

through the Galatian region to encourage the new believers (14:21). Eventually they returned to their sending church at Antioch to celebrate God's work with the disciples (14:26, 27). Paul probably wrote his first epistle, Galatians, to the churches in the region of Galatia after returning to the church at Antioch in AD 49.

READ: Acts 14:27. **ASK:** Despite being stoned and left for dead, Who was the focus of the missionaries' report to their sending church? (Q16) *God.*

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Consider

RESOURCE: Display resource 11. **ASK:** What should we consider when we see a world full of lost souls? (Q17) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *What's God's part for me in reaching the world? Who has yet to be reached? Where is God working?*

Pray

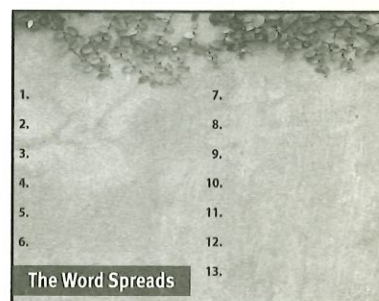
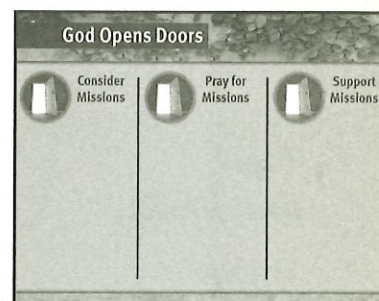
ASK: What should we pray for in regard to missions? (Q18) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *For God to send workers, for salvation decisions, for boldness to share the gospel.*

Support

ASK: How should we support our missionaries? (Q19) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *By asking God to give them the wisdom and strength to be faithful, by giving resources to further their ministries, by considering whether God would have us join them as vocational missionaries.*

Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Be active in and support missions.



The Jerusalem Council



Topic

Doctrinal purity

Theme

Doctrinal purity is essential in a church.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will determine to hold to pure doctrine and confront bad doctrine in a godly manner.

Materials

- Resources 1 and 12

Scripture Focus

Acts 15:1–35

Summary

Lesson 9 summarizes the work of the first major council of the church and presents the importance of doctrinal content and purity. The lesson also gives attention to how the council addressed the controversy.

Outline

- I. The Importance of Doctrinal Purity and Clarity
 - A. Doctrinal importance of the content of faith
 - B. Doctrinal importance of pure faith
- II. The Issue before the Council (15:1–35)
 - A. The problem of the Judaizers (15:1–5)
 - B. The discussion of the council (15:6–21)
 1. Peter’s address (15:6–11)
 2. Barnabas and Paul’s testimony (15:12)
 3. James’s recommendation (15:13–21)
 - C. The decision of the council (15:22–35)

Memory Verse

“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11).

GETTING STARTED

Jury Service

Invite one or two learners to share their experience serving on jury duty. Ask them to focus on the importance of the law and the way both parties in the case treated each other.

ASK: How did the verdict reflect the law and the rights of the two parties?

Acts 15 presents the proceedings of the first major church council. From this study we will learn that clear, pure truth is essential to the church. You will also learn that the process of handling conflicts with fellow believers in the church is important.

Infectious Disease

ASK: How might you respond if a fellow church member came to church with an infectious, deadly disease? (Q1)

ASK: How might an infectious disease be like doctrinal impurity? (Q2) *Doctrinal error can spread and can choke the life out of a church.*

Acts 15 presents the first major church council to deal with doctrinal error. From this study we will learn that clear, pure truth is essential to the church. We will also learn that the process of handling conflicts with fellow believers in the church is important.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Luke's record of the meeting of a council in Jerusalem appears halfway through the book of Acts. This location is critical not only from a literary standpoint but also from a theological standpoint. Luke had illustrated the spread of the gospel from the Jews to the Samaritans to the Gentiles. However, one major obstacle remained. Some Jewish Christians, along with non-Christian Jews, believed that Gentiles needed to keep aspects of the Mosaic law. A council of church leaders, referred to as the Jerusalem council, addressed this issue of full Gentile inclusion into the church. The issue revolved around the very nature of the gospel and the nature of the church.

I. The Importance of Doctrinal Purity and Clarity

Prior to our study of the actual Jerusalem council, we need to review the subject of doctrinal purity. In today's climate of relativism, many churches fail to emphasize doctrinal commitment. Many people today simply have faith in faith. As a result, many think that believing, or having faith, is vital. However, the process of faith does not provide salvation. It is the content of what we believe—the gospel message—that ensures salvation.

A. Doctrinal importance of the content of faith

Paul affirmed the essentials of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15. The first essential involves the historical substitutionary death of Christ (1 Cor. 15:3). Jesus died in our place. He took the punishment for our sins.

READ: Galatians 3:13. **ASK:** What does this verse say about the punishment for our sins? (Q3) *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by dying on the cross and being made a curse for us.*

Jesus took the punishment of humanity upon Himself. In theological terms He propitiated the wrath of God for us (Rom. 3:25). Propitiation is the once-for-all turning away of God's wrath because of the sacrificial death of Christ on behalf of sinners.

Another essential component of faith involves Jesus' literal bodily resurrection from the dead. Jesus didn't stay buried; He rose again (1 Cor. 15:4). The resurrection indicates that God accepted His sacrificial death and that Jesus overcame the penalty of sin (Rom. 4:25).

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:20–22. **ASK:** What does Jesus resurrection mean for those who have trusted in Him as their Savior? (Q4) *Those who believe in Christ will also overcome death.*

We can have confidence that Jesus' resurrection was a real historical event. Paul wrote that it was witnessed by over five hundred people (1 Cor. 15:6).

Other essentials of faith involve the deity and humanity of Christ, which confused some believers in the latter part of the first century. John taught that those who deny the actual deity and humanity of Christ are not believers, but false teachers (1 John 2:22, 23). He also taught that whoever transgresses, or leaves Christ out of their doctrine, does not know God (2 John 9).

B. Doctrinal importance of pure faith

Another key essential of faith involves how one receives the gospel. A person can receive the gospel only through personal faith.

READ: John 1:12; 3:16, 17. **ASK:** What connection do these verses make between salvation and belonging to a particular church of performing a specific ritual? (Q5) *John doesn't link salvation to belonging to a church or performing any rituals.*

READ: Romans 3:23, 24, 28. **ASK:** What does Paul clearly teach about salvation in these verses? (Q6) *Salvation comes by faith apart from the law or any other requirements.*

Pure faith in relation to how one receives the gospel is essential for a church. If a church compromises on this doctrine, it undermines its ministry.

ASK: Why might a church be tempted to compromise its doctrinal stand? (Q7) *To be tolerant and accepting; to appeal to a broad number of people; to be progressive; to keep from offending people.*

II. The Issue before the Council (Acts 15:1–35)

A. The problem of the Judaizers (15:1–5)

While Paul and Barnabas were ministering in the church at Antioch, men from Jerusalem traveled over 250 miles to Antioch to teach that Gentiles must be circumcised (Acts 15:1, 5).

Initially circumcision served as a sign to indicate acceptance of the Old Covenant of God and thus full acceptance into the community of God. During the New Testament period, some Jews had reduced salvation to the simple practice of circumcision.

READ: Galatians 5:2–4. **ASK:** What does Paul say in this passage about circumcision and salvation? (Q8) *Circumcision cannot save a person. A person depending on circumcision is responsible for keeping the entire law. No one can keep the whole law. A person saved by grace gains nothing by being circumcised.*

For believers, circumcision and keeping the law adds nothing. Grace alone is sufficient. The phrase *fallen from grace* does not mean a believer loses his or her salvation. Rather it signifies that anyone who adds works to a faith profession is demonstrating that he or she never exercised true saving faith. Paul was arguing that removing oneself from the sphere of belief alone and moving into a sphere of belief plus works is insufficient to provide the saving benefit of the gospel of grace.

Since the church at Antioch had prospered, and since Paul had taken the gospel to the Gentiles, the men from Jerusalem probably wanted to use the church at Antioch as a test case to enforce their Jewish views.

Acts 15:5 identifies another group from among the council participants: Jews associated with the Pharisees. Pharisees believed in the idea of resurrection, life after death, eternal judgment, and a future Messiah, so common ground did exist between Christianity and Pharisees.

During this time, however, many Pharisees had become prideful and arrogant (Matt. 23). Requiring circumcision would also entail many other Jewish customs and rituals. Essentially the men from Jerusalem wanted the Gentiles to become Jewish.

Paul later reflected on the result of those men's visit. Those men from Jerusalem intimidated even Peter and Barnabas, who were carried away by this Jewish hypocrisy (Gal. 2:11–15). The very gospel was at stake, so Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to present the matter to the apostles and elders.

B. The discussion of the council (15:6–21)

1. Peter's address (15:6–11)

READ: Acts 15:6–9. **ASK:** Who chose to have the gospel shared with Gentiles? (Q9) *God.*

ASK: According to God, what is the difference between a Jewish believer and a Gentile believer? (Q10) *Nothing.*

Peter addressed the council first. He recounted the conversion of Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10), which occurred about AD 40 or 41. Peter emphasized how the Holy Spirit did not differentiate between the Jews and Gentiles and how the Holy Spirit had equally cleansed both groups. Peter argued flawlessly. He emphasized that the Gentiles were saved by grace through faith and that God did not require the Gentiles to keep any law of circumcision. Since the Spirit is fully God and since He formed the church (Acts 2), then anyone who responds by faith will be an equal part of the church. One cannot argue with God's work. Paul later stated that the Body of Christ is one body with no partition between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:13, 14; 4:4–6).

READ: Acts 15:10. **ASK:** When someone espouses a doctrinal error, against whom is that person actually battling? (Q11) *God.*

Peter's statement regarding putting a *yoke upon the neck of the disciples* directly contradicted a Jewish custom. When a Gentile became a Jewish proselyte, the Jew overseeing the ceremony would say that the Gentile had taken up the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven (Matt. 23:4; Gal. 5:1).

ASK: How effective for the Jews was the yoke of the Mosaic law? (Q12) *The believing Jews hadn't been able to bear the yoke of the law. In other words, none of them could keep all parts of the law. Trying to keep it had been a burden.*

When Peter said, *Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they*, he repudiated any type of Jewish superiority (Acts 15:11). He declared that salvation comes by grace through faith plus nothing.

2. Barnabas and Paul's testimony (15:12)

Next, both Barnabas and Paul reported on God's work to the Gentiles through them. They specifically mentioned the signs and wonders performed by Gentile believers through the ministry of the Spirit. The council members understood the Spirit's ministry as an endorsement of the gospel message. If God considered Gentiles unclean and if He did indeed require circumcision and keeping of the law for salvation and growth in Christ, then His Spirit would not have worked with the Gentiles through Paul and Barnabas.

3. James's recommendation (15:13–21)

James spoke next. He was the half-brother of Jesus, a leader in the Jerusalem church, and the one who earlier had written the book of James (Acts 12:17; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12).

James defended the grace gospel through a threefold approach. First, he took a designation used of Israel alone, *a people for his name* (Acts 15:14), and applied it to Gentile believers. This use illustrated that Gentiles had become coheirs with and had equal status with Jewish believers.

Second, James stated that Simon Peter agreed with the prophets. And James, in turn, agreed with Peter's statement that God took the initiative for Gentile salvation (15:15).

And, finally, James alluded to a general Old Testament truth: Gentiles are savable (15:16, 17). James quoted Amos 9:11 and 12 to demonstrate that the prophets agreed with the salvation of Gentiles. James did not, however, indicate that the

salvation of Gentiles fulfilled Amos's prophecy. Rather, he said that the prophets agreed with Gentile salvation (15:15).

This distinction is important. The Amos prophecy is imbedded in a future earthly, millennial reign of Christ; hence the book of Amos will not be fulfilled until the second return of Christ. Amos argued that Messiah will rebuild the ruined tabernacle of David so that mankind, even Gentiles, may seek Jehovah.

Additionally, nothing in the Amos passage suggests that this future Gentile salvation will require circumcision.

Also note that while James quoted only from the book of Amos, he appealed to the prophets as a whole. James was simply establishing the validity of Gentile salvation. He had made his point: Gentile salvation does not contradict the law.

James concluded his discussion by strongly affirming Gentile salvation apart from Mosaic law (15:19).

READ: Acts 15:20. **ASK:** Why would James ask Gentile Christians to refrain from eating blood and animals that had been killed by strangulation when those regulations were part of the law? (Q13) James didn't want the Gentile believers to cause unnecessary conflict with the Jewish believers. The Jewish believers had yet to mature to the point doing away with the dietary restrictions in the law.

C. The decision of the council (15:22–35)

The council and the entire church agreed with James. They sent a letter by Paul and Barnabas and two other witnesses. Luke traced the unanimity of the council's decision directly to the Holy Spirit (15:28). In addition, the council clearly indicated that the Judaizers, those who wished to make the Gentiles Jewish, had no authority to burden the Gentiles.

In its method and manner, the Jerusalem council protected the truth and respected fellow saints. The council set forth both the importance of doctrinal purity and clarity and the importance of handling such major and potentially destructive issues with respect for those involved in and concerned with the outcome of the issue.

ASK: Why might a lack of respect for fellow believers be just as destructive as doctrinal error? (Q14) A church cannot function if its members are at odds with one another. Edification and evangelism both suffer when church members fail to respect one another.

The major emphasis of the council was that each sinner, Jew or Gentile, is saved by grace alone. No one is to place any additional burden on the one who by faith comes to God. This is the pure and clear truth of the Scriptures. The council was correct and firm on the supreme importance of the purity and clarity of doctrine.

This doctrine stands as a foundational truth of the Christian faith. No person is ever saved by adding any human works—no matter how sincerely they are offered—to what God has provided through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:8, 9).

As James expressed in verses 19 and 20, the council wisely respected the sensitivities of Jewish believers who, though saved by grace alone, were still working through their cultural heritage of the law. The council respected the importance of correct doctrine. The members also urged those blessed with a knowledge of

correct doctrine to handle with respectful grace the presentation of the council's recommendations to those still growing in their understanding.

Church leaders have the responsibility of caring for immature believers or those who hold incorrect doctrine. Believers must cherish pure doctrine and hold it without compromise; but in the meantime, church leaders must teach and nurture those who have not yet come to the truth.

A study of the way the Jerusalem council arrived at the correct and wise decision reveals four principles relevant for the church today.

1. Churches should make all major policy decisions that affect the whole church through open discussion with all interested parties free to present their thoughts and concerns.

2. Church leaders should spend considerable time in prayer, seeking God's direction and blessing regarding major decisions.

3. Churches should examine all relevant Scriptures for indicators of God's truth and His desire regarding major decisions.

4. Churches should be careful not to offend or dishearten immature believers in the church, allowing them an opportunity to grow in their understanding of doctrine and practice.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Holding to Pure Doctrine

ASK: What particular teachings are threatening the purity of our church's doctrine or the doctrine of churches like ours? (Q15) *The belief that God accepts all religions; the social gospel; rethinking the gospel.*

RESOURCE: Display resource 12. **ASK:** What can we do to hold to pure doctrine? (Q16) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *Pray for the church leadership; commit to learning doctrine; use doctrinally solid Sunday School curriculum.*

Confronting Bad Doctrine

ASK: How have you seen doctrinal error confronted? (Q17)

RESOURCE: Display resource 12. **ASK:** How should we confront doctrinal error, particularly in our church? (Q18) (Record learners' answers on the resource.) *With grace and patience allowing the erring brother to change; with intolerance for compromise; with meekness and humility.*

Review Resource

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Hold to pure doctrine.

