, let us be considerate of those early Christians who had differences of opinion.

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*\* 189.2. [Bold type is added.]

32. So, what about us today? Do we believe that belonging to the right church guarantees our salvation? If it does not guarantee salvation, what is the advantage of being a member of that church? What issues today might be in some way comparable to that issue about

circumcision? Do any of us look down on and shun people who might be dressed differently or act differently than we expect at church?

33. It would be very instructive if one had time to choose a group of people to represent each of these sides and have a replay of the Acts 15 conference. Would we come to the same conclusions as they did? Would the Holy Spirit be guiding us?
34. It should be clear that even belonging to a group that regards itself as God's faithful people is not always easy. Do we easily accept those that we formerly might have avoided? As Adventists do we have a superiority complex, thinking of ourselves as a privileged people?
35. In our church we have conservative groups and liberal groups. Why do the conservatives look down on the liberals? Why do the liberals look down on the conservatives? Will there ever be a way to reconcile such groups? Why do we choose to be a part of one of these groups or the other? **Conservatives look for truth outside of themselves and then ask of a given situation, "Is this right?" Liberals look for truth within themselves and ask, "Does this work?"** So, why are there conflicts in places like the United States Congress?
36. Was there any gloating after the council was over? Did the former-Pharisees feel completely defeated? Did they have anything to do with the later decision of the leaders in Jerusalem that led to the arrest of Paul and his imprisonment?

Something remarkable took place at the Jerusalem Council.... Ingrained theological, biblical, and sociological principles and practices that had been reinforced for millennia were now about to "officially" shift.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** 107.

37. Any change is painful to some. Is change in the church healthy?
38. Is there evidence from the history of the Jews, and even times prior to that, that occasionally things do change? Even God's requirements? At first Adam and Eve walked with God freely in the Garden of Eden. After being expelled from the garden, they were told to offer sacrifices on personally-built altars. After the children of Israel got into the land of Canaan, they were told not to build personal altars but to offer their sacrifices only at the temple in Jerusalem. (Leviticus 17:3-4) They were told to meet God strictly in His temple in Jerusalem. Later, the temple was destroyed, and the children of Israel were told to move from the old covenant to a new covenant. Then, a whole new revelation came to the children of Israel in the form of Jesus Christ Himself, living that perfect life and dying that awful death on Calvary. This revelation through Jesus was that of God Himself, more clear than all previous revelations.
39. What principles can we learn from the story of Acts 15 that might help us today? Can we be sure that God really wanted that change?
1. God had performed miracles in support of the new changes. Acts 10-11; 13-14.
  2. The changes were discussed and agreed upon by the church in joint discussions.
  3. All sides were given free opportunity to express their ideas, and leadership listened carefully to the arguments.
  4. The exponential growth among Gentiles indicated that God was at work among them.
  5. Pharisees were on both sides of this argument! (Remember that Paul was a Pharisee.)
  6. Support from the Old Testament was quoted for the new approach. (Amos 9:11-12, LXX)
  7. The members of the Jerusalem Council believed that the careful way in which things had been handled gave them permission to claim the support of the Holy Spirit for what they had done.

40. It seems clear from what we read in Acts 15 that circumcision was no longer to be required in order to be a part of God's covenant people. How do you feel about a God who apparently changed His mind and His requirements? Isn't it clear from the Old Testament that circumcision was required?

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. [However, there are a number of texts pointing out that Jews were supposed to spread the gospel to Gentiles, even in Old Testament times.] 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.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 108. [Content in brackets is added; italic type is in the source.]

41. Read Isaiah 49:6; 60:1-3; Jeremiah 33:9; Micah 4:2; etc. Verses like these in the Old Testament make it very clear that God intended for Gentiles to join His people. Why weren't the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes reaching out to all the nations around them? Weren't they trying to fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament? Numerous passages both in the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that God is looking for a change in the heart of a person. Superficial, external signs are never enough.
42. Acts 15 must be understood in the context of the entire history of the Jewish people in the Old Testament. We must try to put ourselves into the situations we read about in Scripture and try to determine what we would have done if we had been there. Even more challenging is to think what we would have done if we had been God in that situation.
43. The fact that the Holy Spirit had come down on Cornelius and his family and that various miracles had taken place including the healing of Gentiles, etc. made it clear, despite some contradictory teachings from the Old Testament, that God was ready to move forward with those new directions.
44. Many of our Christian friends basically choose to reject the requirements mentioned in the Old Testament based partially on some of these discussions we have had in this lesson. But, doing so would be a terrible loss. There are so many lessons we need to learn from the Old Testament.
45. The Jerusalem Council was not the final solution to all of these issues. Paul himself later rejected the restriction about not eating food offered to idols. See Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 10.
46. As Seventh-day Adventists, we have a number of beliefs and practices which are rejected by most of our Christian friends. Have we learned anything from this lesson that might help us in dealing with those who reject Adventism because of our teachings about the Sabbath? Pork? Jewelry? Tithing? Ellen White? Or, even the heavenly sanctuary?

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Last Modified: June 8, 2018

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