FIVE-DAY THEOLOGY COURSE

ACTS

The Spirit of God in Mission

TAUGHT BY

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Chapter 9: Missionary Council in Jerusalem

The Jerusalem council decides that Gentiles need not become Jewish proselytes to be saved

Day 1: Understanding Acts and Preparing for Pentecost · Day 2: The Spirit-Empowered Church in Jerusalem and Beyond · Day 3: The Gentile Mission and Paul's Missionary Expansion · Day 4: Paul's Missionary Journeys, Jerusalem and Rome

Day 5: Final examination (2026-10-09)

Based on Acts: The Spirit of God in Mission by Denzil R. Miller. Africa's Hope, 2017.

CHAPTER 9 · UNIT 4 · DAY 3

Missionary Council in Jerusalem

The Jerusalem council decides that Gentiles need not become Jewish proselytes to be saved

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Source: Acts: The Spirit of God in Mission - Denzil R. Miller (Based on Chapter 9)

Chapter purpose. This chapter discusses the missionary council in Jerusalem, where the church officially determined that Gentiles did not have to submit to the Law of Moses, which required circumcision for one to be saved.

After the first missionary journey, a dispute in Antioch about circumcision of Gentiles is settled in Jerusalem by the Spirit-guided council.

Bible reading: Acts 15:1-21

Before beginning this chapter, read Acts 15:1-21. Each part of the lesson also has its own short reading from within that passage, and the last part of the lesson covers Acts 15:22-35.

Learning Objectives

• Explain the nature of the dispute that arose in the church in Antioch (Acts 15:1-5).

• State the evidences Peter, Paul, and Barnabas give that God had accepted the Gentiles without their first becoming Jewish proselytes.

• Show from this chapter whether certain Jewish believers were mistaking Jewish cultural requirements for gospel requirements.

• State the result of the Spirit-guided decision that followed the council.

• Explain how important it is to God that His children preserve the bonds of peace and unity among culturally diverse groups of believers, and how a leader can help keep this kind of unity between the churches.

Before This Lesson, Read Your Bible

Acts 15:1-21

The book also sets a short reading before each part of the lesson: review Acts 15:1-5; read Acts 15:6-12; Acts 15:13-21; Acts 15:22-35.

The Big Idea

The Jerusalem council decides that Gentiles need not become Jewish proselytes to be saved. Salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by faith in Christ alone. This decision freed the church to be the global missionary force that Christ intended it to be, rather than a mere sub-sect of Judaism.

The Gentile Question

• After the Caesarean and Antiochian outpourings, the church continued to grow and extend itself. By now, it had ranged as far north as Galatia in eastern Asia Minor.

• There, Paul and Barnabas had been sent as the church's first intentional missionaries to the Gentiles. They had experienced great success, and several indigenous churches had been planted, resulting in many new believers being added to the Lord.

• These new believers came from four classes of people: Jews, Jewish proselytes, God-fearers, and Gentiles. It was the last two classes that created controversy in the church.

• Certain Jewish believers contended that before these two groups could be saved, they must first submit to the Jewish rite of circumcision. This debate has been called the "Gentile Question." Acts 15 records the story of how the controversy was resolved.

• In this chapter we will discuss the church council in Jerusalem where the issue was addressed directly. It occurred soon after Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, and we refer to it as the missionary council in Jerusalem.

• It was a highly significant event in the church's missionary development. It was for this reason that Luke included it in his narrative.

• At this council the church officially determined that Gentiles did not have to submit to the Law of Moses, which required circumcision for one to be saved.

• As Scripture makes clear, salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by faith in Christ alone.

• This decision freed the church to be the global missionary force that Christ intended it to be, rather than a mere sub-sect of Judaism.

The Story: Dissension in Antioch (Acts 15:1-5)

Some Jewish brothers arrived in Antioch from Judea and began to teach the Christians there that believers must be circumcised before they could be saved. Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this teaching and entered into a sharp dispute with them. The leaders in the church in Antioch, therefore, appointed Paul and Barnabas, along with some other believers from the church, to go to Jerusalem and discuss the matter with the apostles and elders there.

On their journey to Jerusalem, the delegation traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, where they gave reports about how the Gentiles had come to Christ. This news made the believers in those places glad. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, they were received warmly by the leadership of the church. They then gave a report of all that God had done through them among the Gentiles. However, some of the Pharisees who had become believers objected, saying that the Gentile Christians must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be saved.

Commentary on Acts 15:1-5

• Must a Gentile first become a good Jew before he or she can become a Christian?

• As simple as that question may seem to us today, it was not so simple for the early church. Christianity had been born into the cradle of Judaism.

• However, in order for it to grow into a worldwide movement, it had to break free from the binding legalism of the Jewish religion.

• Some Jewish Christians resisted the call for liberation. Others, like Paul and Barnabas, knew that it must take place if Christianity was to prosper among the nations.

• That is why they decided to travel all the way to Jerusalem to settle the matter once and for all.

15:2 Sharp dispute

• That some would teach that a person must keep the Law of Moses before becoming a Christian was no small issue. It struck at the very heart of the gospel of grace.

• Paul and Barnabas had no choice but to oppose this teaching, even if it meant sharp dispute.

• Some issues are so important that they cannot be ignored; they must be addressed and resolved.

This question

• The "question" referred to is the Gentile question.

• After God had poured out His Spirit on the Gentile believers in Caesarea, the apostles and brothers in Jerusalem praised God and said that "God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (11:18). It was a historic occasion. It did not, however, finally settle the Gentile question.

• The question was this: How could those who were ritually unclean according to the Law of Moses be accepted by God?

• On one hand, how could uncircumcised Gentiles, who ate nonkosher foods and defiled themselves by participating in pagan practices, be true followers of Jehovah God without first becoming good Jews?

• On the other hand, had not Jesus himself commanded the church to take the gospel to these very people? Had He not commissioned His church to be His witnesses to the "remotest parts of the earth?"

• How, then, were they to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory issues? This was the question that needed to be resolved.

15:5 The party of the Pharisees

• These legalistic Jewish Christians are sometimes called Judaizers.

• They were true believers in Christ. In fact, they were probably the most biblically conservative members of the church.

• They were, however, wrong in their belief that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses before they could be saved.

The Story: Peter, Barnabas, and Paul Testify (Acts 15:6-12)

Soon after Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, the apostles and elders met to consider the Gentile question. After much discussion, Peter stood up and reminded the delegates of how God had used him to bring the message of the gospel to the Gentiles in Caesarea. He told them how God had seen into the Gentiles' hearts and had accepted their faith in Him. God proved this by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He had given to the Jewish believers at Pentecost. He made no distinction between them and the Jews, cleansing their hearts by faith.

Peter concluded his address with a challenge: "Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." After Peter had concluded, the whole assembly sat in silence and listened to Paul and Barnabas tell how, through them, God had worked many signs and wonders among the Gentiles.

Commentary on Acts 15:6-12

• At the Jerusalem Council Peter, Paul, and Barnabas stood as witnesses to the fact that God had chosen to include the Gentiles in His plan of salvation.

• They testified how God, by pouring out His Spirit, had extended His hand toward uncircumcised Gentiles. God himself had chosen to include them in His plan of salvation.

• This salvation does not come through keeping the law but through faith in Christ.

15:7 God made a choice

• It is not our choice who should and who should not hear the gospel and be saved.

• The choice to include all people in His plan of salvation was God's alone.

• It was also in God's sovereign plan that Peter would first preach the gospel to the Gentile believers in Caesarea.

15:8 By giving the Holy Spirit to them

• God proved that He had accepted the Gentiles into His family by giving them the Holy Spirit.

• The baptism in the Holy Spirit is an experience for believers only.

• Jesus taught that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to God's children (Luke 11:13). He further taught that the world (unbelievers) cannot receive the Spirit (John 14:17).

Just as he did to us

• God gave the Spirit to the Gentiles at Cornelius' house just as He did to the Jews at Pentecost.

• He gave them the same Spirit, in the same way, with the same evidence (2:4; 10:46), and for the same purpose: empowerment for witness (Acts 1:8).

15:9 He purified their hearts by faith

• It is through faith that all people are saved, whether Jews or Gentiles.

• Salvation does not come by the works of the Law but "through the grace of our Lord Jesus" (v. 11).

• Paul would later write, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

15:12 Miraculous signs and wonders

• The fact that God had done miraculous signs and wonders among (and on behalf of) the Gentiles is another strong indication that He wants to bless them and include them in His family.

The Story: A Word From the Lord (Acts 15:13-21)

After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had finished their speeches, James spoke up and reinforced what Peter had said. He noted that in Caesarea, God had visited the Gentiles and received them to be part of his people. This was in agreement with the words of the Hebrew prophets: "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages" (Amos 9:11-12; Isaiah 45:21-22).

James then delivered his judgment on the matter, stating that the leaders of the

church should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who were turning to God. Only four out of thousands of Jewish religious prohibitions were to be followed by Gentile converts. He said the council should write a letter and tell the Gentile believers that they should not eat food sacrificed to idols and that they must abstain from all sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

He noted that these were some of the very things that Moses taught and had been preached against in Jewish synagogues for many generations. Sexual immorality is clearly forbidden in Scripture, and the other items were important to ensure that Jewish and Gentile Christians would be comfortable eating and fellowshipping together. In this way, James was making a way for the bond of unity and peace to be preserved between culturally diverse Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Commentary on Acts 15:13-21

• Paul and Barnabas, who had opposed the Judaizers in Antioch, were now joined by Peter.

• All three spoke in favor of including the Gentiles into the church without requiring them to first submit to the Law of Moses.

• James also joined them in saying that the church should not make it difficult for the Gentiles to turn to God.

15:13 James spoke up

• This James was the half-brother of Jesus. He was pastor of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the New Testament epistle of James.

• James the apostle and brother of John was martyred by Herod in 12:2.

15:15 The words of the prophets are in agreement

• God's intention to include the Gentiles in His redemptive plan was nothing new.

• It had always been His intention to take out "from the Gentiles a people for himself" (v. 14).

• God told Abraham that through his seed (Jesus), all the nations of earth would be blessed (Genesis 22:18; compare Galatians 3:16).

• The Hebrew prophets consistently testified to the same thing (Isaiah 45:6, 22;

49:6; 51:4-5; 52:10; 56:7; Amos 9:11-12; Zephaniah 2:11; Zechariah 2:10-13).

• As a result, the Gentiles could also bear the Lord's name (v. 17).

15:16 I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent

• This prophecy of Amos said that God would rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David so that Gentiles might seek the Lord.

• Jesus is now the Head of the church as the new place of worship that replaced the temple.

• It is thus God's appointed time for full Gentile inclusion into the kingdom of God.

• Note how James appealed to Scripture to settle the Gentile question.

The Story: An Encouraging Letter (Acts 15:22-35)

After James' speech, the apostles and elders, with the consent of the whole assembly, chose two men from among them, Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas, to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. With them they sent a letter addressed to "the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia." The letter assured the Gentile believers that the men from Judea who had been troubling them did not have the authorization of the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. They were, therefore, sending Judas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas to confirm that the letter had come from them.

The letter called Paul and Barnabas "dear friends" and "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostles further informed its recipients that the decision they had reached "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," indicating that the Holy Spirit had inspired the decision. They assured the Gentile believers that they did not want to place any unnecessary burden upon them; however, they would be required to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.

As soon as the four men arrived in Antioch, they called a meeting of the church and read the letter aloud. When the Gentile believers heard it, they rejoiced. Afterward, Judas and Silas, who were prophets, encouraged and strengthened the believers there. After a while, Judas returned to Jerusalem with the blessing of the church. Paul, Barnabas, and Silas, however, remained in Antioch, where they and

others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Commentary on Acts 15:22-35

• The decision reached by the Jerusalem Council was momentous.

• Because the delegates were open to the Spirit and the teachings of Scripture, the correct decision was reached.

• It resulted in great joy among the new Gentile believers in the church.

• More importantly, the door was opened for the church to continue to expand among the Gentiles unabated.

15:22 Apostles and elders, with the whole church

• Not only were the top leaders of the church brought into the decision-making process, but the whole church was involved.

• This seems to indicate that some primitive form of democracy may have been used in the early church.

15:23 Believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia

• The church, as it was led by the Spirit, continued to expand into new regions.

• What accounted for these believers in Syria and Antioch? The believers in Syria possibly resulted from church-planting efforts of the church in Antioch. The believers in Cilicia possibly resulted from Paul's ministry there. He had spent time in Tarsus, Cilicia, and was probably involved in planting churches in that city and in the surrounding region, as was his custom (11:25).

• Luke did not record all of the church planting efforts of the early church, only those that helped to further his intent in writing.

• Hundreds of other churches were no doubt being planted by the apostles and other Spirit-filled disciples in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia Minor.

• Because these early disciples were empowered by the Spirit and totally committed to fulfilling the mandate of Christ, there was a spontaneous multiplication of churches.

15:28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

• The Holy Spirit was active in the Council's deliberations. The issue was too

important to trust to human reason.

• Again, we observe the Holy Spirit acting as the Superintendent of the Harvest.

• Exactly how the Holy Spirit helped these leaders and delegates to reach their decision we are not told.

• Possibly a word of prophecy was given, as in Antioch on two earlier occasions (11:28; 13:2); possibly a word of knowledge was given to James or another delegate; or possibly there was a strong inner witness of the Spirit in their hearts.

• However the leading came, the Holy Spirit played an active and significant role in their decision-making process.

15:31 The people read it and were glad

• The Spirit-directed decision of the Jerusalem Council brought great joy to the Gentile believers.

• They could now focus their energy on truly serving Christ and advancing His kingdom rather than on keeping nonessential legalistic rules.

Conclusion

• Having settled the Gentile question, the church was now prepared to continue its Gentile mission unhindered by doctrinal disputes.

• After an extended time of teaching and preaching in the church in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas prepared for their second missionary journey.

• This journey, however, was to begin with a dispute of another sort. In the next chapter we will look at that dispute and Paul's missionary journey that followed it.

Important Terms

Gentile Question. The debate over whether Gentiles and God-fearers had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses before they could be saved.

Judaizers. Legalistic Jewish Christians who taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses to be saved.

Missionary council in Jerusalem. The meeting of apostles and elders in Jerusalem, soon after the first missionary journey, that settled the Gentile Question.

Gospel of grace. The good news that people are saved by faith in Christ, not by keeping the Law.

Jewish proselyte. A Gentile who had fully converted to Judaism, including circumcision.

God-fearer. A Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel but had not been circumcised.

Yoke. Peter's word for the heavy load of the Law, which neither the Jews nor their fathers had been able to bear.

Superintendent of the Harvest. Luke's picture of the Holy Spirit as the one who directs the work of missions, including the Council's decision.

Key People

• Paul and Barnabas: Opposed the teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved. The church in Antioch sent them to Jerusalem. At the council they told how God had worked many signs and wonders among the Gentiles.

• Peter: Reminded the council that God had used him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Caesarea, had given them the Holy Spirit just as at Pentecost, and had made no distinction between them and the Jews.

• James: The half-brother of Jesus, pastor of the church in Jerusalem, and writer of the New Testament epistle of James. He appealed to Scripture and judged that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles turning to God. (James the apostle and brother of John was martyred by Herod in 12:2.)

• The party of the Pharisees (Judaizers): True believers in Christ, probably the most biblically conservative members of the church, who objected that Gentile Christians must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses to be saved.

• Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas: Chosen by the apostles, elders, and the whole assembly to go to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and confirm the letter. They were prophets. Judas later returned to Jerusalem. Silas remained in Antioch.

• The apostles and elders: Met in Jerusalem to consider the Gentile question. With the whole church they reached a Spirit-guided decision and sent the letter.

Key Places

• Antioch: Where the dispute began when Jewish brothers from Judea taught that believers must be circumcised to be saved, and where the church later received the letter with joy.

• Jerusalem: Where the missionary council met with the apostles and elders to settle the Gentile Question.

• Phoenicia and Samaria: On the way to Jerusalem the delegation reported how the Gentiles had come to Christ, and the believers there were glad.

• Caesarea: Where God had used Peter to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and had poured out the Spirit on them, the evidence Peter cited at the council.

• Syria and Cilicia: Named with Antioch in the letter to Gentile believers. The believers in Syria possibly came from the church in Antioch; those in Cilicia possibly from Paul's ministry in Tarsus and the surrounding region.

• Galatia in eastern Asia Minor: As far north as the church had ranged by this time, where Paul and Barnabas had planted indigenous churches among Jews, Jewish proselytes, God-fearers, and Gentiles.

Key Event

The missionary council in Jerusalem decides that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised or keep the Law of Moses to be saved. The decision "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

This decision was momentous. Salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by faith in Christ alone. The door was opened for the church to continue to expand among the Gentiles unabated, and the Gentile believers in Antioch rejoiced.

Key Verse

"We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Acts 15:11

Remember This

• Must a Gentile first become a good Jew before he or she can become a Christian?

• God proved that He had accepted the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit.

• God's intention to include the Gentiles was nothing new.

• Salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by faith in Christ alone.

• The decision "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

Life Application: Stand Firm on the Gospel of Grace

• We must stand firm in our conviction that people can be saved by faith in Christ alone.

• While we must never be arrogant or contentious in our dealings with others, neither can we allow anyone to change the gospel.

• Paul was so firm on this position that he wrote, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Galatians 1:8).

Life Application: Do Not Add Extra Requirements

• We should not put unnecessary requirements on people that the gospel does not specifically command.

• Our job is to lead people to Christ, and then to help them grow into Christian maturity.

• This cannot be done by just giving them a set of rules to live by. They must be brought into a living relationship with Christ and then taught to follow Him fully.

• In the words of Paul to the believers in Galatia, "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

Life Application: Base Decisions on Scripture

• At the Jerusalem Council the delegates listened to the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas; however, their final decision was based on Scripture.

• We must ensure that all of our decisions concerning the work of God are based solidly on the word of God.

Life Application: Seek the Spirit's Guidance in Decisions

• Throughout life we are required to make many decisions concerning our ministries and our personal lives.

• We should never forget that God has a plan for each of our lives. That plan includes our participation in advancing the gospel to the ends of the earth.

• Therefore, every important decision that we make should be made in consultation with other committed believers and with God.

• We should seek the guidance of the Spirit so that when we make our decisions, we can also say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

• When we make such decisions, great blessing comes to our lives and to the work of God.

Textbook Review and Application

• 1. What was the nature of the dispute that arose in the church in Antioch (Acts 15:1-5)?

• 2. What evidences do Peter, Paul, and Barnabas give that God had accepted the Gentiles without their first becoming Jewish proselytes?

• 3. Based on the evidence in this chapter, is it fair to say that certain Jewish believers were mistaking Jewish cultural requirements for gospel requirements? Can you think of circumstances in history and your own experience when church leaders and/or Christians made the same mistakes?

• 4. What was the result of the Spirit-guided decision of the church in Antioch?

• 5. How important is it to God that His children preserve the bonds of peace and unity among culturally diverse groups of believers? How can a leader help to keep this kind of unity between the churches?

Quick Review

1. What was the Gentile Question?

Answer: Whether God-fearers and Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses

before they could be saved.

2. How did God prove that He had accepted the Gentiles without their first becoming Jewish proselytes?

Answer: By giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He had given to the Jewish believers at Pentecost, with the same evidence and for the same purpose: empowerment for witness. Paul and Barnabas also told how God had worked many signs and wonders among the Gentiles.

3. What four things did James say Gentile converts should abstain from?

Answer: Food sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and blood.

4. What phrase in the letter showed that the Holy Spirit had inspired the decision?

Answer: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

5. What was the result when the letter was read in Antioch?

Answer: The Gentile believers rejoiced. They could now focus on serving Christ and advancing His kingdom rather than on keeping nonessential legalistic rules.

Chapter Summary

The Jerusalem council decides that Gentiles need not become Jewish proselytes to be saved. Salvation for both Jews and Gentiles is by faith in Christ alone.

• A dispute in Antioch over circumcision of Gentiles was taken to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

• Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testified that God had accepted uncircumcised Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit and by working signs and wonders among them.

• James appealed to Scripture and judged that the church should not make it difficult for Gentiles turning to God. The Spirit-guided letter brought joy in Antioch and opened the door for unhindered Gentile mission.

Stand firm that people are saved by faith in Christ alone, do not add extra requirements the gospel does not command, and seek the Spirit's guidance so that decisions can be said to seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

ONE-SENTENCE MEMORY

The Spirit-guided council in Jerusalem settled the Gentile Question: people are saved by faith in Christ alone, so Gentiles need not first become Jewish proselytes.