



Walking Through the Scripture Together

July 13 - 19, 2008

Acts 15:1-35

## When Church Gets Messy

**Text** Acts 15:1-35 (TNIV)

**1** Certain individuals came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."  
**2** This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. **3** The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. **4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

**5** Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

**6** The apostles and elders met to consider this question.  
**7** After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. **8** God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. **9** He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. **10** Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? **11** No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

**12** The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. **13** When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. **14** Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. **15** The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

**16** "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, **17** that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' —

**18** things known from long ago.

**19** "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. **20** Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. **21** For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

**22** Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, who were leaders among the believers. **23** With them they sent the following letter:

*The apostles and elders, your brothers,  
 To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:  
 Greetings.*

**24** We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. **25** So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— **26** men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. **27** Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. **28** It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: **29** You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.  
 Farewell.

**30** So they were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. **31** The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. **32** Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. **33-34** After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. **35** But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

### Thought

It's instructive that no one barked out an answer or dictated an authoritative response that preempted discussion. These believers had a long and sometimes heated discussion with no one evidently pulling rank to settle matters this way or that. Room was given for God to speak through all that was shared and heard. The resulting letter walks the careful line of avoiding needful circumcision by requiring Gentile believers to become Jewish for full acceptance on the one hand (what James calls "a burden"), and needless scandal and offense by Gentile believers flaunting pagan practices in Jewish faces.

## Small Group Discussion Guide

### Lean In

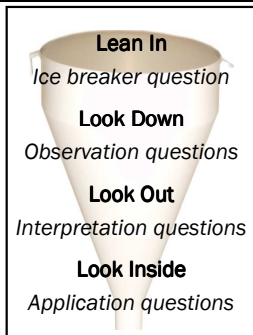
- When's the last time you had a "knock down, drag out" argument with someone? What happened? What do you wish would have been different?

### Look Down / Look Out

- Why are the Jewish believers so keen on having the gentile believers circumcised? What is at stake for them?
- Why is this such a big issue for Paul and Barnabas? What is at stake from their viewpoint?
- How does the church at Antioch go about solving the conflict? How did the church in Jerusalem handle the debate? What went right at their meeting? How did they resolve the issues in this meeting? How satisfied does everyone seem to be?
- How do they decide to communicate their decision? What's the point of the four prohibitions that the leadership includes?
- How would you describe the overall effect of this conflict and debate on the church?

### Look Inside

- What current "hot topics" are you personally having to work through in your church or small group? What help and practical pointers do you see in this passage for navigating more intense discussion on our own current issues?
- In which areas of life (family, work, church, neighborhood) do you tend to experience conflict most frequently? In what specific ways can you begin applying lessons you've learned from Acts 15 to real life situations you may be facing?



## Family Discussion Guide

### Day One Acts 15:1-5 optional Genesis 17:1-27

When you see people arguing, do you tend to be scared or entertained or do you just "zone out"? What was the last big argument you had with someone? What did you do right? What do you wish you could have done better?

### Day Two Acts 15:6-12 James 1:19-20

How does Peter sound to you when he gets up and speaks? Is he angry? calm? passionate? or what? It's been said that it not just what we say but how we say it that counts. How is your tone of voice when you speak to others — particularly if it's an argument? What can help us to have a good tone of voice and attitude?

### Day Three Acts 15:13-21

Is there anyone that you tend to fight with a lot? How might you bring more peace to this relationship and resolve some of the conflicts?

### Day Four Acts 15:22-29

Have you ever received or sent a card or note of encouragement to someone? Is there someone you can encourage this way this week?

### Day Five Acts 15:30-35 optional Galatians 2:1-21

What one key lesson have you learned this week about handling arguments with others in more healthy, less destructive ways?

## Resolving Conflict

First, some solid wisdom from *The Message Bible* for handling conflict and disagreements...

*A gentle response defuses anger, but a sharp tongue kindles a temper fire.* Proverbs 15:1

*A quiet rebuke to a person of good sense does more than a whack on the head of a fool.* Proverbs 17:10

*The start of a quarrel is like a leak in a dam, so stop it before it bursts.* Proverbs 17:14

*The one who knows much says little; an understanding person remains calm.* Proverbs 17:27

*Hard times are inevitable, but you don't have to make it worse.* Matthew 18:7

*Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive.* Ephesians 4:31

*Post this at all the intersections: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.* James 1:19-20

And here are ten steps for resolving relational conflict (wherever it may be found)

- Set a time and place for discussion.
- Define the problem or issue on which you disagree.
- How might each party contribute to the problem? Focus on "I" statements rather than "you" statements.
- List past attempts to resolve the issue that were not successful.
- Brainstorm. Uncritically list all possible solutions.
- Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions.
- Agree on a solution to try.
- Agree on how each party will work toward this solution.
- Set up another meeting. Honestly and lovingly discuss your progress.
- Celebrate success — and work back through the process wherever conflict is continuing.

## details, details...

### The apostles and elders met to consider this question

Historians typically place this first "church council" at around AD 49. This meeting in Jerusalem over the issue of circumcision did set a pattern that was followed in later generations of the early church. In the centuries following, church leaders from around the world would meet at councils to debate key issues in church life and doctrine (for instance the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 in which the nature of Jesus was discussed by some 300 leaders with a resultant creed or statement of faith being sent out, much like the letter is sent out in Acts 15).

### The gentiles must be circumcised

Many Jewish believers no doubt considered the case of Cornelius as an exception of sorts — or perhaps they had just not fully thought through the implications of letting the door swing open for Cornelius without requiring circumcision. Whichever was the case, they were locked into the view that Christianity was Jewish, and every disciple of the Jewish Messiah had to pass through the Jewish entryway of the "eternal covenant" of circumcision (see Genesis 17).

### When they finished, James spoke up

Notice the shift in leadership in Jerusalem. This would be James (or rather, Jacob) the Lord's brother, later known as "Jacob the Just." Note that it is not Peter that has the final word, but James. Peter was no longer the chief figure of the Jerusalem church, though he was certainly a "pillar" of the Jewish church and at the forefront of God's mission among the Jewish people.

### These necessary requirements

The four items prohibited in the letter all dealt with aspects of a pagan lifestyle that would greatly impair fellowship in a Jewish-Gentile body. Note that James does not say, "If you keep yourself from these, you will be saved" but rather "you will do well." Peace would be promoted in the body of believers.