

Turning the World Right-side Up: Study 12, Acts 15

Acts Studies for Teens by Mike Apodaca, MA



Begin with prayer for wisdom from God and for the presence of the Spirit.

Note: In a Bible Study, as much as possible ask the questions and let the students answer. Where they

cannot, you supply the answer and keep everything flowing.

Introduction: What brings Christians Together and What Tears them Apart?

Chapter 15: Mending Fences and Breaking Them

Section 1: Acts 15:1-5 The Problem

15 Certain people 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.” ²This 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. ³The 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. ⁴When 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.

⁵Then 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.”

We have seen this problem bubbling under the surface as we’ve studied The Book of Acts. Consider the power of these arguments: It was God who gave circumcision and the Law. He is the one who broke into history and said He would save the world through His people. It was through them that all the earth would be blessed. Now, the Christians are saying these things need to be put aside.

There have always been those who add Jesus and His salvation to their former beliefs and philosophies. Before this, the Jews were obeying God by being circumcised and by obeying the Law of God. To this they added that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah spoken of by the prophets. They didn’t deny Jesus, as the other Jews had done, they assimilated him into their system.

The real problem is an inadequate conversion. The Jews did not give up all hope of salvation on the basis of their heritage and performance. They simply added Jesus to what they had. Real Christianity means realizing that all our past efforts to be saved were completely futile. We have to let go of them. We need to agree with Paul who writes, “All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.” (Romans 3:23). We need to be careful whenever anyone tells us that salvation can be reached through Christ plus something else (our good works, for instance).

Section 2: Acts 15:6-21 God Accepts, We Accept

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After 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. ⁹He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now 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? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹²The 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. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵The 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,
¹⁷that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’—
¹⁸things 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. ²⁰Instead 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. ²¹For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

The meeting was made up of Paul and Barnabas, believers from Syrian Antioch (some of whom may have been Gentile converts), the Apostles, and the Elders of the Jerusalem church. Their purpose—to find the mind of God on this problem. What they feel comfortable with is not important. God’s will is to be discovered and done.

Peter explains:

1. God chose Peter to speak to the Gentiles: See Acts 10.
2. God showed His acceptance by giving the Holy Spirit: God does not fill a house He has not accepted.
3. This is how we were accepted: Peter is saying that neither he nor the Jews reached God through their circumcision or obedience to the Law. See Philippians 3:1-4.
4. Faith was the operative element in God purifying their hearts and ours. Paul takes this same thread of argument in Romans 1-4.

5. Why put on these a burden that we, nor our ancestors, could bear?
6. We (meaning everyone) are saved by grace.

Paul and Barnabas add to Peter's words by explaining God's work among the Gentiles. Again, this is God's show, not ours.

James is the leader of the Jerusalem church. He is the brother of Jesus and the author of the Book of James. James points to the Old Testament Scriptures back up what they have seen God doing in their midst. This is very important. Remember, the magicians in Egypt were able to do miracles. The Anti-Christ, when he comes, will also dazzle people with his abilities (2 Thessalonians 2:9). Wonders, by themselves, do not mean that God is at work. But we do know that God will never contradict His Word.

They decide to tell the Gentiles that they are accepted, but also to recommend some behaviors:

1. Do not eat food offered to idols
2. Do not engage in sexual immorality
3. Do not eat the meat of strangled animals
4. Do not participate in blood

The church leaders do not tell them that these activities will make them any more or any less saved. This is not a matter of salvation, but of consideration. Let's look at each one individually:

1. Food offered to idols: This issue came up again in the Corinthian church (see 1 Corinthians 8). Paul explained that there is nothing really wrong with the meat, but encouraged the church members not to eat it because it might cause others to eat it and hurt their consciences ("if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will

never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall." 1 Corinthians 8:13).

2. Sexual immorality: Some people think this is an unforgiveable sin. It is not. However, it is very serious and does much to damage the picture that God is portraying with marriage between the church and Christ. Also, sexual behavior was created by God to express oneness in marriage, and it is best for us to use it for this purpose. In the day of Paul, as in our day, sexual immorality was commonplace. No one thought twice about it. This is one area where our difference can really shine.
3. Strangled Animals: This is like number one above, the animals still have their blood in them. This would have been unthinkable to a Jew, for to the Jew, "The life is in the blood."
4. Blood: Many have connected this part with the part above it and seen it as a prohibition against drinking blood.

Section 3: Acts 15:22-35 Putting it in Writing

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, men 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 the men 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 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.

Sending representatives from the Jerusalem church was important. It showed that this letter really came from the Jerusalem church.

The letter encapsulates what they decided together. Notice who they give the credit to first—The Holy Spirit. Can you imagine this happening in a church today? Sadly, it is hard to do.

The burdens placed on the Gentile converts are stated as things to be avoided. In other words, they won't affect your salvation, but they will hurt your witness with the Jews and the purity and strength of your Christian life. The believers did not want to do either of these things.

This issue behind them, the leaders went back to doing what they loved best—sharing the Word. They taught and encouraged the church. They strengthened the believers in their new faith.

Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas

Section 3: Acts 15:36-41 Separation

³⁶ Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, ³⁸ but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. ³⁹ They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for

Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

After the heartwarming resolution we have just seen—with the problem being solved and everyone so happy and unified—it is very hard to read this section and to see Paul and Barnabas break apart on such difficult terms.

They were fighting over John Mark. Remember, Mark had abandoned them when they were at Perga (see Acts 13:13). He was probably afraid, and with good reason. The Jews were hostile and became murderous.

Both men were correct: Barnabas was looking at the man, Mark. Abandoning his post did not mean he could never be trusted again. Barnabas had probably had many conversations with him and had seen good growth in him.

Paul was looking at the mission. He and Barnabas had trusted Mark with the details of their first mission and he let them down. This probably put them in a difficult spot and may have even compromised the mission. Paul was not willing to risk this again.

The result was probably what the Holy Spirit wanted—two separate missions, one led by Paul and one by Barnabas. Unfortunately, no where are we told that they sought the mind of the Spirit in this matter. Each would take a disciple to train. What didn't please the Spirit was the bitter disagreement between the men. We get glimpses from later writings that Paul and Mark had become close later on (Colossians 4:10, Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:11).

What have we learned?

What we are seeing here is the growing pains of any church. As a church grows, there will be new members who will challenge the status quo. These new members will cause no little stress in the body.

Consider Calvary Chapel. When the church first began to reach out to young people the Spirit began filling the pews with teenagers who came in barefoot or in flip flops. One of the leaders called a meeting and went on and on about how these new converts had to be trained to wear shoes before they ruined the carpets. But a wise leader told them that their church was the house of God and that carpets could be replaced. If God had brought them, who were the leaders to turn them away? They decided they would do nothing to slow down the flow of new converts to Jesus.

God brings in people just as they are. What they all need is to be taught the faith and to give themselves over to the work of the Holy Spirit within. The Spirit will make the changes He wants to make. Our job is to love and support new members, to show they that they are welcomed in the body of Christ. They need to see that God accepts them and we do too.

What the Text Says

Section 1 Acts 15:1-5

These Judaizers see coming to Christ as the next step in becoming the people of God. First you get circumcised, as God commanded, then you obey the Law of God, then you accept Jesus as the Messiah of God. They were simply helping new believers who were not circumcised to complete their salvation.

Section 1 Acts 15:6-21

The only real question is, what does God want? Once the church can identify God's perspective, the matter is settled. Peter shares what God showed him (see chapter 10), Paul and Barnabas shared how God was performing great wonders in the midst of the Gentiles. James, the leader of the Jerusalem church sees God's will. These new believers were accepted by Him just as they are and so must also be accepted by the church in the same way.

Section 1 Acts 15:22-35

These prohibitions are not a matter of salvation; that is settled. What they are is suggestions as to how the new believers can get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters, and how they can grow in holiness.

Section 1 Acts 15:36-41

This is a sad section, especially after the unity we just saw. Instead of praying and seeking God in this matter, Barnabas sides with Mark and Paul against him. The two missionaries part for different fields.

Connecting to the Scripture

This chapter shows the power old ideas have over us and how important it is to renew our minds in Christ Jesus (Romans 12:2).

Any number of things can be added by people to the gospel. These can become conditions for salvation. We have seen churches that add good works to salvation (Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, and Catholics) and individuals who call themselves Christian who are legalistic about things like church attendance, tithing, Bible reading, etc. Pretty much anything can be turned into a work we add to Christ's sacrifice for our salvation.

As the gospel moves out, we can expect many people who are not like us to join the family of God. How will we react? How will we feel when people show up with tattoos, or piercings, or who knows what all? Are we ready for people with different musical styles, dress, and cultural habits than ours?

When our common Father and our shared life in Christ and the presence of the Spirit within us becomes the basis for our unity, something amazing happens. For the first time in history, people from different races, cultures, and backgrounds are unified. The vision of everyone who loves peace and dreams of a unified humanity are realized in the church.

Above all, we need to remember whose church it is. I cringe when I hear people refer to their congregation as "our church" or "my church." There is only one owner of the church—that is God. When we remember this, it will be much easier for us to accept anyone He invites home for dinner.

Questions to Ask During the Study

Section 1 Read Acts 15:1-5

1. What was the real issue here? Were the believers who were pushing circumcision just being mean? What was their real motive?
2. What was the worst impact this could have had on the church?
3. Have you ever been involved in a church split? What were the issues that caused all the problems?

Section 1 Acts 15:6-21

1. What becomes the basis for solving this problem in the church?
2. How can we find the mind of God in solving our problems with other believers?

Section 1 Acts 15:22-35

1. What kind of practices might we give up for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

Section 1 Acts 15:36-41

1. This part of Scripture shows a split between Paul and Barnabas. What is the basis of the problem? Who was right?
2. How could they have solved this problem with less strife?