ACTS 15

PARAGRAPH DIVISIONS OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS

UBS ⁴	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	15:1-2
			15:3-5	15:3-4
				Controversy at Jerusalem
	The Jerusalem Council			15:5-7a
15:6-11	15:6-21	15:6-21	15:6-11	Peter's Speech
				15:7b-11
15:12-21			15:12-18	15:12
				James' Speech
				15:13-18
(16-18)	(16-18)	(16-18)		
			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	15:30-35
			15:35	
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 <u>"Bible Interpretation Seminar"</u>) 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

¹Some 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 dissension 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. 5:17-19), not a rival or substitute for it (cf. Acts 11:2; 15:5; Gal. 2:12). These persons' theology is related to the false Jewish teachers (Judaizers) 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." If 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 Judaizers (cf. Gal. 1:7; 2:4). They believed in Christ <u>plus</u> 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 dissension 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 <u>SPECIAL TOPIC: BARNABAS</u>

I "*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.

- In verses 2,3,12, and 22 congregational authority is mentioned.
 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 (Gal. 2:1,3), a Greek and 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! We must be content with the original author's writings and not our expanded assumptions, valid though they may be.

I "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 (ekklēsia)

In 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).

Image: "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 fronted in Greek to show its emphasis) of saved Pharisees felt that the OT was inspired and eternal 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 charge them; and [3] to keep; all three are PRESENT 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

⁶The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "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. ⁸And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now 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? ¹¹"But 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 pattern of polity.

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
- open discussion
 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.

- the Samaritans first, Acts 8
 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

Imigiving 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).

<u>SPECIAL TOPIC: SPIRIT (gift of. . .)</u>

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: RACISM

- **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" (*peirazo*) 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

voke" 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," AORIST 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

¹²All 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, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. ¹⁴Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. ¹⁵With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶After these things I will return, And I will Rebuild the tabernaccle of David which has fallen, And I will Rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it, ¹⁷So that the rest of Mankind May seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles, ²⁰but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. ²¹For 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 are reversed because this was Barnabas' home church. He was the original leader of the missionary team.

Image: "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: JAMES THE HALF-BROTHER OF JESUS

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

Image: The second se

The phrase "for His name" may be an allusion to Jer. 13:11 and 32:20 or Isa. 63:12,14.

<u>SPECIAL TOPIC: "THE NAME" OF YHWH (OT)</u>

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE NAME OF THE LORD

15:15-18 "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 because in this case it uniquely fits his purpose of expressing the universal nature of God's promise of redemption.

Notice the promised actions are of 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. God 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 Brauch, *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)

Messiah-focused, not temple-focused (Jesus is the new Temple)
 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 possibility of local 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 disfellowship, 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

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

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

SPECIAL TODIC, LILIMANI SEXUAL ITY

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

"from illicit marriages"

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 this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. ²⁴Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls, ²⁵it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. ²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."

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.

Silas" He, like Barnabas, was a leader in the church of Jerusalem. He is called Silvanus by Paul and will replace Barnabas as Paul's associate on the second missionary journey. Paul may have chosen him so that when someone accused him of (1) preaching a different gospel than the Twelve or (2) being out of fellowship with the mother church, Silas could answer their concerns and accusations.

SPECIAL TOPIC: SILAS/SILVANUS

15:23 The letter from the Jerusalem Council is directed only to certain churches, apparently which had a large believing Jewish component. By listing only certain regions, James shows that it was not meant as rules for all the Gentile churches. The letter was only for fellowship and evangelism purposes and not for guidelines for ethics or salvation!

- Do you as a modern believer totally avoid non-Kosher meats? See 1. Manfred Brauch, *Abusing Scripture*, chapter 7, "The Abuse of Context: Historical Situation and Cultural Reality," pp. 202-249
- 2. Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*
- 3. Hard Sayings of the Bible, "How Kosher Should Christians Live?", pp. 527-530 and "To Eat or Not to Eat," pp. 576-578

These are all helpful articles. It is so comforting to read other informed, sincere and Bible-believing Christians struggle with these issues. Their writings give other believers the freedom to think and live based on the light they have. Unity, not uniformity, is the key to healthy, growing, Great Commission churches.

Cilicia" This is Paul's home area (cf. Acts 22:3).

15:24 This verse shows that the church in Jerusalem had become aware that some of their membership, who had no authority or official standing (cf. Acts 15:1), were (1) traveling to these mission churches and (2) demanding conformity to the Mosaic law (cf. Acts 15:1). The VERB (*anaskeuazō*) used is a strong military term used only here in the NT for plundering a city.

TEV "we have met together and have all agreed"

Peshitta "while we are assembled" This unity among believers was a characteristic of the Spirit's presence (cf. Acts 1:14; 15:28). Notice this did not mean that there was no discussion or the exchange of strong opinions, but that after a full airing of the issue the believers

came to a unified agenda. This unified theological agreement needed to be published abroad so the same tension and argument would not occur again and again. The Jerusalem church has now taken an official stand on the content of the gospel and its implications for Gentiles!

15:26 Paul and Barnabas shared not only the victories, but also the hardships of mission work (cf. 2 Cor. 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:23-28). This vulnerability was not a passing feeling, but a permanent commitment (PERFECT ACTIVE PARTICIPLE).

15:28 "the Holy Spirit and to us" God was present at this crucial meeting. He expressed His will through the discussion! The Holy Spirit is the one who produced unity. Here both aspects of biblical covenant are highlighted—God's activity and appropriate human response. Notice it was a compromise; each side got something. The grace-alone, faith-alone gospel was affirmed, but Jewish sensibilities were respected.

SPECIAL TOPIC: GOVERNMENT

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE PERSONHOOD OF THE SPIRIT

I "these essentials" These do not refer to personal individual salvation, but fellowship between believing Jews and believing Gentiles in local churches.

15:29 This meant for Gentiles a complete break with their idolatrous past. Christian freedom and responsibility are hard to balance, but they must be (cf. Rom. 14:1-15:13; 1 Cor. 8:1-13; 10:23-28). These pagans' previous worship involved all three of these excluded things!

These "essentials" are listed in various ways in different Greek manuscripts. The real question is to what do they relate?

things sacrificed to idols would refer to meat (cf. 1 Cor. 8; 10:23-33)
 blood could refer to either

- a. non-kosher meat
- b. premeditated murder
- 3. things strangled must refer to non-kosher ways of killing animals, implying that the previous two also relate to food sensibilities of the Jews (i.e., Leviticus 11)
- 4. fornication could refer to
 - a. participation in pagan worship rituals (as well as the food)b. OT Levitical laws against incest (cf. Lev. 17:10-14, see F. F. Bruce, *Answers to Questions*, p. 43)
- All of these "essentials" relate not to salvation, but to fellowship within mixed churches and expanded opportunities for Jewish evangelism. See F. F. Bruce, Answers to Questions, pp. 80-81.

SPECIAL TOPIC: OT FOOD LAWS

SPECIAL TOPIC: CHRISTIAN FREEDOM vs. CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY

if "if" Grammatically this is not a CONDITIONAL SENTENCE. The NJB has "avoid these, and you will do what is right."

Farewell" This is a PERFECT PASSIVE IMPERATIVE which was used as a common closing wishing strength and health.

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:30-35

³⁰So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³²Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. ³³After they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. ³⁴But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. ³⁵But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

15:30 This is another congregational meeting. It shows the significance of the gathered local church.

SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH POLITY

15:31 This second congregation (i.e., the Gentile church of Antioch) did not see these essentials as negative or restrictive.

15:32 This verse defines the thrust of NT prophecy. It is primarily the preaching of the gospel and its application; who knows, maybe it is NT evidence for long sermons!

<u>SPECIAL TOPIC: PROPHECY (NT)</u>

SPECIAL TOPIC: SILAS/SILVANUS

15:33 "in peace" This Peshitta, NRSV, and NASB translation is awkward. See NKJV, "with greeting" or REB, "with good wishes," for a clearer way to translate this verse. This may reflect the Hebrew good-bye, *Shalom* (i.e., "peace", BDB 1022). This is a further way of showing the full support of the Jerusalem church and her leadership.

<u>SPECIAL TOPIC: PEACE (NT</u>)

<u>SPECIAL TOPIC: PEACE (OT)</u>

15:34 This verse is not included in the Greek manuscripts P⁷⁴, N, A, B, E, nor the Latin Vulgate translation. It is also omitted by NRSV, TEV, NJB, and NIV. It is in a modified form in the other uncial Greek manuscripts (i.e., C and D). It is probably not originally part of Acts. UBS⁴ rates its exclusion as "certain" (A).

SPECIAL TOPIC: TEXTUAL CRITICISM

15:35 This verse shows how many other first century preachers and teachers we moderns know nothing about. The NT is so selective in its witness about the lives of the other apostles and other missionaries and preachers. God knows! Acts is not interested in biographies.

NASB (UPDATED) TEXT: ACTS 15:36-41

³⁶After some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, *and see* how they are." ³⁷Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. ³⁸But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

15:36 "Let us return" It was Paul and Barnabas' purpose to return and strengthen the new churches which had been started on their first journey. Notice there was not the divine manifestation about this mission as there was for the first one (cf. Acts 13:2).

15:38 "Paul kept insisting" This is an IMPERFECT ACTIVE INDICATIVE. Apparently Paul continued to express his reluctance.

who had deserted them" Exactly why John Mark left the first mission is uncertain (cf. Acts 13:13). See full note at Acts 16, Contextual Insights, II. A.

15:39 "there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another" The root meaning of this term is "sharp," meaning "to sharpen as a blade." It is used in a positive sense in Heb. 10:24. The VERB is also used in Acts 17:6 and 1 Cor. 13:5. They really had an argument!

Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus" Now there are two mission teams.

15:40 "Paul chose Silas" Paul chose another leader from the Jerusalem church.

SPECIAL TOPIC: SILAS/SILVANUS

being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord" This would have involved a type of dedicatory prayer service (cf. Acts 6:6; 13:3 14:26; 20:32). This implies the whole church, not a select group.

SPECIAL TOPIC: ORDINATION

15:41 "Cilicia" Why and how these churches were started is uncertain. Possibly Paul himself started them during his silent years in Tarsus. Cilicia was Paul's home province.

"churches" See <u>SPECIAL TOPIC: CHURCH (ekklēsia)</u>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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.

These discussion questions are provided to help you think through the major issues of this section of the book. They are meant to be thought-provoking, not definitive.

- Why is this chapter so important?
 Who are the Judaizer-Christians?
- 3. Why was James' opinion given so much weight?
- 4. Who are the elders?
- 5. Do the restrictions of verses 28-29 refer to salvation or fellowship?