

## The Council at Jerusalem

**Lesson Scope:** Acts 15:1-35

*References in brackets refer to Acts 15 unless otherwise specified*

### Lesson Focus

With the beginning of the New Testament church came many changes. The temple with its furnishings, the priests, and the animal sacrifices had come to an end. At Christ's death, the veil of the temple was rent, providing direct access to God.

Many Jews who had been serving God and waiting for the Messiah accepted Jesus as their Lord, and were baptized into the New Testament church. These Jewish Christians held to many of their former Old Testament Jewish practices, such as circumcision. Great conflict arose in the early church when some men tried to impose circumcision on the Gentile converts. The apostles and elders assembled in Jerusalem to attend to this matter.

At times, disagreements will arise within the brotherhood. Resolving the underlying issues in a Scriptural way glorifies God and strengthens the church.

According to Acts 10:35, 45, the Gentiles were clearly accepted into the church, and those who were not circumcised had received the Holy Ghost. However, there were Judaizers who rigorously taught circumcision as a necessary part of salvation.

The Jerusalem conference met and determined that circumcision was not necessary for the Gentiles. The apostles and elders wrote a formal reply to resolve the issue.

This is the last mention of Peter in the Book of Acts.

**Lesson Aim:** To explain the Biblical method for resolving issues in the church.

**Theme Verse:** Romans 14:19. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

## Lesson Text

### Addressing the Question

Acts 15:1-6

<sup>1</sup> (KJV) And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, *and said*, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. <sup>2</sup> When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. <sup>3</sup> And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. <sup>4</sup> And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and *of* the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses. <sup>6</sup> And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

### Analysing the Issue

Acts 15:7-20

<sup>7</sup> (KJV) And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men *and* brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us; <sup>9</sup> And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. <sup>12</sup> Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them. <sup>13</sup> And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men *and* brethren, hearken unto me: <sup>14</sup> Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, <sup>16</sup> After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will

build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: <sup>17</sup> That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. <sup>18</sup> Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. <sup>19</sup> Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: <sup>20</sup> But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and *from* fornication, and *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

### **Rejoicing for the Consolation**

Acts 15:22

<sup>22</sup> (KJV) Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

Acts 15:30-35

<sup>30</sup> (KJV) So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: <sup>31</sup> *Which* when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. <sup>32</sup> And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed *them*. <sup>33</sup> And after they had tarried *there* a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles. <sup>34</sup> Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still. <sup>35</sup> Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

### **Questions for Study**

#### **Addressing the Question**

1. Why is it important to address issues that arise?
2. What is the leaders' responsibility in solving issues? What is the members' responsibility?
3. Why is it imperative to focus on the underlying issue when resolving conflict?

#### **Analysing the Issue**

4. Why is it helpful to look back and see how God has Worked in the past?
5. Why is God's Word the only safe guide for making decisions?
6. How were the concise directions given by letter to the church?

effective in bringing rest?

### **Rejoicing for the Consolation**

7. What was the value in sending Judas and Silas along to Antioch to help deliver the letter (15:27)?

8. How can practical teaching and preaching help to avoid issues today?

### **Analysing the Passage**

The certain men who came from Judea with the purpose of teaching their beliefs to the Christians at Antioch were known as Judaizers (15:1). They no doubt had questions, but they were vigorously pushing their own ideas. Peter rehearsed his vision, his call to Cornelius's house, the Gentiles' salvation, and their receiving of the Holy Ghost (15:7-9).

Paul and Barnabas declared the miracles God had done among the Gentiles in Asia Minor (15:12).

James referred to the prophecy of Amos 9:11-12, of the Gentiles coming to God (15:16-17). The church was privileged to witness the fulfillment of this prophecy.

### **Principles and Applications**

#### **Addressing the Question**

1. Addressing issues is part of the process of resolving them (15:1 -2).

Overlooking an issue will not cause it to go away it would only magnify the problem. Our leaders are responsible to discuss the issues at hand and to outline solutions. We are called to pray for our leaders in this responsibility and to graciously accept their conclusions.

2. Church leaders are responsible to deal with issues that arise (15:2).

This is best done in a collective manner, when various perspectives are shared on a matter. There is safety and blessing in a group of Spirit-filled brethren who gather and contemplate the issues at hand. As each leader is committed to listen and to share, a proper conclusion can be attained, which will strengthen and unify the body.

3. To resolve brotherly disagreements, spiritual brethren need to discuss the underlying issues (15:6). This means leaving the matches at home; we are not out to attack or burn each other's person or character. Rather the focus must be on the issues in question and the finding of a workable solution. When brethren are committed to working out differences

from the premise of God's Word, there will be a way through. God rewards those who sow seeds of peace and unity in the brotherhood.

### **Analysing the Issue**

4. Issues can be resolved when brethren are sensitive to God's work in the past (15:7-11). It is always inspiring to look back and see how God has provided in the past. By learning from church history and from our previous experiences in life, we can find answers to present-day issues.

"There is no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). There are only "new" forms of tests to time-proven principles. In resolving conflict, we should highly regard the advice of the older brethren among us.

5. It is Biblical to resolve church issues in an orderly manner (15:12-13). As brethren, we discuss issues charitably. We listen for the good in another's opinions. In a group of five brethren, the best opinion sometimes is the sixth one, or the blending of ideas to reach a solution. Sometimes, more than one course of action would be right. We need to arrive at a conclusion; then we wholeheartedly support the group decision.

6. Spiritual brethren allow God's Word to direct their thoughts when resolving issues (15:15). The discussion must focus on determining God's will. God's Word provides a sure foundation. The feelings and ideas of men may help to give direction, but they are not always a safe guide to follow. The Bible is always a safe guide.

7. Giving concise direction helps to resolve issues (15:20). The leaders present at the Jerusalem conference prepared a clear response for the Gentile Christians—they were not required to practice circumcision. The reply to them did include four areas they were to observe and possibly strengthen: "that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood." Writing the response in a letter helped to avoid misunderstandings or mistakes in carrying out the decision.

### **Rejoicing for the Consolation**

8. Issues can be resolved when leaders faithfully inform the church of decisions reached (15:22). Not only did they send Paul and Barnabas to Antioch with the decision; they also sent two of their own leaders, Judas and Silas. This may have helped to add weight to the verdict.

9. Teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord helps to avoid and

resolve issues (15:35). God's Word has the answers to all of our questions.

Practical teaching and preaching, with applications to current fads and issues we are facing, will stimulate growth and conviction in the brotherhood. We cannot afford to skirt important issues, or try to take the "middle of the road" approach. Rather, we choose the narrow road that leads to heaven. The practical applications the church makes for us help to chart a safe course through this world.

### **Important Teachings**

1. Addressing issues is part of the process of resolving them (15:1-2).
2. Church leaders are responsible to deal with issues that arise (15:2).
3. To resolve brotherly disagreements, spiritual brethren need to discuss the underlying issues (15:6).
4. Issues can be resolved when brethren are sensitive to God's work in the past (15:7-11).
5. It is Biblical to resolve church issues in an orderly manner (15:12-13).
6. Spiritual brethren allow God's Word to direct their thoughts when resolving issues (15:15).
7. Giving concise direction helps to resolve issues (15:20).
8. Issues can be resolved when leaders faithfully inform the church of decisions reached (15:22).
9. Teaching and preaching the Word of the Lord helps to avoid and resolve issues (15:35).

### **Answers to Questions**

1. Why is it important to address issues that arise? It is the only way to bring unity, cohesion, growth, and stability. Normally problems grow if they are not resolved.
2. What is the leaders' responsibility in solving issues? What is the members' responsibility? Leaders must consider various angles, pray, and discuss it with other brethren. They must choose a safe course. We are accountable to pray for our leaders, share concerns, and quietly submit. We must support the group decision cheerfully.
3. Why is it imperative to focus on the underlying issue when resolving conflict?

As humans, we can quickly allow emotions to be in control. Then we get out of control, and much harm is done. We must resolve to work together peaceably. It is easy to become side-tracked by the details not altogether related to the real issue.

4. Why is it helpful to look back and see how God has worked in the past? God has never forsaken His people. He has always made a way through. We can learn from the successes and failures in our lives and others. Life is too short to learn everything by experience.

5. Why is God's Word the only safe guide for making decisions? God's Word is truth; it is infallible. While brethren can give direction and make decisions, their efforts must be founded on God's Word. What is of man will come to naught; what is of God cannot be overthrown.

6. How were the concise directions given by letter to the church effective in bringing rest? An answer was determined, and the church could move ahead. The written reply could be referenced in the future; it helped to avoid misunderstanding.

7. What was the value in sending Judas and Silas along to Antioch to help deliver the letter (15:27)? The church at Antioch could see this decision was not just made by Paul and Barnabas. This representation of men from the Jerusalem conference gave an added dimension to the reply.

8. How can practical teaching and preaching help to avoid issues today? As we anchor our lives on the principles of God's Word, we can weather the gales that blow without being shipwrecked. Practical teaching and preaching help to build conviction in the rising generation.

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

“For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (James 3: 16-18).

### **Research Guide**

Study Paul's writings that deal with the threat of the Judaizers—Galatians 2:11 And Galatians 5:6 and others.