

Group Study Outline

Acts 15:1-31 Theme Sentence

The way anyone is saved is 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus' with no human supplement.

Launching Question:

Share together any good (or bad!) experiences of 'conflict resolution' (whether that has been in church or secular circles)

READ Acts 15:1

What's the concern of this deputation from Judea? Why is it expressed now? What lies behind it all? So what is the 'conflict' that needs resolution?

READ Acts 15:1-31

Using the table on page 2 of these notes, break down the debate:

- what is the issue (5)?
- what is Peter's contribution (7-11)?
- what point do Paul and Barnabas make (12)?
- what does James say that Amos 9:11-12 tells us (13-19)?
- what is the decision of the council (20-29)?

What does this debate establish about how someone is saved?

Thinking it through

Do we accept what was achieved at the Cross is sufficient, that it is all that we or others need, or do we fail to accept this fully in our daily words or actions? In what ways do we (or others) add things as necessary for people to be saved? If we do, why and how can we learn from the decision of the Jerusalem Council?

Why is it important that we are crystal clear on this?

Let's think some more about the letter sent to back to Antioch.

What lies behind this letter, and its 'conditions'?

If the work of Christ frees me from keeping 'the law', why are there new 'laws'?

When is it right to limit my freedom?

How seriously do we take the need not to offend other believers' scruples?

What makes this difficult?

Can Christians eat black pudding? ... *not as facetious as this may sound!*

Do we value Christian unity as much as did the Council at Jerusalem?

What lessons emerge from this about how Christians should resolve conflict?

On what things was Paul et al. 'stubborn', and when would they compromise?

In what ways do you need to care more for the growth and well-being of others?

OPTIONAL EXTRAS:

Given the importance this chapter puts on Christian unity, what do you make of the 'sharp disagreement' of 15:36-40? why does Luke include this story here? Given the decision of the Council, why does Paul circumcise Timothy (16:1-5)?

Acts 15:1-31



The story so far ...

Paul and Barnabas have just returned from their first missionary journey full of the news that 'God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles' (14:26).

This is a critical point in Acts. Of course, Gentiles have been coming to faith in Christ for several years now. But through those years, a time bomb has been ticking, which now explodes: on what basis are they included in God's people?

This is a critical question historically: is Christianity to remain as a reforming, pressure group within Judaism? Or is the church neither Jews, nor Gentiles, but a third race, 'Christians' (as its new Antioch name suggests cf 11:26).

This is a critical question for the book of Acts. If the gospel is ever to spread beyond the Jewish ghetto (even if it may spread geographically beyond Jerusalem), and if it is ever to reach 'the end of the earth' (1:8), it must be clear whether non-Jewish converts actually need to become Jews.

This is a critical question for us, as non-Jews and yet claiming inclusion within God's people (even though we've not been circumcised). On what basis are we included? Is it possible that we're being presumptuous in our Christianity and that we need to do something more in order to have true assurance?

[NS]

Acts 15:1-31 Theme Sentence

The way anyone is saved is 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus' with no human supplement.

Application

- The basis on which someone is saved is so significant that Christians must be absolutely clear on it, for the sake of people's eternal salvation. The work of Christ on the cross is completely sufficient. The grace of Christ excludes any 'work' of ours. Are we clear on this 'alone' bit of our salvation, renouncing any and every human contribution?
- Are we crystal clear in our gospel proclamation about the basis on which any person can be saved? Is our theology rightly 'pastoral' (ie driven by the 'pastoral' concern for others' salvation)?
- How seriously do we take the need not to cause offence to other believers? Do we value Christian unity as much as did the Council at Jerusalem? Are we willing to limit our legitimate freedoms for the sake of others (both for Christians, and for non-Christians)?

Commentary

This passage may not seem exciting: isn't it just 'a report of the proceedings of the first church synod'?! But actually it is vital for us. At this Council in Jerusalem, 'the truth of the gospel was preserved for us' (Gal 2:5). If it had resolved things differently, the gospel may never have reached Britain (or if it did, it would have had a very different, exclusive and 'Jewish' shape). No wonder this chapter has been called 'the turning point' of the book of Acts.

1, 5 Read this in the context of 13:1-14:26, and particularly the missionary report of 14:27. That report assumes a lot: was it really God who'd been at work ... had he really 'opened a door of faith to the Gentiles'? How could it be that you could be one of God's saved people without bearing the mark of that (by being circumcised)? wasn't this to ignore all God's revelation in the OT? wasn't this to play fast and loose with all the promises of God?

The letter to the Galatians was probably written in the heat of (or just before) this particular crisis. Read Gal 1:11-2:16 to fill in some background.

The Council		
The Issue	15:5	Should Gentile believers take on the OT law when accepting Christ?
Peter speaks	15:7-11	This is a gospel issue: on what basis are Gentiles saved? It is through grace (11), not through being circumcised.
Paul and Barnabas speak	15:12	God had authenticated the apostles' preaching of this gospel amongst Gentiles
James speaks	15:13-19	Amos 9:11-12 says that God always intended to remake the Davidic kingdom to include the remnant of believing Jews (17a) and Gentiles (17b). Gentile Christians in Antioch, called <i>Christians</i> (cf 11:26), do bear his name! So they do belong (14)!
The Decision	15:20-21	Gentiles do not need to be circumcised, but they should respect Jewish Christian scruples over food, and not think that freedom in this issue permits freedom in (eg) sexual matters
The Letter	15:23-29	'The apostle to the Gentiles' is given the job of conveying the decision back to Antioch

7-11 is the critical moment of the debate: is faith in Christ alone sufficient for salvation, or does it need to be supplemented? If the controversy described in Galatians lies behind this Acts 15 Council, what is now clear is this: whatever Peter had once temporarily yielded to (Gal 2:11-12), 'fearing the circumcision party', he is now rock solid, and fully in agreement with Paul. There's lots here that echoes the incident with Cornelius (eg 'no distinction [9 cf 10:34; 11:12]) ... for that is the moment when Peter was shown that 'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins' (10:42). Here that same point is summarised as 'having cleansed their hearts by faith' (9). Nothing more is needed.

Re-examining the Issue

The Council at Jerusalem establishes that salvation is exclusively 'through grace' (11). There are no conditions to that, no additions to that, 'no greater burden'.

This debate has run and run. For example, at the time of the Reformation, everyone agreed that salvation was by faith in Christ. The question was whether it was 'by faith alone' or whether it needed the addition of 'works' too. Martin Luther said that he would die for that word 'alone'!

It's worth considering what 'additions' different sections of the church might impose today (for example, baptism [in Catholic and Baptist circles] or communion [for Anglo- or Roman-Catholics] or things like views on abortion or the return of Jesus [amongst some American Christians] or ...?!).

But it's slightly more complicated. The decision of 15:20, 29 and 21:25 does actually impose some restrictions on Gentile converts ... what is really going on here? The issue is **freedom**. Through the gospel, Gentile Christians (and for that matter, Jewish Christians too) are set 'free' from the demands of the OT law as a means to salvation. But freedom should not be misunderstood:

- There are situations when Christians should restrict their legitimate freedom for the sake of others' scruples (that seems to be the reason given by verse 21: 'for the sake of Jews'). In particular, these Gentile converts should refrain from habits which would make table fellowship with Jewish believers difficult (namely serving/eating food which may have been previously been sacrificed in idol worship, or meat which had been improperly butchered). Christian unity 'trumps' my personal freedom ... and (to use the term from elsewhere in the NT), the 'weaker brother' wins.
- Freedom in some areas of the OT law does not mean freedom in all areas of OT law. In particular, there is nothing 'take it or leave it' about sexual immorality: this is not an area for liberty of discussion, and freedom of conscience! (Alternatively, it could be that the word used here is a reference specifically to idol temple prostitution [which would link this abstinence to the food issues, and explain why 'sexual immorality' needs to be mentioned at all]: the simple point is that Gentile converts should 'turn from idolatry'!)

7 It's no coincidence that this is Peter's last appearance in the book ... his endorsement of the mission to the Gentiles and their inclusion sets up Paul's ministry and the story-line of the rest of the book.

10 Peter's point here is very similar to Paul in 13:9. Jews could never bear this burden, so why do we expect others to?

Peter describes the 'yolk' they were in danger of putting onto Gentiles as a 'test' of God, using the same word as Sapphira's lying in Acts 5:9. So Peter raises the stakes in this debate with Judaisers to the same level of importance as Paul (cf Gal 1:6-8; 2:21; 3:1-3, 26; 5:2-3).

31 Note that the reading of the Council's letter is 'encouragement'. This perhaps underlines the pastoral intent of their letter. It is theological accuracy applied with (not compromised by) pastoral sensitivity ... and the result is profoundly heart-warming and uplifting.