

Acts 14:27-15:32. The Jerusalem Council

The passage's purpose in the narrative.

This chapter could be looked at as the heart of the Book of Acts, because it concerns the mystery of the one new man comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. Or, I take it to be the resolution of a hindrance to the gospel going out to the Gentiles. The main story of Acts, after the apostles and the church had witnessed in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria in chapters 1-8, is the church of Antioch sending Paul out to the Gentiles.

Peter's opening the door to the Gentiles as a preparation for the gospel going out to the Gentiles is presented between Saul's conversion in chapter 9 and the establishment of the church at Antioch in chapter 11. Also, the persecution by Herod in Jerusalem in chapter 12, is enclosed by the church of Antioch sending of Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem with alms in 11:27-30, and their return in 12:25, to show it's a subsidiary event. Finally, the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15 is enclosed by both the church of Antioch sending Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem and their return in 14:27-15:2 and 15:30-35, and also by their sending Paul on the first and second missionary journeys to the Gentiles in Acts 13:1-14:26 and 15:40-18:22.

The Book of Acts

Acts 1:1-5:52 Jerusalem

Acts 6:1-8:40 Judea and Samaria

Acts 9:1-28:31 The World

Saul and the Church at Antioch

Acts 9:1:31 The Conversion of Saul (Divine Intervention)

Acts 9:32-11:18. Peter Opened the Door to the Gentiles (Divine Intervention)

Acts 11:19-26. Saul at the Church at Antioch (Divine Intervention via Persecution)

The Jerusalem Persecution

Acts 11:27-30. The Church of Antioch Sent Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem with a Gift

Acts 12:1-24. The Persecution in Jerusalem by Herod
Acts 12:25. Barnabas and Saul Returned to the Church at Antioch

The First Missionary Journey of Paul from the Church at Antioch

Acts 13:1-3. The Church of Antioch Sent Barnabas and Saul to the Gentiles (Divine Intervention)

Acts 13:4-14:25. The First Gentile Missionary Journey

Acts 14:26. Barnabas and Saul Returned to the Church at Antioch

The Jerusalem Council

Acts 14:27-15:2. Antioch Sent Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem Regarding the Gentiles

Acts 15:3-29. The Jerusalem Council Decided Regarding the Gentiles

Acts 15:30-35. Barnabas and Paul Returned to the Church at Antioch

The Second Missionary Journey of Paul from the Church at Antioch

Acts 15:40. The Church of Antioch Sent Paul and Silas to the Gentiles

Acts 15:41-Acts 21:16. The Second Gentile Missionary Journey

Acts 18:22. Paul Returned to the Church at Antioch

So, the Jerusalem council was mainly the resolution of a potential hindrance of the gospel going out to the Gentiles, as Jesus' commissioned the apostles in Acts 1:8. Even if the Jerusalem council had decided wrongly, and ruled that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved, it would not have changed anything, except to have been a great hindrance. Everyone who knows God and has his Spirit within him knows he was saved by faith in Messiah's provision and nothing else. Paul would have continued to preach that, Peter and James and every believer would have continued to know that, the church would eventually have been guided more by the apostles' epistles than by the Jerusalem Council decisions, as we are today, but a great deal of temporary confusion and delay was avoided by the good decision at the Jerusalem council, that caused everyone to "rejoice[d] for the consolation" (Acts 15:31).

What takes place?

Teachers came from Judea to Antioch saying the Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. After much disputing with them, the church at

Antioch sent a delegation including Barnabas and Paul to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the matter. The Judaizers repeated their claims in Jerusalem, and the apostles and elders held a meeting to consider the matter. After Peter re-testified about the conversion of the Gentiles with Cornelius and gave his opinion, and Barnabas and Paul reported the things that happened on their missionary journey, then James pointed to the Old Testament scriptures, and decided they shouldn't ask the Gentiles to be circumcised or keep the Law of Moses, but should write asking them to abstain from idolatry, fornication, and eating blood (including things strangled). The whole church agreed, and the apostles wrote that the Judaizing teachers hadn't been sent from them, and they sent Barsabas and Silas along with their letter to confirm its message orally.

Important observations?

1) Clarity About What Was at Issue. The primary issue was whether Gentile believers need to be circumcised to be saved, but the bigger picture was what must any person do to be saved. The teachers that came from Judea to Antioch said, "Except ye be circumcised [verse 5 adds and keep the law of Moses] ye cannot be saved." At first it appeared to be an issue only for the Gentile believers, since all the Jewish believers were already ceremonially circumcised. But as Peter said, "we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they" (Acts 15:11). In saying this, he was probably echoing the words of Paul, when he rebuked Peter publicly at Antioch for separating from the Gentiles. "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ,

and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,” Gal. 2:15-16.

2) Luke Minimized Paul’s Role in the Proceedings. Since the issue primarily arose because of the gospel Paul preached among the Gentiles, both in Phrygia/Galatia and Antioch, and since it concerned the message he will continue to preach in Greece and Asia and beyond for the rest of the book of Acts, Luke (as the author, and Paul as the participant) allowed the apostles and elders of Jerusalem to come to their own decision, and even Barnabas is listed before Paul in going to the council and testifying there. Paul had already defended salvation by faith alone to Peter and Barnabas in Antioch per Galatians 2, and he was confident in them and the Holy Spirit, and Luke wanted his readers to know Paul had the genuine, uncoerced support of Jerusalem for his mission to the Gentiles in the rest of the book.

3) Believers Should Not Eat Blood. Before the Law of Moses, Noah said regarding all people, not just Jewish people, meat may be eaten, murder is forbidden and should be punished, and eating blood is forbidden out of respect for life. Gentiles don’t need the Bible to know it’s ok to eat meat, and it’s wrong to murder, but only the Bible reveals it’s also wrong to eat blood, so James included this prohibition for believing Gentiles.

Also, Leviticus 17 says it wrong not only for Jews, but also Gentiles who live in Israel, to eat blood, or things strangled, (which is the same thing since more blood is left in the meat,) for the same reason given to Noah. “Whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood. ... No soul of you shall eat blood, neither

shall any stranger that sojourneth among you eat blood. And whatsoever man there be of the children of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, which hunteth and catcheth any beast or fowl that may be eaten; he shall even pour out the blood thereof, and cover it with dust. For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof: therefore I said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh: for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof: whosoever eateth it shall be cut off,” Lev. 17:10-14. Even though the Gentiles in Antioch were not living in Israel, the principle of applying to Gentiles as well as Jews is a reasonable application.

Jesus gave the apostles authority to create legislation for the church. “Whatsoever ye shall bind [prohibit] on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose [permit] on earth shall be loosed in heaven,” Matt. 18:18. Of course this authority only applied to amoral things that can change from age to age and place to place. The apostles didn’t have authority to say murder is now ok, for example. The Jewish rabbis added thousands of laws to the law of Moses, and the apostles only added the prohibition against eating blood to the law of Messiah, though it was already something that even Gentiles who know the Bible (Genesis) should know is prohibited.

These apostolic prohibitions were still in effect for the Gentiles in Asia, Macedonia, and Greece at the time Paul was taken prisoner in Jerusalem, just as much as they were in effect for Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia when they were first given. “We have four men which have a vow on them. ... Purify thyself with them ... that ... all may know ... thou thyself ... walkest orderly and keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep

themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication,” Acts 21:23-25.

Reformed Theology, has its foundations in spiritualized, symbolic interpretations regarding Israel that make prohibitions such as not eating blood seem nonsensical for us today, yet such theology gives a high place to baptism and communion, which are also physical observances. And all the church, Reformed and otherwise, has abandoned the command given by the resurrected Jesus to the apostles for the headcovering church service observance. (Acts 1:2; 1 Cor. 11:2, 17, 20). Since the church has been given so few amoral commands, we should obey the few we’ve been given, whether through Jesus or the apostles.

The apostles’ prohibition against “fornication” may refer to the immoral practices described in Leviticus 18, since those also include the strangers in Israel. “Ye ... shall not commit any of these abominations; neither any of your own nation, nor any stranger that sojourneth among you,” Lev. 18:26. Or, fornication may have been included because it , along with complex relationships with idolatry, were bigger problems among Gentiles, and the believers didn’t have the completed New Testament to make the Jerusalem Council’s guidance redundant yet. “Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led,” 1 Cor. 12:2. “Abstain from fornication, ... the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God,” 1 Thess. 4:3-5. “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, ... and abominable idolatries,” 1 Pet. 4:3. Now that we have the whole New Testament, even Gentiles clearly understand the need to avoid fornication and idolatry, but we are still dependent on Acts 15 and Genesis 9 to know not to eat blood.

4) Paul Fought False Teaching, But Yielded Personal Rights. Paul stood firm against the teachers who taught the Gentiles they needed to be circumcised to be saved. “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them,” Acts 15:2. He stood firm against Peter and Barnabas for separating from the Gentile brethren. “When Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. ... When I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all ...,” Gal. 2:11, 14. He stood firm against the false brethren that pressured Titus to be circumcised. “Neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you,” Gal. 2:3-5.

But soon after leaving the Jerusalem counsel, he had Timothy circumcised, because he was part Jew, and Paul had no need to resist Gentile circumcision for salvation in this case, and because the purpose of his circumcision was for the furtherance of the gospel and a better ministry. “Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek,” Acts 16:3. “Though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews ...,” 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

5) There Was Wide Participation in Decision Making. When the Judaizers came down from Judea to Antioch and taught circumcision was required for salvation, the leaders of the church at Antioch had not locked things up so much, and held such tight

control of things, that everyone had to be approved by the elders before they were allowed to teach. That would be contrary to the principle of church participation, but the elders did stand up against the false teaching with “dissension and disputation” (Acts 15:2). When the church at Antioch sent representatives to Jerusalem about this issue, they not only sent Barnabas and Paul, but “certain other of them” (Acts 15:2) also.

When the “apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter” (Acts 15:6), there was “much disputing” (Acts 15:7). It seems everyone had the opportunity to present their views. If James and Peter hadn’t given the Judaizers sufficient opportunities to present their views, the council’s resolution would have resolved nothing, and the issues would have continued under the surface and have broken out again publicly at a later time. So just as the church services described in 1 Cor. 12-14 seem to have been very participatory, and just as there was a plurality of elder/pastors leading every church, so also the Jerusalem council and the narrative of Acts 15 demonstrated wide participation in church teaching and decision making.

6) Jews Shouldn’t Stop Being Jews. Acts 15 shows that Gentiles aren’t required to become Jewish proselytes to be saved. But in our days, there’s no pressure on Gentiles to become Jews, but a lot of pressure on Jews to become Gentiles, and the principles of Acts 15 prohibit this kind of teaching as well.

The new man, the body of Christ, is made up of both Jew and Gentile. Paul says since Messiah died, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), but this is concerning spiritual salvation. “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” Gal. 3:26. In the physical realm, there are still males and females, or it would be ok for

males to marry males. We don't make men and women dress the same because "there is neither male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). And it's wrong to make Jews be like Gentiles. "Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace," Gal. 2:15. But if there are not twain, then there can't be one of twain. If there is no male or female, then man and wife can't become one flesh from two.

The unity presented in the Bible is not the unity of sameness, but of love that unites those who are different. "Be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves," Phil. 2:2-3. Jewish people don't have to be circumcised and keep the law to be saved, as Peter clearly said in Acts 15. But Jewish males do need to be circumcised to be obedient to the commandment to Abraham, which preceded the law of Moses. And they have a responsibility to not cast off their Jewishness (unless for survival or something).

Churches that are against Messianic type services because we are all one in Messiah, and "there is neither Jew nor Gentile" (Gal. 3:28), are doing what Paul was wrongfully accused of doing in Acts 21. "They are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. ... [But let] all ... know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law," Acts 21:24.

Tension, plot development, dialogue, and resolution.

Luke keeps us in suspense as to what the outcome will be until the end. When Barnabas and Paul returned to the church at Antioch and told how God “rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27), Luke recorded no reaction from the church, just “and there they abode long time with the disciples” (Acts 14:28). Their report did cause “great joy unto all the brethren” (Acts 15:3) as they told the news of “the conversion of the Gentiles” (Acts 15:3) to those they passed through in Phoenicia and Samaria, but “when they were come to Jerusalem, [and] were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them” (Acts 15:4), nothing. Luke doesn’t give us any response like he did after Peter in 11:18, “they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.” Even after they listen to Barnabas and Paul declare “what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them” (Acts 15:12), nothing; “and after they had held their peace, James answered” (Acts 15:13). Not until after we hear what James has to say, and “then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church” (Acts 15:22) do we know all is well again.

The main point of the episode?

Gentiles are saved and incorporated into the body of Messiah as Gentiles, and Jews shouldn’t stop being like Jews either.

Why included in the book?

The spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome (and then to the uttermost part of the earth) faced an important challenge, and its resolution enabled the gospel to go out all the world unhindered.

Application today?

- 1) Neither Jews nor Gentiles need to be circumcised or keep the law to be saved.
- 2) Both Jews and Gentiles are free to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, so long as it is not done for salvation.
- 3) Jewish believers should continue to identify as Jewish, so long as there are no overriding reasons not to.
- 4) Neither Jews nor Gentiles of any country or any time should ever eat blood, unless there are overriding reasons to do so (like avoid starvation)
- 5) The apostles had apostolic authority and a unique role in the history of the church which no one has today.
- 6) Broad participation is a critical part of godly church ministry and decision making.