

ACTS 15

PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

UBS ^a	NKJV	NRSV	TEV	NJB
The Council at Jerusalem	Conflict Over Circumcision	Controversy Over Admission of Gentiles	The Meeting At Jerusalem	Controversy at Antioch
15:1-5	15:1-5	15:1-5	15:1-2 15:3-5	15:1-2 15:3-4 Controversy at Jerusalem
	The Jerusalem Council			15:5-7a Peter's Speech
15:6-11	15:6-21	15:6-21	15:6-11	15:7b-11
15:12-21			15:12-18	15:12 James' Speech
(16-18)	(16-18)	(16-18)		15:13-18
			15:19-21	15:19-21
The Reply of the Council	The Jerusalem Decree		The Letter to the Gentile Believers	The Apostolic Letter
15:22-29	15:22-29	15:22-29	15:22-29	15:22-29
	Continuing Ministry in Syria			The Delegates at Antioch
15:30-35	15:30-35	15:30-35	15:30-34 15:35	15:30-35
Paul and Barnabas Separate	Division Over John Mark	Departure on Second Missionary Journey	Paul and Barnabas Separate	Paul Separates from Barnabas and Recruits Silas
15:36-41	15:36-41	15:36-41	15:36-41	15:36-38 15:39-40

READING CYCLE THREE (see "Bible Interpretation Seminar") FOLLOWING THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR'S INTENT AT PARAGRAPH LEVEL

This is a study guide commentary, which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the chapter in one sitting. Identify the subjects (reading cycle #3). Compare your subject divisions with the five translations above. Paragraphing is not inspired, but it is the key to following the original author's intent, which is the heart of interpretation. Every paragraph has one and only one subject.

CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS

- A. This chapter is often called "The Jerusalem Council."
- B. This was a major turning point, a theological watershed, in the methods and goals of the Early Church. In a sense it is a merging of the two centers of Christendom, Jerusalem and Antioch.
- C. The conversions of non-Jews in Acts 8-11 seem to have been allowed as exceptions (they were not full, practicing pagans), not as a new policy to be vigorously pursued (cf. 11:19).
- D. This chapter's relationship to Galatians 2 is disputed. Acts 15 or Acts 11:27-30 could be the background to Galatians 2. See Introduction to Acts 14, C.
- E. It is interesting that the recurrent Pentecostal sign of speaking in tongues (Acts 2, 8, and 10; possibly Acts 15:8) is not mentioned at all as an evidence for the assurance of salvation of Gentiles (i.e., pagans).

WORD AND PHRASE STUDY

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:1-5
"Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ²And when Paul and Barnabas had great discussion and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. ⁵But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

15:1 "Some men came down from Judea." This paragraph refers to events in Antioch. "Some men" refers to a group of believing Jews who were committed to both Judaism and Jesus. They saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT faith (cf. Matt. 17:19), not as a substitute for it (cf. Acts 11:2, 15:5; Gal. 2:12). These persons' theology is related to the false Jewish teachers (Judizers) referred to in Galatians. These men were somehow connected to the church in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:24), but they were not official representatives.

Notice it says "down." When you look at a map, it seems to be "up," but for Jews everywhere was "down," theologically, from Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:2).

"began teaching" This is an IMPERFECT TENSE, which can mean (1) started to teach or (2) taught again and again.

"Unless you are circumcised" This is a THIRD-CLASS CONDITIONAL SENTENCE which means potential action. Circumcision was the covenant sign to Abraham and his descendants (cf. Gen. 17:10-11). This was not a minor matter in Judaism, but related to salvation itself. These men felt that the only way to YHWH was through Judaism (cf. Acts 15:5). This type of people became known as Judizers (cf. Gal. 1:7; 2:4). They believed in Christ plus conformity to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Acts 15:5). Righteousness was based on their performance, not on God's free gift. One's relationship with God was achieved by one's performance (cf. Rom. 3:21-30; Gal. 5:2-9). The real issue was who are "the people of God" and how do you characterize them?

SPECIAL TOPIC: WHY DO OT COVENANT PROMISES SEEM SO DIFFERENT FROM NT COVENANT PROMISES?

15:2 "Paul and Barnabas had great discussion and debate with them" Luke uses the expression "great discussion" to show extreme emotion (cf. Luke 23:19,25; Acts 15:2; 19:40; 23:7,10; 24:5). This debate was crucial! It was directed at the heart of the gospel message:

1. How is one brought into right standing with God?
2. Is the New Covenant inseparably linked to the Mosaic Covenant?

The phrase in the NASB, "had a great discussion and debate," is literally "discord and questioning not a little." *Young's Literal Translation of the Bible* (p. 95), has "not a little discussion and disputation." This literary technique of expressing something in a negative understatement is characteristic of Luke's writings. See full note at Acts 12:18.

"Barnabas" See SPECIAL TOPIC: BARNABAS

"the brethren determined that" This refers to "the church" (cf. Acts 15:3). There are several groups in Acts 15 that relate to the different leadership or polity styles.

1. In verses 23,12, and 22 congregational authority is mentioned.
2. In verses 6 and 22 apostolic or episcopal authority (i.e., James) is mentioned, which is Roman Catholic or Anglican polity.
3. In verses 6 and 22 the authority of the elders is mentioned. This seems to parallel Presbyterian polity.

The New Testament records all of these polity structures. There is a development from the authority of the Apostles (who would one day die) to the authority of the congregation, with the pastors being the leadership catalysts (cf. Acts 15:19).

In my opinion the polity structure is not as crucial as the spirituality of the leaders. Great Commission, Spirit-filled leaders are crucial to the gospel. Certain forms of polity fall in and out of favor, usually based on the cultural political model.

"and some others" A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, p. 224, has an interesting comment on this verse, "Certainly Titus (2:1,3), a Greek and not probably a brother of Luke who is not mentioned in Acts," this is certainly a possibility, but it is based on several assumptions. We must be careful that because a text (with our presuppositions) can mean or imply something, does not mean that it does! He must be content with the original author's writings and not to expand assumptions, valid though they may be.

"to the apostles" The leadership structure of the Jerusalem church is not settled. From several texts it looks as if James, the half-brother of Jesus, was the leader. This appears to be true in this chapter also. Yet, there were other leadership groups (cf. Acts 15:4,22):

1. the Twelve
2. local elders
3. the congregation as a whole

What is uncertain is how James relates to these groups. He is called an apostle in Gal. 1:19. It is also possible he was the acknowledged leader of the group of elders (cf. Peter called himself an elder in 1 Pet. 5:1; John calls himself an elder in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1).

SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH POLITY

"elders" In this context "elders" would refer to an older group of leadership modeled on the synagogue pattern. See note at Acts 11:30 or 14:23.

SPECIAL TOPIC: ELDER

15:3 "church" See SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH (cf. Acts 15:3)

"they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria" This is an IMPERFECT MIDDLE INDICATIVE. Phoenicia was mostly Gentile, while Samaria was a mixed population of Jews and Gentiles. These areas had previously been evangelized (cf. Acts 8:5ff; 11:19).

"describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles" It seems that Paul and Barnabas reported the marvelous work of God among the "nations" to every congregation they came in contact with. To people knowledgeable of the OT, the conversion of the "nations" was a fulfilled prophecy (i.e., Isa. 2:2-4; 42:6; 49:6)!
 It is also possible that by widely reporting the success of the mission endeavor that the church in Jerusalem would not be able to quietly and secretly dismiss the issue (cf. Acts 21:18-20).

"were bringing great joy to all the brethren" These were Gentile areas. The churches would have been mixed churches. Their response is a prophetic reminder to the Jerusalem church. The world-wide mission started by Hellenists, is confirmed by Hellenist churches.

15:4 "the church and the apostles and the elders" Here all their polity groups are mentioned, as in verse 22.

SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH POLITY

"they reported all that God had done with them" This had become a pattern!

15:5 "But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed" Faith (PERFECT ACTIVE PARTICIPLE) in Jesus as the promised Messiah was the foundation of the church. But within the church there were differences of opinion about how this faith in Christ related to the covenants and promises to Israel. This vocal group "stood up" is charged in Greek to show its emphasis to be present INFINITIVE. It is the very question that inspired and formal and therefore must be maintained (cf. Matt. 5:17-19)! One must trust Jesus and obey Moses (i.e., *dei*, necessary [1] to circumcise; [2] to front them; and [3] to keep; all three are saved INFINITIVES). It is this very question that forms the theological content of Romans 1-8 and Galatians!

SPECIAL TOPIC: PHARISEES

SPECIAL TOPIC: FAITH, BELIEVE, or TRUST

"It is necessary" See full note on *dei* at Acts 1:16.

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:6-11

"The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ⁸'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁹And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ¹⁰and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹¹Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹²But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

15:6 "The apostles and the elders came together" Here the leadership met in private first. This speaks of the Presbyterian polity of the church.

SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH POLITY

15:7 "After there had been much debate" The leadership was not unanimous. Some agree with the statement in Acts 15:5. These were all sincere believers. But some were clinging to the familiar while being blinded to the radical nature of the gospel. Even the Apostles were slow to see the full implications (cf. Acts 8:1). Notice the elements of policy making:

1. private discussion
2. open discussion
3. vote by the congregation

"Peter stood up" This must have been the way to get to speak to the assembled group (cf. Acts 15:5). This is the last mention of him in Acts. He recalls his experience with Cornelius (cf. Acts 10-11).

"Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe" God used Peter to witness to His love and acceptance of the nations! God allowed this new radical understanding to proceed in stages.

1. the Samaritans first, Acts 8
2. the Ethiopian Eunuch, Acts 8
3. Cornelius, Acts 10-11

These were not full practicing pagans, but were all related to Judaism. However, 1 and 3 were confirmed by the Pentecost experience, which was evidence for the early church of God's acceptance of other groups.

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE GOSPEL

SPECIAL TOPIC: FAITH, BELIEVE, or TRUST

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE KERYGMA OF THE EARLY CHURCH

15:8 "God who knows the heart" This was a way of confirming God's complete knowledge (cf. 1 Sam. 1:24; 16:7; Ps. 26:2; 139:1; Pro. 21:2; 24:12; Jer. 11:20; 17:10; Luke 16:15; Rom. 8:27; Rev. 2:23) of the faith of these Gentile converts.

SPECIAL TOPIC: HEART

"giving them the Holy Spirit" This apparently refers to the same type of spiritual experience as Pentecost ("just as He also did to us"). The very same manifestation of the Spirit occurred in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and in Caesarea. It was the sign to the Jewish believers of God's acceptance of other people groups (cf. Acts 15:9; 11:17).

SPECIAL TOPIC: SPIRIT (gift of...)

15:9 "He made no distinction between us and them" This was the theological conclusion Peter came to in Acts 10:28-34; 11:12. God is no respecter of persons (cf. Gal. 3:28; Eph. 3:11-4:13; Col. 3:11). All humans are made in the image of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). God desires all humans to be saved (cf. Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:10; Titus 2:11; 2 Pet. 3:9)! God loves the whole world (cf. John 3:16-17).

SPECIAL TOPIC: YHWH'S ETERNAL REDEMPTIVE PLAN

SPECIAL TOPIC: BAPTISM

"cleansing their hearts by faith" This term is used in the Septuagint to denote Levitical purification. It denotes the removal of that which separates us from God.
 This is the very VERB used in Peter's experience of the clean and unclean animals in Acts 10:15 and 11:9 (which follows the LXX of Gen. 7:2:8; 8:20).
 In the Gospel of Luke it is used for the cleansing of leprosy (cf. Luke 4:27; 5:12,13; 7:22; 17:14,17). It came to be a powerful metaphor for cleansing from sin (cf. Heb. 9:22,23; 1 John 1:7).
 The heart is an OT way of referring to the whole person. See Special Topic at Acts 1:24. These Gentiles have been completely cleansed and accepted by God through Christ. The means of their cleansing is faith in the gospel message. They have believed, received, and fully trusted in the person and work of Jesus (cf. Rom. 3:21-5:11; Gal. 2:15-21).

15:10 "why do you put God to the test?" The OT background of this statement is Exod. 17:2,7 and Deut. 6:16. This Greek term for "test" (*πειρασμο*) has the connotation of "to test with a view toward destruction." This was a serious discussion!

SPECIAL TOPIC: GREEK TERMS FOR TESTING AND THEIR CONNOTATIONS

"yoke" This was used by the rabbis for the recitation of the *Shema*, Deut. 6:4-5; therefore, it stands for the Mosaic Law, written and oral (cf. Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46; Gal. 5:1). Jesus uses it in Matt. 11:29 for the requirements of the New Covenant (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-36).

"which neither our fathers or we have been able to bear" This reflects the teachings of Jesus (cf. Luke 11:46). This subject is addressed by Paul in Galatians 3. But this is Peter who, like James, feels the weight of Judaism (cf. Gal. 2:11-21).
 This phrase admits the theological truth that the Mosaic Law was not able to bring salvation because fallen humanity could not keep a holy law (cf. Romans 7)? Salvation could not and cannot be based on human performance. However, the saved, gifted, and indwelt believer needs to live a godly life (cf. Matt. 11:30; Eph. 1:4; 2:10). Godliness (Christlikeness, i.e., Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:13) is always the goal of Christianity, for the purpose of providing opportunities for evangelism, not personal pride nor judgmental legalism.

SPECIAL TOPIC: PAUL'S VIEW OF THE MOSAIC LAW

15:11 This is a summary of salvation (i.e., "saved," AGORIST PASSIVE INFINITIVE) by grace through faith (for Peter cf. Acts 2-3; for Paul cf. Acts 13:38-39; Rom. 3-8; Galatians 3; Ephesians 1-2). Notice the way of salvation is the same for Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom. 3:21-31; 4; Eph. 2:1-10).

SPECIAL TOPIC: GREEK VERB TENSES USED FOR SALVATION

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:12-21

"All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³After they had stopped speaking, James answered, ¹⁴'Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁵Simon has taken note of what I first concerned Himself about taking from the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁶With the words of the prophets agreed, just as it is written, ¹⁷'After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it. ¹⁸So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name.' ¹⁹Now says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago, ²⁰'Therefore it is my judgment that it is not to trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²¹but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²²For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

15:12 "All the people kept silent, and they were listening" Peter's words had settled the group of leaders. From the context it seems that at this point the two missionaries repeated their review of the mission trip a second time. This time the leadership listened! *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (vol. 2, p. 195) believes it was another meeting separate from the church council of Acts 15:6-11. I think it was the same meeting.

"Barnabas and Paul" Notice that the names appear as this was Barnabas' home church. He was the original leader of the missionary team.

"relating the signs and wonders" The theological purpose of the Pentecostal tongues in Acts is a sign of God's acceptance, so one wonders whether this particular sign was often repeated as a way of confirmation.
 Signs themselves were performed by Jesus (cf. Acts 2:22), the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:43; 3:7; 4:16,30; 5:12), the Seven (cf. Acts 6:8; 8:6,13), and Paul and Barnabas (cf. Acts 14:3; 15:12). God was confirming His presence and power through the gospel by these signs and wonders. These were further evidence to the Judaizing group that God fully accepted full pagans on the basis of grace alone, through faith.

SPECIAL TOPIC: SIGN (OT)

15:13 "James" This is not the Apostle James because he was killed in Acts 12:1-2. This was Jesus' half-brother who became the leader of the Jerusalem church and author of the NT book of James. He was known as "James the Just." He was sometimes called "camel knees" because he prayed so often, kneeling. The two main Jerusalem leaders are vocal on this issue (Peter and James).

SPECIAL TOPIC: JAMES THE HALF-BROTHER OF JESUS

15:14 "Simon" This is the Aramaic form of Simon, which is Peter (cf. 2 Pet. 1:1).

"about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" This is the universal emphasis of the OT prophets (ex. Isa. 2:2-4; 42:6; 45:20-23; 49:6; 52:10). The people of God were always to include both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Gen. 3:15; 12:3; Exod. 9:16; Eph. 2:11-13).
 The phrase "for His name" may be an allusion to Jer. 13:11 and 32:20 or Isa. 63:12,14.

SPECIAL TOPIC: "THE NAME" OF YHWH (OT)

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE NAME OF THE LORD

15:18 "It is written" This is a free quote from Amos 9:11-12 in the Septuagint. The term "mankind" in verse 17 is *Edom* (the nation) in the Masoretic Text, but the Septuagint has *anthropos* (mankind). James quotes the Septuagint in this case it uniquely fits his purpose of expressing the universal nature of God's promise of redemption.

Notice the promised actions as YHWH. This is similar to Ezek. 36:22-38. Notice the number of "I's"!

This quote from the LXX, which is obviously at variance with the MT, shows that the real issue of faith is not a perfect text, but a perfect God and His plan for mankind. None of us like the textual variants of the OT or NT, but they do not affect believers' faith in the trustworthiness of Scripture. He has effectively and faithfully revealed Himself to fallen humans! Hand-copied ancient texts cannot be used as an excuse to reject this revelation. See Manfred Bruner, *Abusing Scripture*, chapter 1. "The Nature of Scripture," pp. 23-32.

15:16 It is obvious from the context that James chooses and modifies this quotation from the Septuagint to assert the inclusion of the nations. Did he also choose this text because it asserts the destruction of OT Mosaic religion? The New Covenant is radically different.

1. grace-based, not performance-based (gift not merit)
2. Messiah-focused, not temple-focused (Jesus is the new Temple)
3. world-wide in scope, not focused on the Jewish race

These changes would be devastating to a "circumcision party" of believers. Now the chief Apostle (Peter), the converted rabbi Apostle (Paul), and the leader of the Jerusalem church (James) all agree against them, as does the consensus (vote) of the mother church and the mission churches!

SPECIAL TOPIC: WHY DO OT COVENANT PROMISES SEEM SO DIFFERENT FROM NT COVENANT PROMISES?

SPECIAL TOPIC: ELECTION/PREDESTINATION vs. HUMAN FREE WILL

15:17 What a wonderful universal statement. But also note the "election" phrase, "all the Gentiles who are called by My name" (cf. Dan. 9:19). It denotes a worship experience of some kind (cf. LXX of Deut. 28:10; also note Isa. 63:19; Jer. 14:9).

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE NAME OF THE LORD

15:18 The inclusion of the Gentiles has always been God's plan (cf. Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 3:3-6). The means of salvation will come from the lineage of King David (cf. Acts 15:16; 2 Chr. 6:33).

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE MOSAIC LAW AND THE CHRISTIAN

15:19 This is James' conclusion.

15:20 These guidelines were meant to

1. assure table fellowship in mixed churches
2. enhance the dignity of Jewish evangelism

These things have nothing to do with the Gentiles' individual personal salvation! These guidelines were directed at both Jewish sensibilities and pagan worship excesses (cf. Acts 15:29; 21:25).
 The Levitical laws were given to accentuate a distinction (social and religious) between Jews and Canaanites. Their very purpose was disfulfillment, but here the purpose is just the opposite. These "essentials" are to help maintain fellowship between believers of two cultures!

There are many Greek manuscript variations related to this Apostolic Decree. Some have two items, three items, or four items. For a full discussion of the options, see Bruce M. Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, pp. 429-434). Most English translations have the four-fold list.

NASB, NRSV, REB, Peshitta "from fornication"

NKJV, REV, NET "from sexual immorality"

NJB "from illicit marriages"

It is difficult to know for sure if this prohibition was directed towards

1. pagan immoral worship practices (i.e., immorality)
2. Jewish sensibilities about incest (cf. Leviticus 18; see F. F. Bruce, *Answers to Questions*, p. 43; NJB)

SPECIAL TOPIC: HUMAN SEXUALITY

"what is strangled and from blood" Some commentators relate both of these to the Mosaic food laws (cf. Lev. 17:8-16). It is, however, possible that "from blood" refers to murder, which is also a major issue in Moses' writings.

15:21 This verse means either

1. to assure the legalists that the Torah was being taught to Gentiles in all localities
2. since there were Jews in every locality, their scruples should be respected so that they may be effectively evangelized (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14-15)

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:22-29

"²²Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, ²³and they sent Titus Timotheus, and Onesimus, and Sopater, and Tychicus, and Trophimus, ²⁴men who were of the province of Asia. ²⁵After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it. ²⁶So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name. ²⁷Now says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago, ²⁸'Therefore it is my judgment that it is not to trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, ²⁹but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ³⁰For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

15:22 This delegation was for the purpose of unity (cf. Acts 15:23), not to mandate compliance.

"Judas called Barsabbas" This faithful leader, like so many in the NT, is unknown to us. Nothing else in the NT is said about him. But God knows him well!
 It is just possible that this man was the brother of Joseph Barsabbas, who was one of the candidates to replace Judas Iscariot in Acts 1:23. If so, they were both sons of a man named Barsabbas.