

# The Church Is United in the Essentials

## Summary and Goal

Throughout the history of the church's debates, the church has become stronger in its biblical convictions and confessions of faith. In this session, we will work through the debate and decision-making process of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. The debate was over an essential doctrine: justification. Is justification by faith alone or by faith plus works, namely, circumcision and keeping the law? Led by the teaching of Scripture and the Holy Spirit, the apostles came to the right conclusion and the gospel was defended and protected. As we look at what happened in the Jerusalem council, we will learn about how the church established Christian freedom as well as unity between Jews and Gentiles.

## Session Outline

1. The church debates the nature of salvation (Acts 15:1-5).
2. The church affirms justification by faith alone (Acts 15:6-11,14-18).
3. The church advocates freedom in love (Acts 15:19-21).

*Background Passage: Acts 15:1-35*

## Session in a Sentence

Justification is through faith alone.

## Christ Connection

The Jerusalem council met to resolve a dispute in the early church: was faith in Christ sufficient for justification and inclusion into God's family or was something else needed? The early church's response affirmed the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for justification. Because of His finished work on the cross, Jesus alone is all we need to be saved.

## Missional Application

Because we have been saved by grace through faith and not of any of our works, we proclaim the gospel message to everyone that justification is available through faith in Christ alone.

# Group Time

## GROUP MEMBER CONTENT

Group content found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in this shaded area throughout the session.

## Introduction

**EXPLAIN:** Use the paragraph on page 94 in the DDG to speak about the theological disagreement between Arius and Athanasius on the nature of Jesus' deity.

*Church History Lesson:* Sometimes the difference between orthodoxy and heresy can be as small as a single letter of the alphabet. In AD 325, for example, Arius was teaching that because Jesus is the Son of God, "there was a time when he was not." That is, if the Son was begotten, then He must have had a beginning as a created being. Athanasius, on the other hand, argued that because Jesus is divine, "begotten, not made," He must be of the same substance with the Father. Jesus, as the only begotten Son of the Father from eternity, is God. Therefore, He can have no beginning, unlike a creature. Essentially, an "i" distinguished between these two positions of error and truth.

- To ward off division in his empire, Constantine invited 1,800 bishops to settle the matter in the city of Nicaea. About 300 bishops showed up. They rejected Arius's explanation that Jesus was of a "similar substance" as the Father (*homoiousios*) and agreed with Athanasius that Jesus, the Son, was the "same substance" with the Father (*homoousios*). The difference was one little letter—the Greek *iota*, which corresponds to *i* in English. The resulting Nicene Creed affirmed what the Bible already taught about Jesus. Ever since, it has recognized and affirmed what has been received as orthodox Christology.
- Of course, that didn't end the matter. Athanasius had to contend with Arianism throughout his life. But that's what the church must continue to do throughout all ages. We must "contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 3).

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.



Why is it important to work to resolve doctrinal disagreements? (so we can strive for the truth and so honor God; so we can strive for unity in what we believe; so we can lovingly correct error; so we can demonstrate our commitment to love one another and the truth with patience)

**SUMMARIZE:** Throughout the history of the church's debates, the church has become stronger in its biblical convictions and confessions of faith. In this session, we will work through the debate and decision-making process of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. The debate was over an essential doctrine: justification. Led by the teaching of Scripture and the Holy Spirit, the apostles came to the right conclusion and the gospel was defended and protected.

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## Point 1: The church debates the nature of salvation (Acts 15:1-5).

**READ** Acts 15:1-5 (DDG p. 95).

<sup>1</sup> Some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

<sup>2</sup> After Paul and Barnabas had engaged them in serious argument and debate, Paul and Barnabas and some others were appointed to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this issue. <sup>3</sup> When they had been sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

<sup>4</sup> When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

**EXPLAIN:** Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 95) to explain what *legalism* is and how it was on display in this passage.

Reread verse 1—that’s what *legalism* sounds like. At the heart of legalism is the idea that “unless you add \_\_\_\_\_ to your faith, you cannot be saved.” But if, as the Bible teaches, we are graciously accepted by God as righteous by faith alone in Christ alone (see Acts 15:9,11), then to add any other means of seeking God’s acceptance is misguided, wrong, and dangerous.

- Some of the Jewish Christians argued that unless you were circumcised you could not be a Christian. To be clear, these Jewish believers didn’t deny that Jesus is the Messiah and that salvation is in Him alone. The issue was that they insisted that in order to take part in the salvation promised to the Jews, Gentiles also had to become Jews—circumcision for males was the sign of being a Jew, included among the old covenant people of God. The apostle Paul often confronted this kind of legalism during his ministry (see Gal.; Col. 2; 1 Tim. 4).
- Some people wrongly throw around the term *legalism* to dismiss any kind of demand or rule, even the biblical commands for holiness (ex., 1 Pet. 1:14-16). But that is taking the accusation of legalism too far. Denouncing legalism is not to negate the call for holiness but to preserve the Jesus-centered entrance into the kingdom of God: repentance and faith.

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.



What are some ways people are tempted to fill in this blank: “Unless you also \_\_\_\_\_, you cannot be saved”? (are baptized; improve your current behavior; go to church; abandon your friendships with unbelievers; share the gospel; vote a certain way)

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**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 95) to point out how legalism threatens the unity of the church. Then highlight **two equal and opposite personal outcomes** from legalism.

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Legalism also threatens the joy and unity of the church. How? After adding demands to the gospel of grace, the legalist passes judgment on all who do not meet those demands. The legalist also criticizes the leadership for not imposing his or her preferred standard on the whole church. Additionally, the legalist divides the church by trying to win people to his or her standard while separating from those who do not. These demands and judgments tear the church apart.

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In addition to creating disunity in the church, there are generally **two equal and opposite personal outcomes** from legalism:

- With the **first outcome**, all who agree with the legalist and are able to meet the “added” demand begin to feel proud and self-righteous. The Bible, however, cautions against this sentiment, teaching that we ought not elevate ourselves to look down on others because we will all be judged according to the same standard—God’s standard—and God alone is our judge (see Rom. 14:10-12).
- In the **other outcome**, legalists do great harm to Christians with tender consciences, particularly when these Christians are unable to meet the legalist’s demands. If you have a new Christian who is learning about Christ and this glorious salvation and then someone comes along and declares, “Unless you *also* \_\_\_\_\_, you’re not a real Christian,” what is that new believer to think? It shouldn’t surprise us when new believers and those with tender consciences struggle with assurance of faith, discouragement, and even despondency as a result of adding demands to the gospel.

*Application:* “Legalism,” writes theologian Sinclair Ferguson, “is simply separating the law of God from the person of God.” Legalism distorts the biblical view of God. Ferguson continues, “God becomes a magnified policeman who gives his law only because he wants to deprive us and in particular to destroy our joy. The ‘lie’ that we now believe is that ‘to glorify God’ is not, indeed cannot be, ‘to enjoy him for ever,’ but to lose all joy.”<sup>1</sup> Remember, then, the root of legalism is our own distorted view of God. When we have a wrong view of God, it’s no surprise we will have a wrong view of salvation.

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**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

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What are some ways we can battle the temptation to pass judgment against other Christians? (routinely dwell on the gospel and the grace of Jesus Christ, our Savior; be honest with ourselves about our own faults, shortcomings, and sins; believe and act according to the truth that God is the ultimate judge of a person’s heart; live with love for one another, even as we may have to correct one another)

## Point 2: The church affirms justification by faith alone (Acts 15:6-11,14-18).

**READ** Acts 15:6-11,14-18 (DDG p. 96).

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you are aware that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the gospel message and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. <sup>9</sup> He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples’ necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.”

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<sup>14</sup> Simeon has reported how God first intervened to take from the Gentiles a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written:  
<sup>16</sup> After these things I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, <sup>17</sup> so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles who are called by my name—declares the Lord who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from long ago.

**EXPLAIN:** Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 96) to explain Peter’s affirmation of justification by faith.

Peter recounted his eyewitness testimony of how God saved Cornelius and his household by faith alone (15:6-9). Paul and Barnabas shared all that they had seen God do among the Gentiles on their missionary journey (15:12). God had revealed to these men that salvation, for both Jews and Gentiles, has always been by God’s grace through faith in His promise—in other words, we are justified by faith in Jesus alone.

- We would expect Peter to say the Gentiles were saved “just like we were,” speaking of the Jewish Christians present. Instead, he said the opposite: “we believe *we* are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus *in the same way they are*.” Peter emphasized that just as God saved Cornelius and his household—by faith (v. 9), through grace (v. 11)—so also were the Jews. The Jews were *never* saved by their works, that is, by obeying the Law of Moses. Salvation has always been by God’s grace through faith in His promise (see Gen. 3:15; 12:2-3; 15:6). In the Old Testament, the saints looked forward to the coming of the Messiah (1 Pet. 1:10-12). But now, all who believe look back to Jesus, whom God revealed as His promised King.
- By obeying the law fully, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. By going to the cross, He received the penalty for breaking the law. Now, on the basis of what Jesus has done, all who believe are counted righteous before God and forgiven of their sins. Peter’s point was that God shows no distinction between Gentiles and Jews in how He saves people.

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**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 96).

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**Justification by Faith:** Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively declared **righteous** before God based on the righteousness of Christ's atoning death. This act of declaration takes place through **faith** in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort.

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**Essential Doctrine "Justification by Faith":** Justification refers to the moment when a person is objectively declared **righteous** before God based on the righteousness of Christ's atoning death (Rom. 8:33-34). This act of declaration takes place through **faith** in Christ and not as a result of human works or effort (Eph. 2:8-9). Through justification, a person is made to be in right standing before God, changing what was once an estranged and hostile relationship to one of adoption into the family of God.

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**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.

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How would you explain salvation by grace through faith in Christ to someone who's never heard it? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

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**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 96) to explain James's affirmation of justification by faith and inclusion of the Gentiles in the Jewish promises.

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After Peter, Paul, and Barnabas shared their insights, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, affirmed their conclusions. He also quoted from Amos 9:11-12 to point out that they should have known this was God's plan because the prophets had prepared them for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Jewish promises (15:14-18).

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- In ancient times, when kings went off to war they stayed in tents during battle. Amos prophesied that David's tent had fallen, but God promised to restore it so that the nations might be possessed by God's people (Amos 9:11-12). From Israel's perspective this was a military promise that God would empower Israel to defeat her enemies. But James interpreted Amos 9 not as a military invasion but as a missionary expansion (Acts 15:16-18). On the basis of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus, Jews and Gentiles alike would receive, salvation, a new heart, forgiveness of sin, and baptism with the Holy Spirit.

*Illustration:* Think of Old Testament citations and quotations in the New Testament like an online hyperlink. When you click on a hyperlink, it takes you to a background article or definition that helps you understand what you're reading. In the same way, when you "click" on Acts 15:16-18, it takes you back to Amos 9. After an announcement of judgment on Israel (Amos 9:7-10), God announced the promised restoration of Israel. That's the background that helps us understand Acts 15: the promised restoration of Israel (see also Acts 1:6-8).

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### Point 3: The church advocates freedom in love (Acts 15:19-21).

**SAY:** Some people object to or, conversely, revel in the doctrine of justification by faith by claiming that it frees one to sin (see Rom. 6). Yet the apostles upheld this doctrine, knowing that the gospel still has expectations for holiness and love in the lives of believers.

**READ:** Ask a volunteer to read Acts 15:19-21 (DDG p. 97).

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but instead we should write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues.”

**PACK ITEM 11: THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL:** Use the table on **Pack Item 11** and the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 97) to explain how the **four commands** from the Mosaic Law identified by the apostles reflected the gospel’s expectations for holiness for the Gentile believers.

While justification by grace through faith frees us from the yoke of the old covenant law (Acts 15:10-11), it does not free us to sin and to disobey Jesus’ commands. Jesus sent us out to make disciples, and one aspect of making disciples is teaching them to observe everything that Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). In keeping with Jesus’ teaching and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28-29), the apostles instructed the Gentile believers to observe **four commands** of the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:20).

- To be sure, **sexual immorality** is clearly sinful, not just offensive, but the grouping of these **four commands** ties them to the pagan temple practices of their day, which Gentiles would have been steeped in and Gentile believers were called out of (1 Cor. 6:9-20; Eph. 4:17-32).

**Commentary:** The legalism of the circumcision party (also called “Judaizers”) was not, and is not, solved by lawlessness, or antinomianism. Sinclair Ferguson argues that legalism and antinomianism have the same root: a distorted view of God and His commands. Consequently, Ferguson calls legalism and antinomianism non-identical twins. Legalism looks at God and says, “You never give me anything. You insist on me earning everything I have.” Antinomianism looks at God and says, “Why are you always telling me what to do? You don’t want me to be happy.”<sup>2</sup>

**INTERACT:** Ask group members the following question.



How does holiness relate to our belief in the gospel? (we are saved because of Jesus’ holiness, not our own; believers should strive to be more holy as they grow in the faith and the power of the Holy Spirit; our personal holiness has an impact on our witness for the gospel; growth in holiness helps to provide assurance of our faith)

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**EXPLAIN:** Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 97) to connect the council’s **four commands** to love.

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The apostles and the elders, with the help of the Holy Spirit, maintained the unity of the church by not adding anything to the gospel of grace. But with their **four commands**, for the sake of the Jews, they did ask the Gentiles to obey the “law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2), or “the royal law”—“Love your neighbor as yourself” (Jas. 2:8; see Matt. 22:36-40). Our obedience to God and His Son, Jesus, is out of love. If we love God, we will obey Him. If we love Jesus, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15). The doctrine of justification by faith does not free us to sin; it empowers us to love—to love God and to love others.



### Voices from Church History

“Faith alone justifies but a justified person with faith alone would be a monstrosity which never exists in the kingdom of grace. Faith works itself out through love (cf. Gal. 5:6). And faith without works is dead (cf. James 2:17-20). It is living faith that justifies and living faith unites to Christ both in the virtue of his death and in the power of his resurrection.”<sup>3</sup>

—John Murray (1898-1975)

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- The Jews had been dispersed throughout the world in every city since ancient times. Though scattered, they continued to take part in their traditions and law-keeping in their synagogues. To maintain a faithful witness to the Jews and to maintain loving fellowship with their Jewish-Christian brothers, the apostles asked the Gentiles to abstain from those things that most offended the Jews. So out of love, Gentiles were to pursue holiness (leave their old pagan ways) and pursue love (not offend their brothers). The gospel of grace frees us to love one another in such ways (Rom. 14:13-19; 1 Cor. 9:19-23).
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**SAY:** We should take note that the Jerusalem council trusted in the Scriptures as they discussed the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church. Peter, Paul, and Barnabas shared their experiences, but James recognized that these aligned with the Old Testament Scriptures—Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by grace through faith. Furthermore, the council agreed that the Mosaic Law still had implications for believers because it is God’s Word.

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**FILL IN THE BLANKS:** Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 97).

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**Inerrancy of Scripture:** Scripture is an **infallible** guide to salvation and it is **truthful** in all that it affirms.

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**Essential Doctrine “Inerrancy of Scripture”:** Inerrancy refers to the belief that the Scripture is completely truthful, without any mixture of error, in all its teachings, no matter what subject it addresses. Believing the Scriptures to be inerrant does not preclude the biblical authors’ inclusion of observations from a human observer, the use of round numbers, unusual grammatical constructions, or varying perspectives on a particular event. It does mean, however, that Scripture is an **infallible** guide to salvation and that it is **truthful** in all that it affirms (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

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# My Mission

**EXPLAIN:** Until Christ returns, Christians will disagree over issues small and great. We have freedom to disagree with one another on some facets of our faith, but we need to learn to distinguish between secondary matters and those that define Christianity—our understanding of God and the gospel. We must contend vigorously for the foundational doctrines, such as justification by faith alone, that constitute the faith delivered to the saints once for all (Jude 3). From Jesus to the apostles to us, the Holy Spirit has safeguarded the Christian faith over the course of many generations. That is how the Spirit keeps us united in faith and united for our mission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8; Eph. 4:4-6).

**READ** the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 98), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God’s Word.

Because we have been saved by grace through faith and not of any of our works, we proclaim the gospel message to everyone that justification is available through faith in Christ alone.

- **How will understanding the doctrine of justification by faith affect your pursuit of holiness and love?**
- **What are some ways your group/ church may need to work out doctrinal disagreements with an eye toward honoring Christ and loving one another?**
- **Will you commit to sharing the gospel of grace through faith with at least one non-Christian this week? If so, with whom?**



## Voices from Church History

“The article of justification must be sounded in our ears incessantly because the frailty of our flesh will not permit us to take hold of it perfectly and to believe it with all our heart.”<sup>4</sup>

—Martin Luther (1483-1546)

**CLOSE IN PRAYER:** Father, if You counted sins, who could stand before You? Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf. On the cross, Christ bore the curse of the law, and through faith alone, we are forgiven and declared righteous before You. Help us to see Your Spirit at work among all peoples to make Your salvation known as we take the gospel to the nations. Amen.

**INSTRUCT:** As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 99-101), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 102) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God’s Word.

# Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 99-101) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 102) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

## Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 99-101) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 2** as a part of point 2 in the session: **By the mouth of two apostles from the Jerusalem church, it was established that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone for all who believe. To the Jew first, then also to the Gentile.**



Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 3:** “The Gentiles were free in certain respects (e.g., eating meat sacrificed to idols), but their freedom had to be informed by love for others.”
- **Day 5:** “The gospel of grace is what unbelievers need for salvation, and it is what the church needs for continued strength.”



Visit [www.GospelProject.com/Blog](http://www.GospelProject.com/Blog) for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

## Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 102) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to discuss the ways that they are tempted to add requirements to the gospel beyond repentance and faith in Jesus alone.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

# Additional Commentary

## **Point 1: The church debates the nature of salvation (Acts 15:1-5).**

“It was widely accepted that Gentiles could become proselytes of Judaism and so share in the blessings promised to Israel. The biblical foundation for this can be seen in passages such as Genesis 17:10-14,23-27 and Exodus 12:43-45,48. Male converts would be circumcised, and the whole family would undertake to live in obedience to the law. But these Judaizers had failed to grasp the radical change in God’s dealings with the nations brought about by the coming of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. vv. 8-11). The idea that God had granted Gentiles ‘repentance that leads to life,’ without becoming Jewish proselytes, seemed to have been settled by Peter’s reflection on the Cornelius incident (11:18). But clearly some Jewish Christians were not persuaded and were insistent that circumcision and all that it entailed was necessary for eternal salvation. ‘The issue in chapter 15 is thus not merely post-conversion behaviour but what constitutes true conversion in the first place.’”<sup>5</sup>

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“The Jewish law contained not only basic moral provisions but many aspects of a more ‘ceremonial’ nature, such as circumcision, the kosher food laws, and many requirements involving external purity and various kinds of sacrifices and festivals. These laws presented a problem for Gentiles: to live by them would make it virtually impossible to continue in their Gentile communities. But according to the OT, one had to be circumcised to belong to the people of God (Gen. 17:9-14), and it seemed to many of the Jewish Christians that the church should also require this of male believers. Paul addresses the issue of circumcision in Romans 2:25-29; 4:9-16; Galatians 2:3-5; 5:2-12; 6:12-15. Those from the **Pharisees** were likely the same group as those insisting on circumcision in v. 2 and 11:2. They not only argued that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved but also that they were required to **keep** the whole Mosaic **law** as well, for circumcision represented a commitment to observe the law.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Point 2: The church affirms justification by faith alone (Acts 15:6-11,14-18).**

“Peter’s description of God’s initiative and understanding in acting is the key to the argument. Also crucial is the presence of the divine gift of the Spirit identifying the arrival of the new era of promise in Acts 2 and 10 (2:4; 10:44-47; 11:15-17). Peter had nothing to do with how Gentiles were to be included. God has acted and shown the way ... Does Peter see this as an internal circumcision of the heart (Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Rom. 2:29)? If so, he does not say so, referring rather to the related idea of cleansing the heart, a connection that shows how baptism represents new life (Ezek. 36:24-26). Peter is more interested in God’s taking the lead in disclosing his approval and its timing. God does the work of washing their hearts clean. This divine washing takes place in the context of faith. So the entire work reflects God’s directive.”<sup>7</sup>

“At the gathering the Pharisaic faction of the Jerusalem church stuck to its guns: gentiles must be circumcised and obey Torah (15:1-5). But first Peter recounted his missionary experience with Cornelius: God gave the gentiles the same spirit he gave to Jewish believers, making no distinction. What mattered was the purification of the heart, effected by divine grace. Paul and Barnabas then described the miraculous signs that God had performed through them among the gentiles. Finally, James expounded Amos 9:11-12, which in the Greek version indicates that gentiles were destined to participate in a restored Israel. In other words, it was precisely because God had fulfilled his covenant with Israel in sending Jesus as Messiah that the covenant-family was now thrown open to all, without distinction. The only burden to be placed on gentiles was the commitment to avoid idolatry, which could be spelled out in terms of converts avoiding idol-food, sexual immorality, and consuming blood from the meat of strangled animals (15:6-21). The apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church sent a letter censuring the views of the intruders, and adding only those instructions for gentile believers. This decision, not unnaturally, caused great rejoicing among the believers in Antioch (15:22-35).”<sup>8</sup>

### **Point 3: The church advocates freedom in love (Acts 15:19-21).**

“God is making a people out of the nations and nothing in the text suggests that they are to become Jews in order to become God’s people. So there are no entrance ‘conditions’ to be imposed upon them. Nevertheless, James has a recommendation to make, that the Gentiles should abstain from certain things which were repulsive to Jews. Four things are mentioned in the text. First, there are *pollutions of idols*. This refers to meat offered in sacrifice to idols and then eaten in a temple feast or sold in a shop. Secondly, there was *unchastity*, variously understood as illicit sexual intercourse or as breaches of the Jewish marriage law (which forbade marriage between close relatives, Lev. 18:6-18). The third element was meat which had been killed by *strangling*, a method of slaughter which meant that the blood remained in the meat, and the fourth item was *blood* itself. These food regulations resemble those in Leviticus 17:8-13.”<sup>9</sup>

#### References

1. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 83.
2. *Ibid.*, 81.
3. John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 138.
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