

The Church in the New Testament, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Doctrinal Unity

Acts 15:1-21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the most consequential meeting in the history of the church, and your class should understand what was actually at stake before they watch it resolved. The question sounds procedural: must Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved? It was not procedural. It was whether there is one gospel or two, whether the death of Jesus was sufficient or merely helpful, whether a man comes to God through Christ alone or through Christ plus a system God had already fulfilled. Paul understood exactly what was at issue, which is why he wrote to the Galatians that anyone preaching another gospel should be accursed (Galatians 1:6-9), and why he said that if you accept circumcision as necessary, "Christ will be of no advantage to you" (Galatians 5:2-4). Help the class feel that this was not a squabble about customs. The church nearly split, and it should have, if the other side had been right.

Be careful to define the dispute precisely, because it is constantly misdescribed. The question was never whether salvation requires obedience. Nobody in that room thought so. Peter, who stands up in verse 7 and argues for grace, is the same Peter who commanded the crowd to repent and be baptized in Lesson 1 and who commanded Cornelius and his household to be baptized (Acts 10:47-48). James, who renders the decision, is the man who wrote that faith without works is dead. The question was whether the law of Moses could be added to the gospel as a second requirement for salvation. The council said no, and it said so without ever suggesting that the gospel makes no demands. Guard your class against pulling this passage toward "faith only," because the men arguing here would not have recognized that conclusion.

Then teach the method, because Luke gives us the whole process on purpose. There was open disagreement, real debate, careful listening, testimony about what God had done, and finally, in verses 14 through 18, James settling the matter by appealing to Scripture. Notice the order: even after Peter's firsthand account of Cornelius, the question is not closed until the Bible speaks. That is the discipline your class most needs to see. And note what the letter does next: the apostles and elders, saying "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28), bind four commands on Gentile Christians. Those were not suggestions or cultural courtesies. They were apostolic commands. Aim the lesson at a class that leaves knowing how to tell God's requirements from men's, and willing to hold the first without adding the second.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verse 1, some men from Judea teach that Gentiles cannot be saved “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses.” Why was this teaching a direct threat to the gospel?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read verse 1 to the class and make them hear the shape of the sentence. “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” The dangerous word is “unless.” These men were not denying that Jesus saves. They almost certainly affirmed the cross, the resurrection, and the need for faith. They simply added one small word, and that word turned the gospel into a down payment. Christ, and. Help the class see that heresy rarely arrives by subtraction. It arrives by addition, and it usually comes from sincere people quoting the Bible.

Now show them why the addition destroys everything. If circumcision is necessary for salvation, then the death of Jesus was not sufficient, and if it was not sufficient, it did not accomplish what Scripture says it accomplished. Paul saw this instantly and said so with more heat than anywhere else in his writings: if anyone preaches a gospel contrary to the one you received, “let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6-9). To the Galatians, who were facing this same teaching, he wrote, “if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you... You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:2-4). Those are not the words of a man arguing about a preference.

Then draw out the logic the class needs to be able to follow. Circumcision was never a standalone rite; it was the door into the law. Paul says it plainly: “every man who accepts circumcision... is obligated to keep the whole law” (Galatians 5:3). You cannot take one piece of a covenant system. To require circumcision was to reinstate a law that God had fulfilled and taken away in Christ, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9-10). It was not adding a rule. It was reopening a covenant God had closed.

Be fair to the men from Judea, because the class will understand this better if they see how reasonable it looked. Circumcision was commanded by God. It was given to Abraham, kept by Moses, honored by the prophets, and practiced by Jesus Himself. These men were not inventing something; they were holding onto something God really had commanded, for centuries. Their error was not that they loved Scripture too much. It was that they did not recognize when God had brought something to its intended end.

Bring it home carefully, because the modern version of this error is rarely circumcision. Ask the class what we are tempted to add. Not to our doctrine of salvation, necessarily, but to our sense of who is really acceptable: a background, a manner, a set of opinions, a way of dressing or speaking. Any time we say “Christ, and,” about a man’s standing before God, we are standing where the men from Judea stood.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The threat was the word “unless”; error usually comes by addition, not subtraction (Acts 15:1)
- If circumcision is necessary, the death of Christ was insufficient
- Paul pronounced a curse on any other gospel and warned that accepting circumcision severs from Christ (Galatians 1:6-9; 5:2-4)
- Circumcision was the door into the whole law; one cannot take a piece of a covenant (Galatians 5:3)
- The Old Law was fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 8:13; 10:9-10)
- The men from Judea held to something God truly had commanded but failed to see He had fulfilled it
- Any “Christ, and” regarding a person’s standing before God repeats this error

Discussion Prompts

- What do we quietly add to “Christ” when we assess whether someone is really acceptable?
- Why does one small word like “unless” change the entire gospel?
- These men were defending something God had genuinely commanded. How do we avoid their mistake?

Question 2

Student Question:

Verse 2 says Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and debate” with these teachers. Is strong disagreement over doctrine appropriate? When is it necessary?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class feel the phrase. “No small dissension and debate” is Luke’s understated way of saying there was a serious fight. Paul and Barnabas, the two men the class watched being sent out in worship last week, are here in a sharp public conflict with fellow believers. Notice that Luke does not apologize for it, does not treat it as a failure of love, and does not suggest that a more spiritual church would have avoided it. He simply reports it as what faithful men did when the gospel was threatened.

That will trouble some in your class, because we have been trained to think that disagreement is itself a failure. So teach the distinction plainly. Scripture never commends quarreling; it condemns it repeatedly (2 Timothy 2:23-24; Titus 3:9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13). What Scripture commends is contending. Jude says to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Paul says an elder must be able “to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). There is a fight we are commanded to have and a fight we are commanded to avoid, and the difference is what is at stake and how we conduct ourselves.

Help the class find the line. Paul fought here, and hard, because salvation itself was on the table. But the same Paul told Christians to receive one another without quarreling over opinions in matters of food and days (Romans 14:1-6), and told Timothy that the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, correcting opponents with gentleness (2 Timothy 2:24-25). The maturity your class needs is the judgment to know which is which: what is a matter of the gospel, and what is a matter of preference wearing the gospel's clothes. Most congregational fights are the second kind, and most silence in the face of real error is the first.

Notice too what Paul did not do. He did not split the church, walk out, or write these men off privately. He argued, and then he traveled to Jerusalem to settle it in the open with the whole church. That is a crucial detail. Contending for the truth and staying in fellowship long enough to resolve it are not opposites, and the men who are quickest to fight are often the ones least willing to sit through the resolution.

Ask the class the honest question. Most of us fall off one side or the other. Some will fight about anything and call it faithfulness. Others will not fight about anything and call it love. Which are you, and what has it cost the people around you?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Luke reports the sharp debate without apology; it was not a failure of love (Acts 15:2)
- Quarreling is condemned, but contending for the faith is commanded (Jude 3; Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 2:23-24)
- Matters of opinion are to be received without quarreling (Romans 14:1-6)
- Correction is to be done with gentleness, not combativeness (2 Timothy 2:24-25)
- Maturity is discerning what is a gospel matter and what is preference wearing the gospel's clothes
- Paul contended and stayed in fellowship to resolve it publicly rather than splitting

Discussion Prompts

- Do you fight about everything and call it faithfulness, or nothing and call it love?
- How do we tell a gospel matter from a preference wearing the gospel's clothes?
- Why is staying for the resolution as important as being willing to contend?

Question 3

Student Question:

The church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders (v. 2). What does this decision teach about how doctrinal disputes should be resolved in the church?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with why Jerusalem, because the reason is specific and the class needs it. They did not go because Jerusalem outranked Antioch. They went because that is where the apostles were, and the apostles were the men to whom Christ had promised the Spirit to guide them into all truth (John 16:13). This was a question about revelation, and the men who received revelation were in Jerusalem. It was the right destination for a reason that no longer exists.

Now set the boundary carefully, because this passage is used constantly to justify things it does not support. Acts 15 is not the charter for church councils, synods, conventions, or any body of men with authority to legislate for congregations. Notice what is absent: no vote binding other churches, no ongoing institution created, no headquarters established. Antioch was not submitting to a governing board; it was asking inspired men a question that only inspired men could answer. When the apostles died, that avenue closed. What we have instead is better: the answer they gave, written down and preserved, which is why we go to the book rather than to a council.

Then draw out what does transfer, because a great deal does. The disputants did not each go their own way. They did not settle it by who shouted loudest or by counting the congregation. They took a serious question to the highest authority available and abided by the answer. That instinct is entirely right, and for us the highest authority available is Scripture. The Bereans model it in the next chapter, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether Paul's preaching was so (Acts 17:11). Ask the class where they actually go when a doctrinal question arises: to the text, or to a preacher's opinion, or to what we have always done here?

Notice too that this was done publicly and together. Verse 4 says they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders. Verse 12 says all the assembly fell silent and listened. Verse 22 will say it seemed good to the apostles and elders "with the whole church." The congregation was not excluded while leaders decided in a back room, and the leaders did not abdicate to a popular vote. Both are present, which is the same balance the class saw in Acts 6 when the congregation chose and the apostles appointed.

Bring it near. Ask the class how our congregation handles a genuine doctrinal question. Do we bring it into the open and take it to Scripture together, or does it get handled in hallways, by rumor, or by whoever is most persistent? The method Acts 15 models cannot be practiced by people who will not talk to each other.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- They went to Jerusalem because the apostles were there, not because Jerusalem outranked Antioch (John 16:13)
- Acts 15 establishes no council, synod, or governing body over congregations
- No ongoing institution or headquarters is created; the apostolic avenue closed when the apostles died
- We now go to the written answer: Scripture is the highest authority available (Acts 17:11)

- The right instinct is to take serious questions to the highest authority and abide by the answer
- The process was public: the whole church was present and heard (Acts 15:4, 12, 22)
- Both congregational participation and leadership responsibility are present, as in Acts 6

Discussion Prompts

- Where do we actually go when a doctrinal question arises here?
- Why is Acts 15 not a warrant for a church council with authority over congregations?
- What happens to doctrinal questions that get handled in hallways instead of in the open?

Question 4

Student Question:

In verse 5, some believers from the Pharisee party insist that Gentiles must keep the law of Moses. Why was this position attractive to some, and why was it ultimately wrong?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice how Luke describes them, because it is remarkably fair: “some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees.” Believers. These were Christians. They were not enemies infiltrating the church; they were brothers who had obeyed the gospel and who were sincerely, disastrously wrong. Help the class hold that, because it is more unsettling than a story about villains and far more useful. Sincere, converted, Bible-loving people can teach something that would have destroyed the church.

Ask the class why the position appealed, and let them work through it, because every reason still operates. It had the weight of Scripture behind it; God really did command circumcision. It had the weight of history and identity; these were the customs of their fathers, their nation, their childhood. It felt reverent, because it asked for more rather than less. And underneath all of it, honestly, it kept the Gentiles a step below and kept the old guard in charge. Requirements are a form of control, and a rule that costs you nothing but costs someone else everything is always tempting.

Then name the deeper appeal, which is the one that reaches your class. Law is easier than grace. A system of requirements tells you exactly where you stand and lets you measure yourself against others. Grace gives you no such handle. It makes you a debtor rather than an achiever, and it puts the Gentile who believed last Tuesday on the same ground as the Pharisee who has kept the law for fifty years. That is precisely what the human heart resents. The elder brother in Luke 15 was not angry that his brother came home; he was angry that the party was free.

Now say why it was wrong, and say it in the terms Scripture uses. The law was never able to justify anyone (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20). Its purpose was to reveal sin and to serve as a guardian until Christ came (Galatians 3:24). Christ fulfilled it and took it away, nailing it to the

cross (Colossians 2:14). To reinstate it was not conservative; it was rebellion against what God had done. Help the class see the irony: the men most determined to honor God's past command were resisting God's present work.

Bring it home where it belongs. Ask the class where they are tempted by law, not in doctrine but in the heart. Most of us would rather have a list than a Savior, because a list can be finished and a Savior must be trusted.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- These were genuine believers, sincerely and dangerously wrong (Acts 15:5)
- The position carried the weight of Scripture, history, identity, and apparent reverence
- Requirements function as control; the rule cost its advocates nothing and the Gentiles everything
- Law is attractive because it lets us measure ourselves; grace leaves no such handle
- The law never justified anyone; it revealed sin and served as guardian until Christ (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:20; 3:24)
- Christ fulfilled the law and took it away; reinstating it resisted God's present work (Colossians 2:14)
- Those most determined to honor God's past command opposed what God was doing

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted by law, not in doctrine but in the heart?
- Why would sincere, converted, Bible-loving people teach something this destructive?
- Why does grace bother us more than requirements do?

Question 5

Student Question:

In verses 7–11, Peter recounts how God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles and argues that salvation is “through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” How does Peter’s testimony settle the question?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice who is speaking, because it matters enormously. This is Peter, the apostle to the circumcision, a Jew of Jews, the man who had told God “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything common or unclean” (Acts 10:14). If anyone in that room had a reason to side with the Pharisee party, it was Peter. And he stands up and argues the other way, on the basis of what he watched God do at Cornelius’s house. That is testimony against interest, and everyone present knew it.

Walk the class through his argument, because it is tight. God chose that the Gentiles should hear the gospel and believe (v. 7). God, who knows the heart, bore them witness by giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us (v. 8). He made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith (v. 9). Therefore, why put God to the test by placing a yoke on their necks that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear (v. 10)? The argument is simply this: God already accepted them without the law. Who are we to require what God did not?

Handle the yoke carefully, because the class can misread it. Peter is not saying that God's commands are burdensome or that obedience is a yoke. Jesus said His yoke is easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:30), and John said His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). The unbearable yoke is the Mosaic system as a means of being justified, a system no one ever kept and no one was ever saved by. Peter is not arguing against obedience. He is arguing against a covenant God had closed.

Now guard the most important boundary in this lesson, because verse 11 is regularly conscripted for something Peter never said. "We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Some read that as salvation by faith only, with no obedience required. Consider the speaker. This is the man who preached in Lesson 1, "Repent and be baptized every one of you... for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). This is the man who, at the very house he is describing right now, "commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:47-48). Peter is not contradicting himself between chapters. The question on the table was never whether salvation requires obedient response; it was whether the law of Moses must be added to Christ. Peter says grace saves, and Peter commanded baptism, and both are true because baptism is not a work that earns grace but the appointed way faith receives it.

Then let the class feel the force of Peter's conclusion, because it is stunning coming from him: "we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." He does not say the Gentiles will be saved like us. He says we will be saved like them. The Jew has no separate road. Everyone in the room, and everyone in your class, comes the same way or not at all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Peter, the apostle to the circumcision, testified against his own inclination (Acts 10:14; 15:7)
- God accepted the Gentiles without the law, cleansing their hearts by faith (Acts 15:8-9)
- The unbearable yoke is the Mosaic system as a means of justification, not obedience itself (Matthew 11:30; 1 John 5:3)
- Verse 11 is not a proof text for "faith only"; the question was whether the law must be added to Christ
- The same Peter commanded baptism for the forgiveness of sins and commanded Cornelius's household to be baptized (Acts 2:38; 10:47-48)
- Baptism does not earn grace; it is the appointed way faith receives it
- Peter says the Jews will be saved just as the Gentiles are; there is one road for everyone

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that Peter, of all people, made this argument?
- How would you answer someone who quotes verse 11 to prove salvation by faith only?
- Peter says “we will be saved just as they will,” not the reverse. Why does that word order matter?

Question 6

Student Question:

Verses 12–13 describe the assembly listening to Paul and Barnabas and then to James. What does this deliberative process teach about how churches should handle disagreements?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Point the class to the most surprising word in verse 12: silence. “And all the assembly fell silent and they listened to Barnabas and Paul.” Remember what this room was like a few verses earlier. There had been “much debate” (v. 7), and before that “no small dissension.” And now a room full of people with strong convictions stops talking and listens. Ask the class when they last saw that happen in a disagreement. Silence is not the absence of conviction. It is the discipline of people who want the truth more than they want to win.

Then trace the order of what happened, because Luke lays it out deliberately. There was open debate, not suppression. Peter gave testimony about what God had done. Paul and Barnabas reported the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles. James listened to all of it and then spoke. Nobody was shouted down, nobody was excluded, and nobody rushed it. This was a room that took a hard question seriously enough to sit in it.

Draw out a detail the class should not miss. The men most invested in the outcome, Paul and Barnabas, were given the floor, and the men who disagreed with them were in the room hearing it. That is not how we usually manage conflict. We tend to talk about people rather than to them, and to arrange rooms so the opposition is not present. Acts 15 put everyone in one place and made them listen to each other. That alone would transform most congregational disputes.

Note carefully what the testimony was for, because this is where the class needs precision. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas testified to what God had done, and that evidence was genuine and relevant. But notice it does not close the question. The matter is not settled until James opens the Scriptures in verse 15. Experience raised the question and framed it; Scripture answered it. Keep that order in front of the class, because reversing it is the root of most modern error. What God is doing is never established by what we have seen; it is established by what He has said.

Bring it home. Ask the class what our disagreements would look like if we did these three things: brought everyone into the same room, actually fell silent while the other side spoke, and

refused to settle anything until Scripture had the last word. Most of what divides congregations would not survive that process, and what remained would be worth having.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The assembly fell silent and listened, though the room was full of strong conviction (Acts 15:12)
- The process included open debate, testimony, listening, and unhurried judgment
- Those who disagreed were present to hear rather than talked about in their absence
- Testimony about what God had done was genuine and relevant evidence
- Experience raised and framed the question; Scripture settled it (Acts 15:15)
- Reversing that order, letting experience establish doctrine, is the root of much error

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last fall silent and truly listen to someone you disagreed with?
- What would our disputes look like if nothing were settled until Scripture had the last word?
- Why is talking to people rather than about them so much harder?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 14–18, James appeals to Scripture (Amos 9:11–12) to confirm that God always intended to include the Gentiles. Why is Scripture—rather than experience or opinion—the final authority in doctrinal matters?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice exactly where James turns, because it is the hinge of the whole chapter. He has just heard Peter describe the Holy Spirit falling on Gentiles, and Paul and Barnabas report signs and wonders among the nations. That is about as strong a set of experiences as anyone could offer. And James says, “And with this the words of the prophets agree, as it is written...” He does not settle the question with the miracles. He settles it with the book. The experiences were true, and they were not the authority.

Let the class feel how remarkable that is. If ever a case could have been decided by testimony, this was it. Firsthand apostolic experience, confirmed by miraculous signs, from unimpeachable witnesses. And still the decisive move is a quotation from Amos. Help your class see what that establishes: even genuine works of God are measured by the word of God, never the reverse. James is not doubting Peter. He is showing that what Peter saw is what God said all along, which is the only thing that could make it authoritative.

Draw out why this matters so much today, because this is the practical payoff of the whole lesson. Nearly every doctrinal error in the modern religious world enters through the door

James refused to open. Someone says God told them, or that they felt led, or that the results prove it must be of God, or that so many people have been blessed by it. Those are all arguments from experience, and Acts 15 shows the apostles themselves declining to use them. The Bereans did the same thing, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether even Paul's preaching was so (Acts 17:11). If Paul submitted to that test, no one is above it.

Then say why Scripture can bear the weight. It is God-breathed, and it makes the man of God complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). It does not shift with the culture, it does not depend on how anyone feels this morning, and it does not change when the results are disappointing. Experience is real, but it is mute; it has to be interpreted, and we always interpret it in our own favor. Scripture interprets us.

Bring it near without being harsh. Ask the class how they actually decide what is true. Most of us are more shaped by experience than we admit: we conclude something is right because it worked, or because a person we love does it, or because it felt like God was in it. Amos 9 is not a more exciting authority than a miracle. It is just a more reliable one, and James knew the difference.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- James settled the question with Scripture, not with apostolic testimony or miracles (Acts 15:15-18)
- Genuine works of God are measured by the word of God, never the reverse
- Amos 9:11-12 shows God always intended to include the Gentiles
- Modern error enters through arguments from experience: feeling led, results, or blessing
- Even Paul's preaching was tested against the Scriptures (Acts 17:11)
- Scripture is God-breathed and fully equips; it does not shift with culture or feeling (2 Timothy 3:16-17)
- Experience must be interpreted, and we interpret it in our own favor; Scripture interprets us

Discussion Prompts

- How do you actually decide what is true? Be honest about how much is experience.
- Why did James not simply accept Peter's miracle account as sufficient proof?
- What arguments from experience have you heard used to settle a doctrinal question?

Question 8

Student Question:

The council's letter asks Gentiles to "abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood" (vv. 19–20). What was the purpose of these instructions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

First, establish the authority of these four, because the class may assume they were merely advice. Look ahead to verse 28: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these requirements.” The Holy Spirit and us. These were not the council’s preferences or a negotiated compromise; they were apostolic commands, delivered by inspiration, binding on Gentile Christians. James introduces them with “my judgment is,” but the letter tells us whose judgment stood behind it. Do not let the class treat them as optional cultural courtesies.

Then notice what the four are not. They are not a reduced version of the law of Moses, as though the council kept four requirements and dropped the rest. That would have conceded the entire argument they had just won. Nor are they arbitrary. Look at what they have in common: every one of them stood at the heart of pagan temple life. Meat sacrificed to idols, ritual immorality, and the handling of blood were the ordinary furniture of the religion these Gentiles had just left. The council is not rebuilding the law. It is telling new converts to walk away from the temple and not look back.

Take them in turn with the class. Things polluted by idols and what was strangled and blood all concern the pagan sacrificial system, and blood in particular carries weight far older than Moses; God forbade eating blood to Noah, long before Sinai, because “the life of every creature is its blood” (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11). Sexual immorality was not a ceremonial matter at all; it was woven into temple worship, and it remains sin in every age, as the New Testament says everywhere (1 Corinthians 6:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). These are not Jewish customs being imposed. They are the specific ways a former pagan would slide back into his old life.

Now give the class the second purpose, which verse 21 supplies and which is easy to skip: “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” Jewish Christians were everywhere, and every one of them had been raised finding these four things unspeakable. A Gentile Christian eating blood in front of his Jewish brother was not committing a small offense against taste; he was making fellowship impossible. So these commands honored God, protected the convert, and preserved the unity of a church that had just barely held together.

Bring it home. Ask the class what our version of the temple is, the thing we walked away from that we should not casually walk back into. And ask the harder question the council was answering: what would you willingly do without, not because it is wrong for you, but because your brother could not survive it?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The four were apostolic commands given by the Holy Spirit, not preferences or compromise (Acts 15:28)
- They are not a reduced remnant of the law of Moses; that would have conceded the argument
- All four stood at the center of pagan temple life the converts had just left

- The prohibition of blood predates Moses and rests on the life being in the blood (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11)
- Sexual immorality is sin in every age, never a ceremonial matter (1 Corinthians 6:18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:3)
- Verse 21 supplies the fellowship concern: Jewish Christians were in every city
- The commands honored God, protected the convert, and preserved unity

Discussion Prompts

- What is our version of the temple, the thing we should not casually walk back into?
- What would you do without, not because it is wrong for you, but because a brother could not survive it?
- Why does it matter that these were commands of the Holy Spirit rather than the council's advice?

Question 9

Student Question:

How does this passage guard against two opposite dangers: adding human requirements to the gospel and ignoring the need for sensitivity toward other believers?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Show the class that this chapter says no twice, in two directions, and that is what makes it so useful. To the Pharisee party it says: you may not add the law of Moses to the gospel; salvation is through the grace of the Lord Jesus and nothing else may be required for it. And to the Gentile believers it says: your freedom does not release you from your brothers; there are four things you must not do, partly because your Jewish brethren are in every city. One chapter, two refusals. The class should feel the balance, because we almost always fall off one side.

Name the first danger precisely. Adding to the gospel is not usually done by wicked men. It is done by serious people who love Scripture and want to honor God, and who take something God gave for a purpose and bind it after the purpose is fulfilled. The result is not extra holiness; it is a different gospel and a severed people (Galatians 5:2-4). Ask the class where our congregations are tempted: not with circumcision, but with requirements of style, background, or opinion that we treat as though they were the faith itself.

Then name the second danger just as clearly, because the class that hates the first often falls straight into it. Once you know you are free, you can become careless with people who are not there yet, and Scripture will not permit it. Paul, the great defender of freedom, is the same man who wrote, "if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat" (1 Corinthians 8:13), and who told the Romans, "do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God" (Romans 14:15, 20-21). Freedom that runs over a brother is not maturity; it is a different way of failing to love.

Help the class see what holds the two together, because it is not compromise. Paul did not split the difference here; he won the doctrinal argument completely and then accepted the four commands entirely. Both refusals come from the same root: the gospel is God's, so I may not add to it, and my brother belongs to Christ, so I may not trample him. Someone who understands grace will resist additions and will also gladly give up his rights. A person who only ever does one of those has not understood grace; he has just found a comfortable place to stand.

Bring it home with the two-sided question, and let both halves land. Where are you binding on someone else what God has not bound? And where are you insisting on something you are free to do, at the cost of someone God loves?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The chapter refuses two errors: adding to the gospel, and using freedom carelessly toward brethren
- Nothing may be required for salvation beyond the grace of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 5:2-4)
- Adding to the gospel is typically done by serious people binding what God has fulfilled
- Freedom does not release a Christian from responsibility to his brother (1 Corinthians 8:13; Romans 14:15, 20-21)
- Paul won the doctrinal argument completely and still accepted the four commands
- Both refusals share one root: the gospel is God's, and the brother belongs to Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you binding on someone what God has not bound?
- Where are you insisting on something you are free to do, at the cost of someone God loves?
- Why is refusing both errors different from splitting the difference between them?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking at Acts 15:1-21 as a whole, what model does this passage provide for maintaining doctrinal unity in the church while addressing legitimate questions and disagreements?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class assemble the method from the chapter, step by step, because every piece is there. A real error was taught. It was opposed openly rather than tolerated. The question was not settled locally by force or by drift; it was taken to the highest authority available. Everyone gathered, including those who disagreed. There was full debate. Testimony was heard. The assembly fell silent and listened. And then Scripture, not experience, decided it. Finally, the decision was communicated plainly, with commands, in a letter. That is a complete model, and there is not a step in it we could not follow.

Point out what the church refused to do, because those refusals are as instructive as the actions. They did not paper over the difference to keep the peace. They did not let each congregation decide for itself, which would have created two gospels within a decade. They did not settle it by the seniority of Peter or the success of Paul. And they did not split. Every one of those was available, and three of them are what churches usually do.

Then draw out the truth underneath the whole chapter, and say it plainly to the class. Unity and truth are not in tension here. We are trained to think they are, that you can have one only by trading away some of the other. Acts 15 shows a church that got more unified by insisting on the truth, because the unity they had before the council was an illusion that would not have survived another year. Real unity is not the absence of conflict; it is agreement on what is true, arrived at honestly. Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 4:15, that we grow up by speaking the truth in love.

Keep the class from over-reading it. This chapter did not end all the trouble. Paul and Barnabas split over John Mark within a few verses (Acts 15:37-39). Peter later had to be rebuked to his face at Antioch for withdrawing from Gentiles, which is the very issue this council settled (Galatians 2:11-14). The Judaizers followed Paul for the rest of his ministry. Settling a question rightly does not mean nobody ever fails to live by it. The council was still worth every hour of it.

End with the mirror, and let both questions sit. First: when we disagree here, which step of this process do we skip? Because almost every congregational wound comes from skipping one. And second, the question the whole chapter is really asking: are we willing to let Scripture overrule us, including when it overrules what we have always assumed?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The model: error opposed openly, taken to the highest authority, debated fully, heard patiently, decided by Scripture, communicated plainly
- They refused to paper over the difference, to let each church decide separately, or to split
- The question was not settled by seniority or by success
- Unity and truth are not in tension; insisting on truth produced real unity (Ephesians 4:15)
- The unity that existed before the council was an illusion that would not have lasted
- Settling a question rightly does not prevent later failures to live by it (Acts 15:37-39; Galatians 2:11-14)
- The decisive question is whether we will let Scripture overrule our assumptions

Discussion Prompts

- When we disagree here, which step of this process do we skip?
- Are we willing to let Scripture overrule what we have always assumed?
- How did insisting on the truth make this church more unified rather than less?