

## Acts Chapter 15

### Theme of Acts: The Holy Spirit and the Birth of the Church

#### Personal Reflection

Complete this section in one sitting or little by little during the week. Begin with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit into your time. Spending time in the Bible, studying the original intent, meaning and cultural context helps you to understand how it applies to you now.

#### Further Study

Complete on your own or with your small group.

#### **Personal Reflection**

Song for the week: Then Christ Came - MercyMe

Song links: <https://youtu.be/euUYX-jss5Y?si=Q2p5oUgek0uBEFhn>

**Read Acts 15** Click on any Bible verse in the study to read it or use your own Bible.

Paul's first missionary journey was with Barnabas and was detailed in Acts 13 and 14. It is estimated to have lasted from 46-48 AD. After, Paul and Barnabas went back to Antioch, gathered with the church, told about what God had done and included how Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus.

*Optional, read Acts 14:26-28*

Review the covenants between God and people below.

	God's Part	People's Part	Points to a Savior	
Covenant of Works (Edenic)	Walking with people / no separation between God & people	Responsibility & Limits - take care of the garden & don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil	disobedience separated people from God / proto-evangelism: God's provision for sin	Genesis 2:7 Genesis 3:15 Hosea 6:6-7
Covenant of Circumcision (Abrahamic)	He would be their God, Abraham would have many descendents, they would have land	Circumcision - an outward sign / cutting away of that which was unclean	Messiah would come from Abraham's family, all nations would be blessed	Genesis 12:1-7 Genesis 17:1-8 Genesis 22: 15-18
Covenant of the Law (Mosaic)	Blessing & peace with God and with each other	Obedience - 10 commandments	all fall short	Exodus 20:1-17 Deuteronomy 11:26-28 Romans 3:23

Some of the "Pharisees became Christians but brought their Judaic beliefs with them. They believed that Gentiles must first become converts to Judaism and be circumcised before being eligible to be saved by faith. (Archeological study Bible)."

Based on the old covenants, why might the Jewish believers have thought that salvation was through works or needed to include circumcision?

Paul and Barnabas's view that circumcision was not needed was reinforced by what they witnessed with the Gentiles who believed in Jesus and were converted. They "arguing vehemently" with those who disagreed. *Optional, read Acts 15:1-2.*

What has God done in you / your life that has strengthened your ability to stand firm when you tell others about Him?

Today, not even knowing of the Covenant of Works or the Covenant of the Law, people still struggle with these two sides of not being good enough (works) or needing to do more (law). What might you tell them?

The church in Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and others to Jerusalem to discuss this disagreement. "This is considered the first formal church council that met to address important issues related to doctrine and policy (Bible Prophecy from Genesis to Revelation)."

At the council, Paul and Barnabas "didn't take credit for the signs and wonders, but rather gave credit to God. It would have been easy for them to have taken the credit because none of those on the council were present when people were cured of diseases and demons were cast out (Life with God Bible)."

Why might Paul and Barnabas have used God's work through them as part of their defense?

How tempted would you be to claim credit if God suddenly used you to perform miracles? How do you both acknowledge God's part and your willingness to participate, giving Him the glory, not yourself?

Following Paul and Barnabas' testimony, some of the Pharisees who believed in Jesus spoke. "They were believers who insisted that before anyone could become a true Christian that individual must keep the Law of Moses; for a man, the test of such compliance was circumcision (Archeological Study Bible)."

The apostles and elders discussed the topic then Peter reminded them he had witnessed the Gentile believers receiving the Holy Spirit just as the Jews had at Pentecost - his witnessing of the Gentile Pentecost. He argued that faith alone saves, no matter whether that faith is exercised by Jew or Gentile. Paul and Barnabas turn another turn, telling of the signs God had done through them for the Gentiles. *Optional, read Acts 10: 44-46, Acts 11:1-18, Acts 2:1-41*

How might each side have felt as they defended what they knew?

When there is a disagreement about theology today, how might this format of offering scripture and experience help people navigate a solution?

James was the next to speak with authority, summing up the debate and quoting from the Old Testament; he made the final decision. Gentiles would not need to be circumcised but there would be four stipulations. "These involved areas of Gentile weakness that particularly repulsed Jewish believers. It would have helped both the individual and the relationship between Gentile and Jew if these requirements had been observed. They involved divine directives that the Jews believed were given before the Mosaic Law (Archeological study Bible)."

The Gentile believers were to abstain from food polluted by idols, sexual immorality (as was outlined in Levitical Law regarding marriage, which included not marrying close relatives), meat from strangled animals and eating blood. "Pagan idol worship which often involved eating a non-slaughtered animal, drinking blood and temple prostitution, thus fornication (Todd Price, Bible Translation for Roma)."

*Optional, read Leviticus 18, Leviticus 19:26*

James emphasized these four things because it was important that Gentile believers did not act in a way that would offend the Jewish community nor destroy the church's witness. The decision was clear; people did not have to become Jewish and live by the law of Moses to become a Christian, but did they have to come under the law of love.

Based on what you have learned about the other gods and pagan worship, how do these stipulations also help the Gentile believers in practicing their new faith?

Read Jesus' law on love in Matthew 22:36-40. We should be willing to give up things out of love to demonstrate to our church community "I am doing this not for the sake of legalism, but out of pure love for others." When was the last time you laid down a freedom or gave up something out of love for somebody else?

Silas was one of the men chosen to go with Paul and Barnabas. He was a leader in the Jerusalem church, a prophet like Judas who went with him, a Roman citizen like Paul and his companion for his second missionary journey. The letter would be not just delivered, but would include a public reading in the churches. *Optional, read Acts 15:22, Acts 15:32, Acts 16:38, Act 15:40*

The apostles, elders and church chose two of their own to send with Paul and Barnabas. What might have been their reason for this?

Old Testament and New Testament prophets are different as they operate under different covenants. Under the Old Covenant, all believers in God did not have the Holy Spirit living in them so God used the prophets to speak to His people; the prophet was judged with death if what was said did not come to pass. *Optional, read Deuteronomy 18:19-20*

Jesus ushered in the New Covenant in which ALL believers have the Holy Spirit in them. The church has Jesus as the cornerstone and is built by the apostles He sent and the prophets He gave. "Just as there are no more apostles, there aren't any prophets today in the way that there were when Christ was just beginning to build his New Covenant church. We have God's written New Testament now.

The foundation *has* been laid. There's no need for growth of that foundation—it has been laid, and now we're building on it. To build on that foundation, the offices of evangelists and pastors continue today (corechristianity.com).” *Optional, read Ephesians 2:20, Ephesians 4:11-12, Ephesians 4:19-20*

**Putting it into practice:**

This week as you spend time with God, ask the Holy Spirit to show you who He would like you to encourage or comfort. Who He may want you to tell about your relationship with Him and Who Jesus is. Obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Spend time thanking the Holy Spirit for His direct relationship with you, for courage to do what He prompts you to do and pray for the person / people He has lead you to encourage or comfort.

**Further Study**

Review the new covenant (below).

New Covenant / Covenant of Grace	Sacrifice His Son Jesus & Raise Him again, paying for our sin	confess & believe		<a href="#">Matthew 5:17</a> <a href="#">Matthew 26:28</a> <a href="#">Ephesians 2:8-9</a> <a href="#">Luke 22:19-20</a>
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Contrast the Covenant of Grace with the other Old Testament covenants.

Read [Ephesians 2:8-9](#). What did Paul write to the believers in Ephesus? How does this affirm the New Covenant?

What things that other people do are the hardest for you to not judge?

The early church provided a good example of listening and evaluating each other's sides. When you are talking with someone you disagree with, what is most challenging for you?

For people who do not yet believe in God, how can you suspend judgment and instead offer the gospel, offering people opportunity for grace and belief instead of being ostracized from the church?

**Prayer**

Tell each other about those the Holy Spirit has put in your path to encourage or witness to this week - withhold names or details that are not appropriate to share.

Spend time praying for each other, our pastors, our church and those who the Holy Spirit connected you with.

**Follow Up**

Is there anything from this week's personal reflection time which you would like to discuss more with your small group?