

Acts 15**Lesson 14****The Jerusalem Discussion about Circumcision****Outline****I. The Discussion in Jerusalem** (vv. 1-29)

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- B. *The speeches* (vv. 6-21)
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 - 2. Paul and Barnabas spoke (v. 12)
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- C. *A letter was sent from the apostles and elders to the Gentiles in Antioch* (vv. 22-29)

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III. Beginning the Second Journey (vv. 36-41)

- A. *Paul and Barnabas disagreed over John Mark* (vv. 36-38)
- B. *Paul and Barnabas separated* (vv. 39-41)
 - 1. Barnabas and John Mark sailed to Cyprus (v. 39)
 - 2. Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia (vv. 40-41)

Key Verse that Summarizes the Chapter**Acts 15:2**

Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

The previous chapter ends with Paul and Barnabas back at Antioch working with the church. During that time some Judaizing teachers have come from Jerusalem teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. The meeting(s) here have been called the Jerusalem "conference". This is not a conference wherein the vote of the majority determines the official church doctrine or policy. I prefer to call this the Jerusalem discussion.

The Discussion in Jerusalem (vv. 1-29)

The problem explained (vv. 1-5). The Judaizing teachers came to Antioch teaching that Gentiles must become like Jews (by being circumcised) in order to be saved (v. 1). The fact that they were from Judea gave the impression that “Jerusalem” (the church there, its elders, and the apostles) was in agreement.

Paul and Barnabas “had no small dissension and dispute with them” (v. 2). “Dissension” literally means “a standing” (Strong’s). Thus, they stood against or “argued” (LBP) against them. The error had caused discord.¹ “Dispute” literally means “questioning” (ASV).² Paul and Barnabas called the doctrine into question. Thus, a “debate” (NIV) ensued.³

The controversy was “no small” one. It was a big and serious debate because the doctrine being addressed was a fundamental violation of the gospel. It denied the sufficiency of the gospel.⁴

It was determined that Paul, Barnabas and some other brethren would go to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the question (v. 2). What was the purpose of going to the apostles and elders? It was not to learn the truth about whether circumcision was essential. Paul and Barnabas already knew the truth as evidence in their speech later in Jerusalem (v. 12). Neither was it to establish policy. They went so that Antioch could see where the Jerusalem church, with its elders and the apostles, stood.⁵

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem they reported to the church, the apostles, and elders how God had worked through them among the Gentiles (v. 4). However, some Pharisees, who had been converted, rose up contending that it was necessary to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (v. 5).⁶

There were public and private meetings involved in this meeting at Jerusalem. This meeting in verse 4 was a public meeting. “It seems that the assembly adjourned to meet again at another hour.”⁷ There was another meeting of the apostles and elders (vv. 6-22) along with the “multitude” (v. 12) or the “whole church” (v. 22). There was also a private meeting in which Paul met with those “of reputation.” “I did so *in private* to those who were of reputation” (Gal. 2:2, NASV, emphasis mine, DVR). This private meeting must have been either prior to or between the public meetings.⁸ In this private meeting the right hand of fellowship was extended to Paul (Gal. 2:9).⁹

1 The same word is translated “insurrection” (Mark 15:7), and “uproar” (Acts 19:40) in the KJV. Thus, the idea is that Paul and Barnabas rose up against the false teachers.

2 The same word is translated “questions” (Acts 25:20; 1 Tim. 1:4; 6:4; Tit. 3:9) in the KJV.

3 Debate is good. We are to contend for the faith (Jude 3). Paul was set for the defense of the gospel (Phil. 1:17).

4 They did not ignore the error. They did not agree to disagree.

5 The fact that the false teachers were from Judea (v. 1) coupled with the statement of the apostles that they gave no such command (v. 24) suggests that these false teachers left the impression that the apostles and the church at Jerusalem were behind them or at least in agreement.

6 Apparently they tried to harmonize the gospel with the Law of Moses and live by both.

7 J. W. McGarvey, *Original Commentary on Acts*, 183.

8 See J. W. McGarvey, *ibid.*, 183; *New Commentary on Acts*, Vol. II, 60.

9 The meeting(s) in Acts 15 are the same as the meeting(s) in Galatians 2. See Mike Willis, *Truth Commentaries, Galatians*, 46-50.

Is this an example of women in church business meetings? Those who think Acts 15 allows women in business meetings tell us that this chapter is an example of women being involved in making decisions for the church. They think they see that in more than one spot in this chapter.

These brethren contend that the whole church at Antioch (including women) determined to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (vv. 2-3). Thus, women were involved in making that determination. We are told that more than just the apostles and elders (v. 6) were present and discussed the matters at hand. The "multitude" (v. 12) or "whole church" (v. 22) was present. Thus, this was a congregational meeting to discuss the problem. The contention says that the "whole church" (including women) was involved in the decision to send a letter to Antioch and in choosing some of their own to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (v. 22). Then, we are told, that the whole church gathered to receive the letter at Antioch (v. 30) and not just the elders or the men of the congregation. Their conclusion from the above points was: women may attend and participate in business meetings.

Some are using Acts 15 to say that women may attend business meetings, but cannot participate. Others are using the same passage to say that a woman may attend and participate. Still, others are saying that this same text teaches that she must be in the business meetings and be involved in the decision-making process.

Some contend that Acts 15 teaches that women can be in the business meetings in the absence of elders. Others say women are to be a part of the decision-making process even when there are elders. In fact, some are saying that elders cannot make any decision without a congregational meeting.

The question about women and Acts 15 is not: (a) whether there was a gathering of the whole church including women, (b) whether the whole church including women listened to the speeches recorded in vv. 7-21, or (c) whether the whole church including women agreed with the proposal of sending a letter to Antioch. To prove that women were involved in the above (which is what the text says) proves nothing about women in business meetings. The question is whether women were involved in any decision-making process.

Keep in mind that only men were present in the private meeting (Gal. 2:1, 2, 9). Those who participated in the discussions were men. (a) It was the apostles (men) and elders (men) who were to consider the matter (vv. 2, 6). (b) Those who addressed the meeting were men: Peter (v. 7), Paul (v.12), Barnabas (v. 12), and James (v. 13). (c) Those who wrote the letter also gave commands (v. 24). The statement "to whom we gave no such commandment" implies that some commandment was given. Who are the "we"? Were women included in giving commandments? If so, could they do so today? (d) There is no evidence that any woman said anything in either of the public meetings in Acts 15! In fact, the multitude kept silent (v. 12). While it is true that the church (including women) was pleased (v. 22), "we are not told how they reached the decision, whether all the members were consulted, or whether the membership expressed agreement with the apostles and elders. The apostles and elders led in the agreement as they did in the discussion."¹⁰ Those who abuse Acts 15 confuse approval or being pleased over some action with direct participation in decision-making.

To assume that women must have spoken and participated in these meetings is to make the same kind of assumption that our Methodist friends do with the household of Lydia

10 H. Leo Boles, *Gospel Advocate Commentaries*, Acts, 241.

(Acts 16:15). They assume the baptism included infants because they assume infants were in the household. These assumptions involve contradicting other passages of the Bible. Such assumptions cannot be necessarily inferred into the text.

Since the “whole church” (v. 22) was in one place, women could not have spoken and participated in any discussion (1 Cor. 14:34-35, cf. v. 26).

God was directly involved in these meetings of Acts 15. Unlike our business meetings today, God called this meeting. Paul said he went “by revelation” (Gal. 2:2). Furthermore, when the decision was made about circumcision, it was made by the Holy Spirit (v. 28). I hardly think we could attribute some of the decisions we make in business meetings to the Holy Spirit.

What took place in Acts 15 is not parallel to business meetings. Acts 15 would be more parallel to having some public discussion (debate) on a doctrinal matter.¹¹

The speeches (vv. 6-21). The apostles and elders came together to consider the question at hand. This was the second public meeting (v. 6). In the three speeches the apostles appealed to command, approved example and necessary inference.

Peter spoke (vv. 7-11). Peter rose up and spoke about what had happened at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10-11). Peter’s speech used *necessary inference*. Peter learned that he was to take the gospel to the house of Cornelius from the following four events: (a) the heavenly vision (10:9-16), (b) the Spirit’s instruction to follow the men who were sent for him (10:19-20), (c) the story of the angel at Cornelius’ household (v. 22), and (d) the Holy Spirit falling upon the house of Cornelius as Peter began to speak (10:44-47; 11:15).

He was not commanded to go to the Gentiles. Rather, Peter *inferred* from these events that the Gentiles are gospel subjects as well as Jews. Notice how he began his sermon at Cornelius’ household. He said, “I *perceive* that God shows no partiality” (10:34, emphasis mine, DVR). That is a matter of necessary inference. He concluded his sermon by saying, “Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (10:47). Again, he *inferred* from the reception of the Holy Spirit that the Gentiles can be saved just like the Jews.

Peter went to Jerusalem and retold the story (Acts 11). He told them “If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (v. 17). “To have withstood God would have been to refuse to accept the necessary implications of the Holy Spirit’s coming to Cornelius’ household.”¹² The Jews who heard his recounting of these events *concluded* (inferred), “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life” (v. 18).

Where in Acts 10 or 11 was Peter *commanded* to preach to the Gentiles? Rather, he learned that by *inference*.

11 For more in Acts 15 and women in business meetings see my article *Guardian of Truth* XXXIX: 3 p. 18-20, February 2, 1995. (<http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume39/GOT039042.html>).

12 D. E. Koltenbah, *Truth Magazine*, XI, 11 pp. 15-18, August 1967.

When Peter came to the Jerusalem discussion (Acts 15) he told about the Holy Spirit falling upon the house of Cornelius (vv. 7-8). He *deduced* that God “made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith” (v. 9).

The conclusion was that Gentiles could be saved without being circumcised.

Paul and Barnabas spoke (v. 12). They *used approved examples*. They told about the examples of them preaching among the Gentiles with God’s approval (miracles and wonders). This is a reference to their work in the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14). The miracles at Paphos (13:8-12), Iconium (14:3), and Lystra (14:8-10) demonstrated that their example of preaching to Gentiles was approved.

James spoke (vv. 13-21). James *used a command or direct statement from God*. James appealed to Amos 9:11-12 which specifically said that those who may seek the Lord included the Gentiles (v. 17). The conclusion was that Gentiles could be saved without being circumcised.

James proposed that they write to the Gentiles and warn them about bringing in heathen practices associated with idolatry (vv. 20-21).

A letter was sent from the apostles and elders to the Gentiles in Antioch (vv. 22-29). As James proposed, a letter was composed and sent by the hand of Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas (v. 22). The letter had seven fundamental points.

1. We hear that some unsettle you by their teaching (vv. 23-24).
2. We (the apostles) have given no such command (v. 24). We are not behind or even in agreement with these teachers.
3. We are united on this (v. 25a).
4. The men we send will tell you the same thing (vv. 25b-27). Paul, Barnabas, and the other men sent with them will tell you orally what we are saying by letter.
5. The answer is given by the Holy Spirit (v. 28a).
6. Add no greater burden (v. 28). To require circumcision would be adding a burden that God did not.
7. Abstain from things associated with idolatry (v. 29, cf. v. 20). (a) Things offered to idols. Meat sacrificed in honor of idols was also eaten at feasts that honored idols. This was forbidden.¹³ (b) Blood. Idol worshippers would drink the blood of sacrifices. (c) Things strangled. This refers to meat not properly bled. (d) Sexual immorality. Though any and all fornication would be wrong, this refers to the sexual immorality connected with idolatry.

The Church at Antioch Received the Letter (vv. 30-35)

¹³ Paul wrote to the Corinthians that eating meat in honor of an idol was wrong (1 Cor. 10:20-21). However, merely eating the meat (not in a feast to honor the idol) was not wrong (1 Cor. 8:8; 10:25-26). Barnes argues about verse 20: “James advised that the Christians at Antioch be recommended to abstain from this. To partake of that food might not be morally wrong (1 Cor 8:4), but it would give occasion for scandal and offence; and, therefore, as a matter of expediency, it was advised that they should abstain from it” (*Barnes’ Notes*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997 by BibleSoft).

Rejoiced over its encouragement (vv. 30-32). When those carrying the letter arrived in Antioch, they assembled the church and delivered the message (v. 30). They rejoiced over the message and were encouraged (v. 31).¹⁴

The brethren departed (vv. 33-35). Judas and Silas were prophets who spent time exhorting and strengthening the brethren (v. 32).¹⁵ The brethren at Antioch sent the messengers back with greetings to the apostles (v. 33). However, Silas, Paul, and Barnabas stayed in Antioch preaching and teaching (vv. 34-35).

Beginning the Second Journey (vv. 36-41)

Paul and Barnabas disagree over John Mark (vv. 36-38). After some time passed, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back and revisit the churches that were established on the first trip to see how they were doing (v. 36). Barnabas wanted to take John Mark (v. 37). But, Paul had lost confidence in him since he turned back on the first trip (v. 38; cf. 13:13). Paul thought he had displayed weakness and was not reliable. Barnabas thought he should be given a second chance.¹⁶ “Perhaps the *combination* of Paul’s and Barnabas’ attitudes was good for Mark. Paul’s attitude would have impressed him with the seriousness of the weakness he had displayed, and Barnabas’ manifestation of confidence would have encouraged him to make good on his second chance.”¹⁷ John Mark later regained Paul’s confidence (2 Tim. 4:11; Philemon 24; Col. 4:10-11).

Paul and Barnabas separated (vv. 39-41). Each one had such strong feelings about the matter that they parted ways (v. 39). There were no ill feelings, animosity, or hostility toward each other. They each took the course that his judgment deemed appropriate.¹⁸ Barnabas and John Mark sailed to Cyprus (v. 39). Paul and Silas went through Syria and Cilicia (vv. 40-41).

Questions

1. What prompted the discussion in this chapter? _____

2. What does “no small dissension and dispute” (v. 2) mean? _____

14 As a practical matter, when we hear sermons and classes that merely confirm what we already know to be true, it is encouraging.
15 The brethren were strengthened by the *word* that was preached rather than the personality of the speaker or some social activity.
16 Perhaps his thinking was influenced by the fact that they were kin (Col. 4:10).
17 Johnny Stringer, *Truth Commentaries, Acts*, 318.
18 Their difference was not doctrinal, but a matter of judgment. This was not a matter where God had legislated.

3. What was the purpose for sending Paul and Barnabas to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem? _____

4. How do you show that this was not a case of a decision-making meeting where women participated? _____

5. How many public and how many private meetings took place? _____

6. How does Acts 15 show that command, approved example and necessary inference are the ways to establish Bible authority? _____

7. What did Peter say in his speech (vv. 7-11)? _____

8. What did Paul and Barnabas say in their speech (v. 12)? _____

9. What did James say in his speech (vv. 13-21)? _____

10. What is the point being made about unity (v. 25)? _____

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