

What We Value: Crossing Cultures

October 31, 2021



Vision 22

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 15:1-21

Session Outline

1. The Conflict of the Council (Acts 15:1-5)
2. The Conclusion of the Council (Acts 15:6-21)
3. Peter's Example (Acts 10:1-6, 13-16, 19-20, 27b-35, 43-45)

Theological Theme

The Jerusalem council established for the early church that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ, without adding any requirement, and is freely offered to all people.



Leader Guide

What We Value: Crossing Cultures

Introduction

- ❓ Think about a group or a close-knit community you have been a part of, either presently or in the past? What was the group, and why were you involved in it?
- ❓ Was there a unifying purpose behind the group? What brought you all together?
- ❓ What brings us together as a church? What is the basis for all that we do?

When we get together with groups of people, we usually meet for a purpose. Whether the reason be to play a sport, read a book together, enjoy good food, or let children play, if people are meeting together, it is because they share something in common. The church is a group of people from diverse backgrounds and places who are united under one thing: belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is the primary organizing feature of the church of Jesus Christ. Because the Bible teaches us the gospel, the church is based on a biblical foundation.

In today's text, a threat arose to the unity of the early church and their willingness to cross cultures to share the gospel. The church leaders could have swept this issue under the rug and refused to engage the topic in an effort to keep the peace and maintain the status quo. However, the issue was essential to the gospel message and God-given purpose of the church to go and make disciples. As such, believers needed to engage in discussion, no matter how uncomfortable it might be. The effectiveness and reach of the gospel message was at stake.

Session Summary

We believe that the whole gospel of Jesus is for the whole person. We believe that the gospel is for all people. That's why we value crossing cultures with the message and the hope of Jesus. Right here in our city, we have the opportunity to reach people of all nations, ages, and backgrounds. We are committed to reaching every person no matter who they are or where their story begins. From Middle Tennessee to the ends of the earth, we are going to do whatever it takes to make sure everyone hears the good news of Jesus.

1. The Conflict of the Council (Acts 15:1-5)

In A.D. 49 the church at Antioch faced its first crisis. Legalists from Judea, known as “Judaizers,” suggested that in order to be admitted into the church, Gentile converts must be circumcised and follow Jewish laws. The Judaizers had tradition on their side. Jews had been welcoming Gentiles into the faith for hundreds of years; the procedure was well fixed. Since Christianity was just a messianic branch of Judaism at this time, why should the rules change? Why should they back away from requiring circumcision and the keeping of the Mosaic law? The Judaizers failed to realize that God had changed the rules. The Judaizers were adding their preferences on top of the gospel, which is always wrong.

The significance of the meeting in Jerusalem is hard to overstate. The debate centered around one question: Did Gentiles who believe in Jesus have to become proselyte Jews to be saved? The Judaizers saw Christianity as an extension of Jewish belief so they thought it was right for Gentiles to follow their rules. The only problem with that line of thinking is the gospel. The criteria for inclusion in God's family is faith in Jesus. To add to the gospel is to take away from its meaning. The Bible clearly teaches salvation is a gift available to all, and it is through Christ alone.

- ❓ What was the root of disagreement at the Jerusalem council? How can we tell if something we believe is a preference or a tradition instead of gospel truth? How does discerning between these two help us to know how to best cross cultures for the sake of the gospel?
- ❓ What are some ways we make a similar error to the Judaizers and require more of each other than the Bible requires? Why does adding to the gospel actually take away from the truth of the gospel?

The Law of Moses

We should not confuse the Ten Commandments with the law of Moses. From our perspective we often view those two as one, but they were not. The New Testament never argues that Christians should not pay attention to the Ten Commandments, though certainly they will never lead to salvation. This argument was not about that. It dealt with the ritualistic practices of the Jews which set them apart from other people—circumcision, food laws, and other guidelines for living.

Some things aren't worth arguing over, but some are. Paul and Barnabas understood that to keep the Mosaic law in the requirements for salvation was to deny that salvation is by faith alone. The conflict described in these verses involved theological as well as practical concerns. The integrity of the gospel and the unity of church fellowship were at stake.

- Application: Where is God calling you to cross cultures for the sake of the gospel? What preferences or tradition might you need to lay down in order to do this effectively?

2. The Conclusion of the Council (Acts 15:6-21)

“After much discussion” (v. 6) indicates that the debate must have been long and intense. Peter briefly shared his unforgettable experience with Cornelius and his household (see 10:9-48). He made clear the Lord had made a choice to use Peter for His purpose of sharing the gospel with some Gentiles. This was a sovereign act of God that began with a vision and ended with Cornelius and other Gentiles believing in Jesus. All are included in the church through faith.

Peter's point was clear. He believed faith in Christ is the only way to receive salvation. All people are saved the same way—by God's grace through personal faith in His Son, Jesus. Salvation is a result of God's grace received through faith, and it is anchored in faith apart from any works of the law. It was clear God saved the Gentiles because of His evident work in their lives. Faith manifests itself in action, not to earn salvation, but out of appreciation for all that God has done for you in Christ.

After Peter's speech, the gathering fell silent. Barnabas and Paul recounted their work among the Gentiles, emphasizing what God had done through them. They had performed signs and wonders by God's power. These miracles impressed the Gentiles and validated the gospel Paul and Barnabas proclaimed. The reports of Barnabas, Paul, and Peter had great impact because they were Jewish Christians who had witnessed God's grace in action.

- What do we learn about God and the gospel through Peter's testimony at the Jerusalem Council?
- What evidence did Peter give that the Gentiles had truly received and believed the gospel? What evidence did Paul and Barnabas give? Why must we trust God's evidence of conversion before our own?

James announced his opinion, perhaps as a formal motion: Gentiles would not have to become Jewish converts to become Christians (v. 19). Then James suggested a letter be sent to Gentile churches instructing believers to keep four ritual requirements in deference to Jewish Christians. Many Gentile converts and God-fearers had become familiar with Jewish rituals and regulations. Also, by being sensitive to the beliefs and practices of Jews, Gentile Christians might reach them (vv. 20-21). To resolve conflict, we should always look to the Scriptures' wisdom for guidance. We should never accept any resolution that violates God's Word.

The Bible is the supreme rule for all faith and practice in the church. The apostles appealed to the words of prophecy to make their claims about Gentile salvation, because they understood the Scriptures disclosed the plan and will of God. Everything we do and everything we believe as Christians must be tested by the words of Scripture. Through them we learn what God is like and the true path to salvation, the gospel of Jesus Christ.



Application: How does believing that the gospel is meant for all people change your perspective on why you should be willing to cross cultures to share the love of Jesus? How has Jesus "crossed cultures" for us?

3. Peter's Example (Acts 10:1-6, 13-16, 19-20, 27b-35, 43-45)

Even prior to the Jerusalem Council, new questions arose about the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian faith. Gentiles were attempting to understand where they fit in, and Jews were trying to determine how and if they should mingle with non-Jews. The Jews had adhered to lifelong dietary laws that prevented them from socializing with Gentiles.

These verses depict the responses to two different visions from God. The first was a vision to a Gentile seeker named Cornelius. The second was a vision to Peter, the God-appointed leader of the early church. The vision Peter experienced from God communicated it was now permissible to kill and eat unclean animals (Acts 10:9-33). The vision didn't make sense to Peter, since it would have violated dietary food laws. But God was communicating to Peter that He was overturning these restrictions and Gentiles could be embraced in Christian community. Peter was tasked with the responsibility of sharing the good news with both Jews and Gentiles.

But the Holy Spirit was not done communicating with Peter. As he stood puzzling over the meaning of the vision he had just had, the men from Cornelius arrived at the home of the tanner. As the men inquired of Peter's presence at the house, the Holy Spirit prompted Peter to know that the men were there, looking for him, and that he should go with them without hesitation. It was not time for Peter to reflect on his feelings about the matter, it was time for him to simply obey what God had commanded him to do. Because he did, God brought two unlikely people together and opened the door for a gospel conversation.

- ❓ How do we see Peter crossing cultural lines for the advance of the gospel in these verses? What indication do we have that this made Peter uncomfortable? How does this encourage you in moments where you are uncomfortable taking the gospel across cultural barriers?
- ❓ What was the result of Peter's willingness to move out of His comfort zone and follow God's vision for His life instead of His own? How might God do the same for our church as we show obedience to Him today?

God showed Peter that some of the things he had considered gospel truth were really just religious preferences. Many times what causes you to disobey God is actually your well-intentioned, though misguided, attempts to hold onto truth. Peter let his preferences rise above the truth of the gospel, and so must you. Those of us who have been in church for a while forget what it is like to be lost, so we expect lost people to act and think like Christians. But God does not show partiality as we do. God looks at the heart, because that is what matters to Him. When you find yourself being offended by someone else, take the time to consider whether your belief is an act of love or actually just a preference.

- ❓ Application: Why do you think it was important for Peter and Cornelius to both share their testimonies of what God had showed them regarding one another? What does that indicate about the power of your own story in breaking prejudice toward those who are unlike you?

Conclusion

- ① What are some ways we elevate preferences and tradition above biblical revelation? What rules do we add on top of the gospel? What do we communicate to God when we do that?
- ② Have you ever shared the gospel with someone who comes from a drastically different background than yours? What was that experience like?
- ③ One of our values is: “We believe that the whole gospel of Jesus is for the whole person. We believe that the gospel is for all people. That’s why we value crossing cultures with the message and the hope of Jesus.” What has today’s reading and discussion taught you about how we do this together?

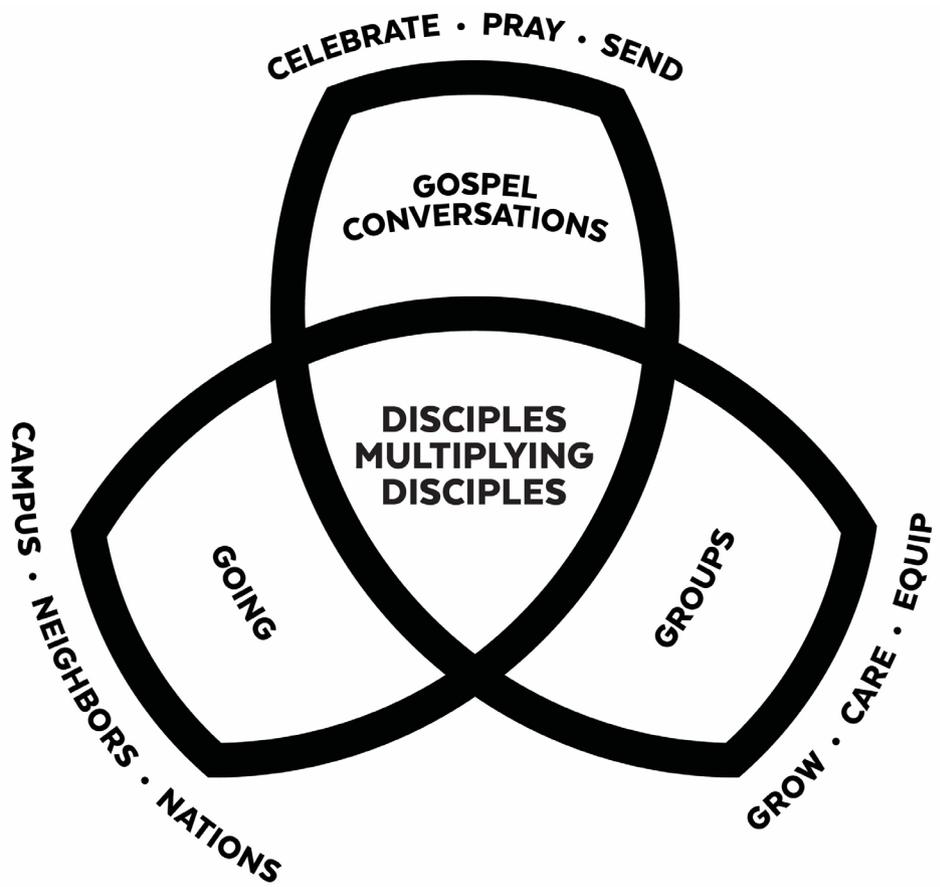
Prayer of Response

Pray that God would cause you to trust and believe His Word more than your own preferences. Ask for God to release you from any attempts to earn favor with Him by work and convince you of the truths of the gospel. Praise Him for His work in your life and commit yourself to living by His truth revealed in His Word.

Additional Resources

- *Counter Culture* by David Platt
- *The Insanity of God* by Nik Ripken
- *Saturate* by Jeff Vanderstelt

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



For Next Week

Session Title

- What We Value: Multiplication Matters

Main Passages

- Mark 1:35-38

Session Outline

1. The Fuel for Discipleship (Mark 1:35)
2. The Pace of Discipleship (Mark 1:36-39)
3. The Fruit of Discipleship (Acts 2:42-47)

Memorize

And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

- Acts 15:8-9

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 15:1-21

15:1 After arriving back in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas reported on what God had done in Asia on the first missionary journey, especially the evangelizing of the Gentiles (14:27). Some men came down from Judea and attempted to modify Paul's approach to non-Jews. By insisting that Gentiles be circumcised, they made observance of Jewish ritual a requirement for salvation.

15:2 Unable to reach an agreement, Paul and Barnabas were sent to the elders in Jerusalem, a sign that the Jerusalem church, with its apostles and elders, was still the center of the Christian movement. If Paul failed to convince the Lord's apostles, the church would not support him.

15:3 On the way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas wisely shared details about the conversion of the Gentiles with believers in Phoenicia and Samaria, creating great joy among the brothers and sisters.

15:4–5 Though the Pharisees (including Paul) had opposed Jesus bitterly, some had become believers (6:7). In this case a group of them failed to understand the freedoms Christ had won for believers.

15:6 The central issue of the Jerusalem Council was whether Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. Given the Jewish roots of Christianity, it is understandable that the church had to grapple with this issue in an era of transition.

15:7–9 Peter reminded his hearers of four things: (1) God had chosen him to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (10:1–43). (2) The Gentiles believed Peter's message. (3) When the Gentiles believed, they received the Holy Spirit (10:44–46). (4) The pattern of Gentile conversion was the same as for Jewish believers. God was making no ethnic distinctions in building the church.

15:10 In light of the above points (see note at vv. 7–9), the believers from the "party of the Pharisees" (v. 5) were testing God and putting on Gentile converts a burden that neither Jewish ancestors nor contemporary Jews were able to bear.

15:11 Having mentioned the inability of Jews and Gentiles alike to fulfill the law perfectly, Peter insisted that salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, which means it is a free gift. Rituals such as circumcision cannot save anyone.

15:12 The signs and wonders among the Gentiles demonstrated that they were included in God's salvation.

15:13–14 As leader of the Jerusalem church, James, the brother of Jesus, assessed the claims and counterclaims. He began his address by recalling how Simeon (Peter) had reported God's plan to take from the Gentiles a people for his name, which had occasioned controversy of its own (11:2ff).

15:15–18 James cited the prophets Amos (Am 9:11–12) and Isaiah (Is 45:21) to show that God had long ago foretold that Gentiles would be called by his name.

15:19 James’s position as the first among equals in the Jerusalem church is seen in his summarizing conclusion to the debate. In his judgment, Jewish believers should not cause difficulties for those turning to God from among the Gentiles.

15:20 Despite the common basis of salvation for Jews and Gentiles, a number of restrictions were required (v. 29; 21:25). Some scholars think these may have been introduced as a way for Jews and Gentiles within the church to have a common basis for contact. But it is more likely that these were designed to elevate the moral standards of the Gentiles by prohibiting them from engaging in a number of the practices that were associated with pagan temple rites such as animal sacrifice, sexual immorality, and idolatry.

15:21 James’s reason for invoking Moses and the widespread proclamation of the law is not entirely clear. He may have meant that Jewish people who spread throughout the world via the Diaspora had made Moses’s law known among Gentiles through their public reading of Scripture. Alternatively, he may have been saying that the standards he demanded of Gentiles in v. 20 reflected universal moral laws that were enshrined in the law of Moses.¹

References

1. *CSB Study Bible: Christian Standard Bible*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.

Author Bio

David Platt (Counter Culture)

David Platt is the author of three New York Times bestsellers, including *Radical*. He is lead pastor at McLean Bible Church in metro Washington, D.C., the former president of the IMB (International Mission Board), and founder of Radical Inc., a global center for the unreached that serves churches in accomplishing the mission of Christ. Platt received his master of divinity (MDiv), master of theology (ThM), and doctor of philosophy (PhD) from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He lives in Virginia with his wife and their children.

Nik Ripken (The Insanity of God)

Nik Ripken is the world's leading expert on the persecuted church in Muslim contexts. He is a missions veteran of 30 years, having served primarily in North Africa and the Middle East. He is the author of *The Insanity of God* and the new book *The Insanity of Obedience*. He and his wife have done extensive research on the persecuted church, and on Muslim background believers, in approximately 72 countries.

Jeff Vanderstelt (Saturate)

Jeff Vanderstelt is a pastor, speaker, author, and founder and visionary leader of Saturate and the Soma Family of Churches. He serves as a teaching pastor and director of missional communities at Doxa Church in Bellevue, Washington. Additionally, Jeff supports church planting globally through training and as a member of the advisory board of C2C Network. He and his wife, Jayne, have three children. You can connect with Jeff at his website, JeffVanderstelt.com, or on Twitter (@JeffVanderstelt).