

**THE CHURCH'S WITNESS TO THE WORLD:  
Jerusalem Council - Acts 15:1-16:5**

**Memory Verse:** *"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom. 3:28 NIV).*

**Background Helps:**

Over the last several weeks, we have witnessed the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

1. The salvation of Cornelius' household: "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (Acts 10:45). "So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18).
2. The establishment of a predominantly Gentile church in Antioch: "Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20).
3. Paul & Barnabas' First Missionary Journey: "We now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). "God...had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27).

These events prompted a crisis in Judaism. Although the Jews understood from the Old Testament that God intended to extend His salvation to the Gentiles, most had assumed that the Gentiles would still have to pass through the door of Judaism. Perhaps this idea could be diagrammed like this:

GENTILES → JUDAISM → SALVATION

The only difference now with the Gospel of Christ was that the Gentiles (along with the Jews) would also accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. But Paul and Barnabas' mission to the Gentiles had radically changed the picture:

GENTILES  
 ↘  
 CHRIST → SALVATION  
 ↗  
 JEWS

Jews and Gentiles were coming to God on the same basis of faith in Christ alone. Both would now have equal access to God in Christ as one body (see Ephesians 2:11-22).

In Acts 15:1, the so-called Judaizers raised an objection: "Unless you [Gentiles] are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved. The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." This viewpoint can be diagrammed like this:

FAITH in CHRIST + CIRCUMCISION → SALVATION

OR

FAITH in CHRIST + OBEYING the LAW of MOSES → SALVATION

OR

FAITH in CHRIST + GOOD WORKS → SALVATION

This controversy led to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 in which the crucial issue of "What is the true Gospel?" or "What is the way of salvation?" was considered.

The result was a victory for the Gospel of God's grace. The decision of the Council could be diagrammed like this:

FAITH in CHRIST ALONE → SALVATION

Notice how Peter's testimony, the witness of Paul and Barnabas, and the conclusion of James, drawn from the prophetic Scripture, all point to the fact that "we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Jews] are saved, just as they [Gentiles] are" (v.11). This is also the clear teaching of Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. See our memory verse, Romans 3:28.

The regulations listed in Acts 15:20 and repeated in verse 29 were not imposed on the Gentiles as conditions for salvation. Rather, they were urged in order to promote fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, since these practices were particularly offensive to the Jews. In other words, these regulations were urging the practice of Christian love, the natural fruit of true saving faith. (See Romans 14; I Corinthians 8; 9:19-22; 10:31-11:1; James 2:14-26.) A more complete diagram, therefore might look like this:

FAITH in CHRIST ALONE → SALVATION + LOVE (or good works)

### **Lesson Helps:**

Having spent so much space on the background(!), we leave the lesson to you! Perhaps you could incorporate the diagrams above. Be sure that the Gospel of salvation by faith is clear to your students and that each one of them has believed! Although circumcision is not usually put forward as a condition of salvation today, what other kinds of works do people trust in?

### **Home Assignment:**

 Read Acts 16:6-18:22

 Memorize Acts 16:31