

## Finding Clarity in the Church

*Life Group Leaders should read through this material and choose a few questions to talk over in your group. Your group will not have time to cover all the material. The guide is for personal study and for choosing a few questions that you and your life group would like to discuss.*

### **Read Aloud Acts 15:1-21**

Before we break down this section of Scripture, describe what is happening in your own WORDS. (Being able to summarize Scripture is a great way to see if we are comprehending what we have just read.)

### **Acts 15:1-2**

**1** The early Church was primarily made up of Jewish believers. As the Jews came to faith, naturally they continued in much of the Mosaic law, especially circumcision. However, while trying to understand the new covenant, some Jews believed that it was necessary to believe in Christ AND keep the law to be saved.

This type of theology is still around today. You may hear things like “you must be baptized to be saved,” “go to church to be saved,” “have a certain amount of good works to be saved.” In the book of Galatians, read how Paul confronts those who taught that you needed the works of the law AND Christ to be saved.  
Galatians 1:6-10 & Galatians 3:1-9

**2** It is vital that as followers of Jesus, we understand that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, by the finished work of Christ alone. There are many acts of obedience that should accompany salvation, but we are not saved by any good works or acts of obedience in accordance with Ephesians 2:8-9 and Romans 10:1-21.

Think about this for a moment: You are standing before God and He asks you, “Why should I let you into heaven?” What would you say? If your answer has anything to do with your works, you trying your best, you spreading the Gospel, you making disciples, you doing miracles, you helping the poor, then I am sad to tell you that you may be on your way to hell. Our answer should solely rest on the fact that we placed our faith in the grace of God working through Christ. Our answer could look something like this, “God, I do not deserve to go to heaven. I have fallen short, but I believe that Jesus Christ paid the price for my sins, and by your grace I have received a new heart to live with you forever.”

**?** **Question: Do you find yourself relying on your works in order to be assured of your salvation? If not, what has helped you not do that?**

### Acts 15:3-5

While traveling, Paul and Barnabas shared the testimony of what God had done. Although there was still controversy around the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit, many of the “brothers,” or followers of Jesus, were ecstatic about the news.

It is important to note that the opposition in vs 5 is said to be Pharisees who became **believers**. This is important to note because even followers of Jesus can be very wrong about certain theological beliefs. Even in this case, these believers were struggling with being saved by grace alone. Their upbringing in the Jewish faith was blinding them to the unconditional grace of God. Now we cannot know for certain if these men were saved, however, the book of Acts does describe them as believers. They had put their lives at risk as Pharisees to identify with Jesus.

! This should be a warning to us. We must keep our eyes fixed on the simplicity and purity of the Gospel. We CANNOT earn our way to heaven by any works. We are saved by Jesus. If you hear you are saved by Jesus AND some work, then you know you are hearing false teaching.

### Acts 15:6-11

This debate seems like it should have easily been put to rest, but it was a matter of much discussion throughout the early Church. The Scripture had not been finished yet as the Apostles were still laying the foundation of the Church by the authority of Christ. However, Peter clearly articulates a few points of foundational doctrine.

- A The Gospel is God’s power for salvation - Romans 1:16
- B God sees and knows the heart of man, not just his outward behavior - 2 Corinthians 5:1-15
- C We are saved by faith in the Gospel - Romans 10:14-17
- D The Holy Spirit is given upon salvation - John 15:26-27, Ephesians 1:13-14
- E The law was to expose that we fall short, not for the sake of saving us - Galatians 3:15-29 & 1 Timothy 1:8-17
- F Saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone - Ephesians 2:8-9



**Question: Are any of these foundational truths new to you? Or hard to obey or believe?**

### 1 Acts 15:12-21

The Church was able to come to a clear decision based upon a few components.

- A First, James used the word of God as the foundation on why the Gentiles could be saved. Peter also quoted the words of Christ as his foundation when the Gentiles first received the Holy Spirit.
- B Second, there was fruit of the power of God working through the Word of God. Paul and Barnabas gave witness that the Gentiles received the Holy Spirit by faith.
- C Finally, there was agreement amongst the leadership of the Church on how the Church should proceed.

! Note the order of these pieces. The Word of God must come first. Once we are in alignment with the Word of God, it can prove wise to evaluate fruit and the way God is moving in our lives. Finally, it is important for the leadership to strive for both doctrinal unity and unity in how to live out that doctrine.

**2** Ultimately, the Church agreed that the Gentiles did not need to keep the law of Moses to be saved. However, they did encourage them to keep a few rules. They asked them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.

**A** All of these points had to deal with the Gentile system of idols. Idolatry was repulsive to the Jews. If you are familiar with the Old Testament, you are familiar with how the Jews constantly fell into idolatry. After many failures, God brought Israel back into captivity. When the Jews came back from captivity, they did not return to idol worship, but instead their religion unknowingly became an idol.

With the Jews repulsed by idolatry, the Church encouraged the Gentiles not to put a stumbling block in front of the Jews by partaking in acts that could be tied into idol worship.

Things polluted by idols - any food offered to idols, or items connected to idol worship.

Sexual immorality - this was often connected to idol worship, and any sort of sexual immorality is not only sinful but would become extremely divisive to the Jews.

**B** Secondly, the Church mentioned a couple of commands that were connected to the dietary laws. This again was for the sake of unity. The Jews were devoted to the dietary laws of the Old Testament, and seeing Gentiles eat what to them was “unclean” was very offensive. The Church was not saying that eating these things was sinful but was simply encouraging the Gentiles to avoid strangled things and bloody meats to not cause unnecessary conflict between their Jewish brothers or offend non-believing Jews and cause them to lose their witness.

**3** James concludes this section of Scripture by stating the reason for the rules as described above.

*“For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.”*

In other words, James is saying that Jews are everywhere. The Law has been read every Sabbath all over the known world. Therefore, the Gentiles should follow these simple rules for the sake of not causing unnecessary conflict between believing Jews and for the sake of not losing a testimony to unbelieving Jews.

**?** **Questions: What are some issues in our society that are not necessarily “sinful” but should be avoided for the sake of maintaining a powerful and pure testimony?**

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### **Read Aloud Acts 15:22-41**

Describe what is happening in your own words.

### **Acts 15:22-29**

The “Home” church of Jerusalem sent out their final verdict to the Gentile churches. Notice that this letter has the following elements.

**A** Clear communication on who is sending the letter. God appointed the Apostles and then elders to lead the local church. These leaders had the responsibility to provide doctrinal clarity and direction for the churches.

**ACD** There was unity amongst the leaders and amongst the brothers who were with them.

**ACD** The letter was carried by trusted men who had proven fruit amongst the churches.

**ACD** Through the Word of God, good fruit, and unity, the Church could be confident that they were being led by the Holy Spirit.

### **Acts 15:30-35**

Notice that the leaders who brought the letter were interested in more than simply providing doctrinal direction to the Gentiles. Rather they were interested in discipleship and relationship. The leadership stayed to encourage, teach, and to preach the Word of God to these new believers and churches.



**Question: Immediate direction in times of crisis is good, but in-depth discipleship is what the Church really needs. Has there been a relationship that you have had with a leader or fellow Christian that has brought both crisis intervention and doctrinal depth to help you navigate life as a disciple?**

### **Acts 15:36-41**

1

Something happens in this Scripture that none of us like, CONFLICT! Two of the greatest leaders of the early Church had a moment of conflict that caused separation. There are a few key points to note about this conflict.

A

Neither man is ever reprimanded for their decision. In fact, Scripture seems to indicate that God blessed both of their ministries. Acts 15:40 says that Paul was commended by the brothers for his next mission with Silas.

B

Although Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement, they still had love for one another. In 1 Corinthians 9:1-7 Paul calls Barnabas a fellow apostle. This letter was written after the disagreement found in Acts 15.

C

Later Paul and Mark reconcile. Paul says that Mark is useful to the ministry in 2 Timothy 4:11.

2

Conflict is never fun, and separating from partners in ministry can be heartbreaking. However, we can learn something from the lives of Paul and Barnabas. They separated yet maintained love for one another.

3

Both of them may have been right in their stance. It may have been good for Barnabas to give Mark another chance, it may have been good for Paul to show Mark tough love and the importance of being reliable.

4

We do not know the ins and outs of this conflict, and that is the point. There are times when we must follow what we believe God is doing in our lives and stay true to God's Word in the best way we know how. In doing this, we must also trust God's work in other people's lives when we disagree and not allow the disagreement to be an open door for bitterness.



**Question: How do you deal with disagreements in the church? Are you able to trust God when there is disagreement or even separation in the church? Not all circumstances are like what we witnessed with Paul and Barnabas, but it can be a good example to check our hearts in times of conflict.**

# Weekly Challenge

Conflict, disagreement, and separation can be difficult in the church. However Acts 15 showed us how we can navigate these type of issues with the Word of God, godly counsel, and striving for unity. Is there a brother or sister in Christ with whom you have been bitter? If so, take some time this week to evaluate how you can bring peace to that situation. Maybe you have done all you can, and you need to trust God's timing. Or maybe there is a kind word, an act of repentance, or an act of service you can do to help bring peace.

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# Memory Verse

## **Acts 14:21-23 ESV**

*<sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. <sup>23</sup> And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*