

# Decisions

*April 30, 2023*

## Lesson Summary

### **Main Passages**

Acts 15:1-11

### **Session Outline**

1. The Dispute (Acts 15:1)
2. The Response (Acts 15:2-5)
3. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6-11)

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### **Theological Theme**

When men came to Antioch and taught a message that was contrary to the gospel, Paul and Barnabas stood against their false teaching. The matter was taken to the Jerusalem Council, where Peter reinforced that the truth of the gospel is for everyone and nothing else is needed for salvation.



## Leader Guide

# Decisions

### Introduction

In our world of advanced technology, it can be tough to spot a scam when it pops up on your phone or in your inbox. According to the Federal Trade Commission 2.8 million people reported being victims of scams in 2021 and the losses totaled over \$5.8 billion.<sup>1</sup> We struggle to discern lies from truth, especially when the falsehoods are delivered in a deceiving manner.

There are times when people will present supposedly Biblical teachings that are not aligned with Scripture. If the people are passionate about what they are saying and teach with a persuasive style, even strong believers can be led astray. It is even more common for those who are new to the faith to be misled by false teachings. It is the responsibility of each Christian to know the truth and help others recognize it.

- ❓ What are some things that make it difficult to recognize false teachings from the truth?
- ❓ What can Christians do to strengthen their faith and keep themselves from falling prey to false teachings?

### Session Summary

There were some who taught a false message that could cause confusion among believers in the church at Antioch. Paul and Barnabas were not willing to allow the false teaching to continue and possibly interrupt the great work of God they experienced among both Jews and Gentiles.

When the matter was presented the Jerusalem Council, Peter made it clear that all people are saved by trusting in Jesus alone. It was not acceptable for anyone to put additional requirements, like circumcision, onto the Gentiles who believed.

## 1. The Dispute (Acts 15:1)

Some men came down from Judea to influence the body of believers at Antioch. God had been doing a great work in both the Jews and Gentiles of the area. These men struggled to accept that Gentiles could receive salvation without following the law or Jewish traditions. The men who came to the church taught that Gentiles could only be saved if they first became Jews and submitted to Jewish traditions, including circumcision.

These men felt so strongly about their message that they came to Antioch from Judea to teach this message. In doing so, they cast doubt and confusion on all that God was doing in Antioch through the efforts of Paul and Barnabas. Their missionary trips resulted in churches being started without any attempt to bring the Gentiles under the law of Moses. The men from Judea said Paul and Barnabas were wrong in their approach of the Gentiles.

- ❓ Why was the men's teaching directly against all that Paul and Barnabas had been doing? Why was this more than a minor add-on to Paul and Barnabas's message?

Paul taught that everyone who believed in Jesus would be saved. The men from Judea disagreed and claimed the people could only be saved by both believing in Jesus and keeping the law of Moses. Paul taught that people could be right with God based solely on what Jesus did.

- ❓ Why is it sometimes hard for us to believe the gospel is all we need for salvation today? In what sense is it easier to try to do other things to earn our salvation?

This is no small issue; it is a core teaching and central to the gospel. Sometimes Christians get divided over things that are not a big deal, and they can agree to disagree. That was not the case in this situation—how a person receives salvation is not something believers should be divided about. There was no room for disagreement, and the matter needed to be addressed and resolved.

The enemy pushes false doctrines and teachings to cause confusion and disagreements among believers. If he can get people arguing and focused on those kinds of things, they will not be focused on carrying out the Great Commission and reaching the lost world.

- ❓ Application: What are ways we can seek to guard against believing false teachings?

## 2. The Response (Acts 15:2-5)

Paul and Barnabas demonstrated good principles of dealing with adversity and dissension. They were unwilling to stand by and let the false teaching have influence on the work that God was doing. They first tried to show the men from Judea the truth. Scripture tells us that this caused no small amount of dissension and dispute. In other words, the men from Judea were committed to their message and not willing to turn from it.

The approach of Paul and Barnabas gives a good first step in reconciling with others who teach and think differently on important matters. There are some issues that do not need to be addressed and can be let go because they are periphery topics of the faith. However, when the issue is a core salvation issue, it is good and right to stand up and confront falsehood with the truth. We see that Paul and Barnabas attempted to discuss and explain the difference in the message of the gospel, but it did not work. There are times when we recognize a need to explain about the truth of salvation to someone who has been teaching a false gospel, but they may refuse to hear what we have to say.

When their first attempt failed to bring about the hoped-for results, it was time for the next step. This matter was important enough that those in Antioch determined to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to seek additional counsel and instruction. Paul and Barnabas showed the heart of true shepherds in that they were willing to do whatever was necessary to protect their flock and resolve the issue at hand. There was no ignoring the false doctrine that could hinder people from coming to salvation.

- ❓ How do we determine which issues are of primary importance in the church and which are less important?


On their way to meet with the leaders in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas took every opportunity to share with other believers the great work of God through the conversion of Gentiles. Notice how these other believers responded. Verse three says hearing about the conversion of Gentiles “brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.”

- ❓ How do you think it affected Paul and Barnabas to encounter joy and encouragement on their way to Jerusalem? Why might this have mattered?

This must have been further confirmation and encouragement for Paul and Barnabas as others joined them in praising God for His work among the Gentiles. When they arrived in Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders, Paul and Barnabas explained what had been happening at the church in Antioch, and they found many other believers who were excited

about the work of the Lord. But they also were faced with additional opposition from some Pharisees.


These were people who had been raised and trained to believe and uphold the law above all else. They held similar opinions to the men of Judea who had come to Antioch. Because of their history with the law, these men argued that any person who wanted to come to faith in Christ must first be initiated into Judaism by circumcision, then they must live under the law of Moses. This was a sign that this issue needed to be resolved everywhere, not just in Antioch. Any place where Gentiles were reached with the gospel was a place where this topic needed to be answered so that it would not cause continued problems.

 Application: What can you learn from the way Paul and Barnabas dealt with conflict? How might their approach be instructive when you face threats to the gospel message?

### 3. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6-11)

The leaders of the early church gathered to address the situation at hand. This council consisted of apostles and elders who were committed to encouraging and guiding the early church. The ultimate question of this matter was: Is the work of Jesus on the cross enough to save completely or does a believer also need to add to the work that Jesus did? Is it Christ alone or a combination of faith in Christ and obedience to the law?


People who were passionate about each side presented their arguments and were heard through much debate. While it is good for Christians to be passionate enough about their faith to stand and argue publicly for their beliefs, it is imperative to be certain that what you are arguing is grounded in the Word of God. Our passion should come from a commitment to the Scriptures and not just our own thoughts or preferences.

 Proverbs 9:10 tells us “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” How do we show this wisdom when we seek to root our convictions in the truth of the Bible?

After much dispute, Peter stood up. Peter was one of the most influential leaders in that day, and when he spoke it was likely that everyone stopped to listen. Notice how Peter addressed the topic. He started with a history lesson and made it clear that he knew what he was talking about since he was directly involved and an eyewitness to the events he described. God made it clear to Peter that there is no distinction between clean and unclean (see Acts 10). This was an important moment in the discussion over this matter.


#### Support for Paul's Position

Paul's position was defended by two influential figures—Peter, the leading apostle, and James, the brother of Jesus and ruling elder of the Jerusalem congregation. Peter pointed out how God had shown him through Cornelius that He accepted the Gentiles. Gentiles should not have to live by Jewish ways. In Christ, salvation is by grace alone, for Jew and Gentiles alike. James basically reinforced Peter's arguments, giving scriptural proof for God's inclusion of the Gentiles.

-  Look back at Acts 10. How has Peter's own mind and heart been changed on this matter? How did this make him a credible and influential contributor to the discussion?

Peter proclaimed that God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile, so it made no sense for the church to do any differently. God purified the hearts of those who believed, Jew or Gentile, by faith and not by keeping the law. Peter's words aligned with what Paul and Barnabas had claimed about the Gentiles.

Finally, Peter addressed the outsiders who were testing God by adding to His requirements for salvation. He used the illustration of a heavy yoke being placed on the necks of new believers. The yoke of the law could only be carried by Jesus, and He had already done this perfectly to secure salvation for all who come to Him. Why would they expect something from new converts that no one else had been able to manage? Peter reminded them they had each been saved by grace through faith and nothing else. This was God's plan that Jesus carried out and it applied to both Jews and Gentiles.

-  Application: Where do you need to take a stand for your faith and share with others how they can be saved by grace through faith?

## Conclusion

When God is at work, there will be opposition against that work. The enemy will work to distract and destroy what God is doing. The church at Antioch was growing and flourishing as they reached Gentiles in that area. The men who came to teach a false doctrine were committed to their beliefs and would not listen to the truth when confronted by Paul and Barnabas.

There are times to let matters of dispute go because they are not core salvation issues. There are also times when we must be committed to take a stand against false teaching. In this, we show that we care more about the health of the church and reaching lost people than avoiding conflict. False doctrine is dangerous and destructive. The best way to see it is to know the truth so well that you recognize the difference. When our convictions are rooted in Scripture, we don't have to shy away from difficult conversations over important matters. We can and should also ask for wise counsel from other believers. Paul and Barnabas took their issue to Jerusalem. You also have people and places you can go for guidance. Use the biblical counsel God has given to equip you in reaching the lost people around you.

- ❓ What are common forms of false doctrine today? How do these threaten to influence those in the church?
- ❓ Who is someone you can go to for encouragement and wise counsel when faced with false teaching on an important matter?
- ❓ Who is God putting on your heart to have a gospel conversation with this week? How will you pursue them with the truth?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank the Lord for giving us His Word so we can know and stand on truth. Ask for wisdom and discernment to recognize any places you face false teachings that may need to be addressed.*

## Additional Resources

- *Tactics* by Gregory Koukl
- *Acts* by Charles Swindoll
- *Acts Chapters 15-28* by J. Vernon McGee

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples



### Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

\*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

### DxD This Week

#### ***Call to Action***

Engage the lost and searching in gospel conversations that invite people to ask hard questions about following Jesus.



## For Next Week

### Session Title

- Guidance

### Main Passages

- Acts 16:6-10

### Session Outline

1. Stopped by the Spirit (Acts 16:6-8)
2. Clear Direction (Acts 16:9-10)
3. Knowing His Voice (Proverbs 16:1-3)

### Memorize

*“And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us.” - Acts 15:8*

# 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 15:1-11

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.<sup>2</sup>

## References

1. “New Data Shows FTC Received 2.8 Million Fraud Reports from Consumers in 2021,” Federal Trade Commission, February 22, 2022, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2022/02/new-data-shows-ftc-received-28-million-fraud-reports-consumers-2021-0>.
2. M. David Sills, “Opportunities and Challenges in Global Missions,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1744–1746.

## Author Bio

### Gregory Koukl (Tactics)

Gregory Koukl holds MA degrees in both apologetics and philosophy. He's spoken on over 80 university campuses and hosted his own radio talk show for 30 years defending "Christianity worth thinking about." Greg is founder and president of Stand to Reason (str.org) and serves as adjunct professor of Christian apologetics at Biola University.

### Charles Swindoll (Acts)

Charles R. Swindoll is the founder and senior pastor-teacher of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas. But Chuck's listening audience extends far beyond a local church body, as Insight for Living airs on major Christian radio markets around the world. Chuck's extensive writing ministry has also served the body of Christ worldwide, and his leadership as president and now chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary has helped prepare and equip a new generation of men and women for ministry. Chuck and his wife, Cynthia, his partner in life and ministry, have four grown children, ten grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

### J. Vernon McGee (Acts Chapters 15-28)

Dr. J. Vernon McGee (1904-1988) spent more than 50 years teaching the Bible on his "Thru the Bible" radio broadcast. He pastored for more than 40 years and has authored many best-selling books, including *Doctrine for Difficult Days*.