

# *The First Church Council*

## [PREPARATION]

### ✦ GETTING READY

How have you seen church people work through conflict in a healthy way that leads to deeper unity?  
How have you seen church people let conflicts divide them?

Read Acts 15.

Ask God to use these Scriptures to help you understand the importance of maintaining church unity and seeking God's will together.

## [THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE]

### ✦ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The church should work hard to be unified as one body, both on important doctrinal issues and in personal relationships.

### ✦ THEOLOGY APPLIED

The theological disagreement in this story was the question of whether Gentiles had to follow Jewish law to be saved. In Galatians, Paul talked about this conflict and was adamant that they could not give in on this issue. It was not a minor issue; it is essential to the gospel. To teach that Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow Jewish law to follow Jesus was to teach "a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6–10). He felt so strongly about it that he rebuked Peter to his face in Antioch for not eating with the Gentiles while those of the circumcision party were visiting from Jerusalem (Galatians 2:11–14). He said it didn't make any difference that James and Peter were pillars of the church; he would not give in to them for a moment on this issue (Galatians 2:5–6). Yet, Paul and Barnabas also believed it was important for them to be unified with the Jerusalem apostles on every essential gospel issue. They could agree to disagree about non-essential issues like whether to eat meat or drink alcohol (Romans 14), but they had to agree on essential gospel issues, or they couldn't call themselves Christians.

Paul wrote extensively about the importance of unity in the church. He didn't want people following different pastors or leaders, but everyone, including the leaders, following Christ (1 Corinthians 1:11–13). He said the church should have no divisions among them (1 Corinthians 1:10). We are all members of the same body with Christ as the head (1 Corinthians 12). It's strange, then, that he allowed a personal conflict with John Mark to come between him and Barnabas in this chapter right after they had worked so hard to be unified with the apostles theologically. This just shows us that everyone has times when they don't handle conflict well, even our strongest leaders. The Jerusalem Council showed us the right way to handle conflict in the church—listen to each other and seek the Lord's guidance together.

## ✚ MEDITATE

"Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10–11).

## [GETTING STARTED]

+This section will introduce the lesson by identifying the main point of the passage and offering a preliminary application of it.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen church people talk through issues about which they disagree, really listen to one another, and seek what God says about it together? When have you seen church people let conflicts or disagreements divide them?*

**QUESTION** *Does the Holy Spirit lead us to greater unity or greater division?*

In Acts 15, we see Paul and Barnabas working hard to maintain unity with the apostles in Jerusalem without compromising a major core tenet of the faith, an essential issue about which we can't just agree to disagree and still call ourselves Christians. But immediately afterward, they allowed a personal conflict to separate them. The difference between the two stories is that in the first one, where they maintained unity, they focused on what God said about the issue and how He was working in the church, not just their own thoughts, feelings, or perspectives. In the second story, there is no mention of seeking God's will or listening to the Holy Spirit's guidance. This chapter shows us that the right way to handle conflict in the church is to seek God's guidance together. When we do that, the Holy Spirit will always lead us to greater unity, not division.

## ✚ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+This section has two stories that deal with unity in the church. The first story details the first church council in Jerusalem, where all the church leaders met to discuss a theological disagreement and come to a consensus on the official stance of the church. The church leaders worked hard to maintain unity without sacrificing truth. They didn't compromise. They didn't split into separate denominations because they couldn't agree. They discussed it and sought the Lord's will together because they prioritized both unity and truth. In the second story, two of those leaders, who had been very close co-workers, got into a sharp disagreement and didn't work through it together or seek the Lord's will on it, but parted ways.

The theological issue had been a conflict since they first started reaching out to Gentiles—whether Gentiles had to be circumcised and follow other Jewish customs to be saved. In verses 1–21, Paul and Barnabas came to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the leaders there. In verses 22–35, the Council wrote an official letter detailing their decision. But in verses 36–40, Paul and Barnabas, faithful friends and coworkers for decades, had such a sharp disagreement that they parted ways. This wasn't theological, it was personal. Paul no longer trusted John Mark and didn't want to take him on their trip to encourage the churches. It is strange that they would work so hard to remain unified on theological issues but separate over a personal one. It shows us that even the apostles had moments of conflict and weakness.

1. *The Jerusalem Council*
2. *The Council's Letter to the Gentiles*
3. *Paul and Barnabas Separate*

## [GOING DEEPER]

+ This section will follow the points given above and look deeper into Acts 15.

### 1. *The Jerusalem Council*

## ✚ READ ACTS 15:1–21

**QUESTION** *What did those of the “party of the Pharisees” teach about circumcision?*

**QUESTION** *What evidence did Paul, Barnabas, and Peter use to show them they were wrong?*

At the end of the last chapter, Paul and Barnabas had returned from a very successful first missionary journey witnessing to both Jews and Gentiles throughout the island of Cyprus and the mainland of Galatia and Pamphylia. But there was already a growing conflict between the Jews and the Gentiles, and a dangerous false teaching was spreading quickly, even to the churches they had just planted (Galatians 1:6–7).

Paul and Barnabas were back at Antioch. Then “certain people” came from Judea and taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved. In Galatians, Paul called them the “circumcision party” (Galatians 2:12). Here in Acts, Luke called them “the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). Paul and Barnabas argued adamantly with them in Antioch, and the church leaders appointed Paul, Barnabas, and others to go to Jerusalem and ask the apostles and elders there about this question, since these men had come from Jerusalem.

This issue had already been discussed several times in the church’s short history, about fifteen years at this point. Each time it seemed the issue had been settled, and yet this circumcision party kept teaching it. In Acts 11:1–3, shortly after Peter’s vision, the circumcision party criticized him for eating with Gentiles. He told them about his vision and God’s word to him that He shows no partiality between Jew and Gentiles but accepts everyone from any nation who fears Him and does what is right (Acts 10:34–35). Later, Paul and Peter had had a conflict about the same issue.<sup>1</sup> They were at the church in Antioch when “certain men” from the circumcision party in Jerusalem came, and Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Paul confronted him for his hypocrisy, and Peter admitted he had been wrong (Galatians 2:11–14).

Now, this circumcision party had come to Antioch again, teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas also learned this same false teaching was being spread in the churches they had just planted in Galatia. Paul wrote to them almost immediately after returning from the missionary journey that he was astonished they had “so quickly” deserted Christ for this “different gospel” (Galatians 1:6–7). This time they decided they needed to settle this issue once and for all. The church needed to nip this false teaching in the bud with an official declaration from all the leadership, both the original apostles, who had primarily focused on the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas, who were called to the Gentiles. The churches at Jerusalem and Antioch needed to be unified.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the apostles and elders, and they reported everything God had done through them in Cyprus, Galatia, and Pamphylia. But some of the circumcision party argued that the Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. So, the church leadership met to consider this question.

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<sup>1</sup>This could have occurred during Acts 11:19–30, but we aren’t sure exactly when, just that it was after Peter’s original declaration to the circumcision party in Acts 11 and before this council in Acts 15.

After much discussion, Peter made a statement reminding them of God's vision to him many years ago and how he shared the gospel with Cornelius's household, where God demonstrated His acceptance of them by pouring the Holy Spirit out on them just as He had done with the original disciples at Pentecost (Acts 10). Peter said God "purified their hearts by faith" (v. 9). In the Hebrew, the "heart" means the whole inner person, not just the emotions, as we typically think of it. Peter said this proved that God doesn't discriminate between Jew and Gentile; both are saved by grace through faith. Peter even reminded them that no Jew has ever been able to keep the law (neither we nor our ancestors), so why would we impose it on the Gentiles? Then Paul and Barnabas shared all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. This all pointed to God's movement among the Gentiles; it wasn't something the apostles were imposing on the church. They were following God's lead.

Then James spoke up. This James was the brother of Jesus, not the brother of John who was one of the original Twelve who was martyred by Herod (Acts 12:2). This James was now the leader of the Jerusalem church, which was still considered its center, though Antioch had become the center of the mission to the Gentiles. James reminded them of the prophecy of the new covenant, that God would return and rebuild David's fallen tent, restoring it through Jesus—so "the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and *all the Gentiles* who are called by my name" (Amos 9:11–12). James declared his decision as leader—they would not make Gentiles keep the law but only tell them to abstain from food offered to idols, the meat of strangled animals, blood, and sexual immorality. These few requirements represent the handful of laws God gave Noah, which meant they applied to all peoples of the earth, before they became many different nations.<sup>2</sup>

This was a pivotal moment in the early church that showed the apostles' commitment to working through differences and coming together in unity. We saw it first in chapter 6 when the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews had a conflict. They didn't split the church; they confronted the issue head on and worked through it. Here we are, around fifteen years later, and again, they confronted the conflict head on and worked through it. Paul and Barnabas could have just walked away and split off from the church in Jerusalem, but they were committed to unity as long as it didn't sacrifice the truth of the gospel. If the Jerusalem leaders had defended the false teaching, they would have split over it because it was an essential gospel issue. But they didn't, because they all sought God's will together.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Keener, *Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVP, 1993).

**QUESTION** *Why was it important for all the apostles to meet to discuss this issue and come to a consensus? What would have been the result if they hadn't?*

**QUESTION** *What does their focus on sharing what God had been doing through the Gentiles tell us about how the apostles viewed the church?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / When the apostles met, they all sought together what the Lord was telling them about the issue, not just their own ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. When the circumcision party spoke, it was all their own ideas of what Scripture said. But when the apostles spoke, it was all about what God was doing and what God had said to them and shown them. And everything they heard or saw from the Holy Spirit was consistent. It was only human reason and human viewpoints that disagreed.

God has promised us that the Holy Spirit is not the author of confusion but of peace. He doesn't cause division but brings unity. When we talk things out, seek the Lord, and pray together for Him to reveal His truth to us, we will reach a consensus. But we must be humble enough to listen to God instead of focused on being right. Resolving conflict God's way always bring more unity. Not uniformity, where one person decides what is "right" and everyone conforms to their way of thinking, but true unity, where we all agree together on what is right because we see it from God's perspective.

This is the type of resolution we should always seek in the church. We can't just hope we won't ever have conflict. We will, because we're human. We can't just sweep it under the rug, ignore it, or hope it goes away. The model of the early church is to pray together, discuss one another's viewpoints and experiences, listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and then come to a consensus together as the Lord leads, not by human reason.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen conflict handled in churches? Which situations led to more unity and which led to division? Why?*

**QUESTION** *What conflicts do we currently have in the American church? How can we seek God's leading and unity on those issues?*

## 2. The Council's Letter to the Gentiles

### + READ ACTS 15:22-35

**QUESTION** *What did this letter tell the Gentile believers about those from Jerusalem who had come teaching about circumcision?*

**QUESTION** *What did they call Paul and Barnabas? How did they describe them?*

The apostles and elders and the whole church at Jerusalem decided to send a letter to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, which was meant for all the Gentile believers everywhere. This was the church's official statement about this issue and could be used to confront false teachers who tried to infiltrate their churches with this "different gospel." The leaders at Jerusalem sent some of their own leaders, Silas and Judas Barsabbas, with Paul and Barnabas so the people at Antioch would know this letter really came from them and that they were unified in this statement, both Paul and Barnabas and the Jerusalem church leaders.

The letter said the false teachers of the circumcision party had come to Antioch without their authorization, which was significant because Paul had said these false teachers came "from James" (Galatians 2:12), making it sound like they were sent by the Jerusalem leadership to teach these things. But here the Jerusalem leaders made it clear this was a misunderstanding. The false teachers had come from the Jerusalem church, but they hadn't been sent by James or the leadership there.

This is why it was so important for Paul and Barnabas, instead of assuming the false teachers were being truthful, to take this matter directly to the Jerusalem leadership instead of splitting from the Jerusalem church without first discussing it with the church leaders. When they went directly to them, they learned the leaders there hadn't sent the circumcision party to spread that false teaching; the Jerusalem leaders actually agreed with them. This is why, when we have a conflict with someone, or we have heard something about someone, we are called to go directly to them and talk it out. We are not to gossip or listen to what other people say about them. Gossip only creates more division and breeds more lies. Direct healthy confrontation brings unity because it seeks to get to the truth.

The letter told the Gentile Christians what the council had decided. They were to follow the few laws God had given to all people through Noah, not the whole of the Jewish law. But they said it in a very interesting and intentional way—"It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The apostles, elders, Paul and

Barnabas, and the leaders from Antioch all sought the leading of the Holy Spirit, not their own ideas or solutions.

The letter also confirmed the Jerusalem church's support of Paul and Barnabas and the mission to the Gentiles. Barnabas had come from the Jerusalem church; he was one of its earliest members and supporters (Acts 4:36). The Jerusalem leadership were the ones who originally sent Barnabas to Antioch to teach the new believers there and encourage the church (Acts 11:22). Paul also had the support of the Jerusalem leaders after Barnabas had convinced them that his conversion was real (Acts 9:27). Barnabas and Paul had brought the financial support from Antioch to Jerusalem during the famine (Acts 11:27–30). But a sense of division had arisen between the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem since Antioch had launched their mission to the Gentiles. Not because of the Jerusalem leaders but because of these false teachers who had come and stirred it up. The leaders in Jerusalem were addressing that division too with this letter, calling Barnabas and Paul their "dear friends" and recognizing that they had risked their lives for the gospel.

This letter unified the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. It made an official churchwide statement against the false teaching of the circumcision party. The Jerusalem leadership confirmed their agreement with Paul and Barnabas theologically and supported the mission to the Gentiles. The people at Antioch read the letter and were encouraged. Judas and Silas spent time there, encouraging the believers and then were sent back to Jerusalem with the blessing of peace. This was a godly, peaceful ending to the conflict, showing again that God's intention for His church is to be unified as one body with Christ as the head. Unified in one mission, spreading the gospel and making disciples. Being of one mind and one heart, by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**QUESTION** *What impact did this letter have on the church at Antioch? How did Judas and Silas impact the church too?*

**QUESTION** *If they had decided to separate into two churches, how might that have affected the church's mission?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / This letter was an official statement of the unity of the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch and the Jerusalem's support of Antioch and their united mission. This is the goal of the church—not just that each individual church be unified but that the church universal be unified. Each church should not be a separate entity doing its own thing, but together, we should be one "big C" church, supporting one another in one common mission.



The church today is divided, both theologically and in our missions. Some churches even act competitive with one another! And the church is largely failing at its mission to make disciples of the world, because “a house divided will not stand.” The church should be united from city to city and from church to church within each city, with one mission for the world, supporting and encouraging one another in that shared mission. That is the only way we will accomplish our mission and grow the church in this generation and beyond. This can only be done by all of us humbly submitting to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**QUESTION** *How have you seen separation and division between churches in our world today? In our own community? What kind of impact has it had on the church’s mission?*

**QUESTION** *How have you seen churches and ministries working cooperatively toward a shared mission? How does this affect their impact on the world?*

### 3. Paul and Barnabas Separate

#### ✦ READ ACTS 15:36-41

**QUESTION** *Why did Paul and Barnabas separate for their next journey?*

**QUESTION** *How was this different from the way they handled the conflict with the Jerusalem church?*

This final section of this chapter is shocking and disappointing, especially coming right after this beautiful story of Paul and Barnabas working out the conflict with the Jerusalem leaders with such respect and grace by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Yet, God also redeemed even this failure on the part of His apostles and used it for good, to multiply the spread of the gospel.

After some time, Paul suggested to Barnabas that they go back and check on all the churches they had planted in the first missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark, but Paul didn’t think it was wise since he had left the first journey early to return to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). We don’t know why John Mark left them. We know he grew up in Jerusalem in a wealthy household, because his mother’s home was large enough to hold a large gathering of the church (Acts 12:12). He could have not been

used to the discomfort and difficulties of that kind of travel. We also know he was very young because it was called his mother's home. In a patriarchal culture, this meant she was a widow, and he was not yet old enough to become the family patriarch. He could have simply been immature and not yet ready for this kind of mission. It's possible he was needed at home, though this was unlikely because his mother, Mary, was a significant leader in the Jerusalem church community. She supported his mission and would have been unlikely to pull him away except for an emergency. This doesn't seem to have been the case, because the text says he "deserted" them, not that he had to leave.

John Mark was Barnabas's cousin or nephew; the Greek word could mean either (Colossians 4:10), so it makes sense that Barnabas was more likely than Paul to give him a second chance. Paul said it wasn't wise to take him; he didn't think Barnabas was being discerning enough about John Mark because he was family. This is possible, because family ties were very strong in their culture, but Jesus taught His disciples that the body of Christ is your real family, not your biological one (Matthew 12:50). The text says they had such a "sharp disagreement" that they parted ways. This word is used only here and in one other passage in the New Testament, where Hebrews says believers should "provoke" one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24). This word is used to describe jabbing at one another in swordplay. This was an intense, emotional fight and quite surprising considering how close Paul and Barnabas had been up to this point, like spiritual family, and how they had just worked so hard to maintain unity with the Jerusalem leaders.

Barnabas is a nickname meaning "son of encouragement." Perhaps Paul thought he was being too encouraging to John Mark and not realistic enough about his weakness. Barnabas may have thought Paul wasn't being encouraging or willing enough to show grace to a young man who had made mistakes but was eager to try again. Paul was adamant about not giving in to false teachers who preached against the gospel, but this wasn't a false teacher situation. Regardless of who was right or wrong, this kind of sharp disagreement did not reflect the unity of the Holy Spirit. Had they humbly sought the Holy Spirit's will together, they would not have been so sharply divided. This is an example of a descriptive, not prescriptive text: Acts describes it as something that happened, but it doesn't condone it, which is especially obvious in this context, right after the story of the Jerusalem Council.

This time the conflict was personal, not theological, yet it was still a conflict that caused division in the church, something they should have sought the Holy Spirit about. There is no mention of them seeking the Holy Spirit through prayer or asking for His direction, even though they did that in many other places throughout Acts. This shows us that even God's most on-fire disciples can make mistakes, have fights, and stubbornly stick to their own side instead of doing what He has called us to do—live in humility, put the needs of others ahead of our own, work together in unity, and seek the Lord's will, not our own. We need to remember that although the apostles did amazing things by the power of the Spirit, they weren't perfect.

The good news is that God redeemed even this sharp disagreement and made it work for His glory and the advancement of the gospel. Because they split into two different teams, they went to twice as many

places and spread the gospel even further!

And eventually, they did reconcile. About twelve years later, John Mark was with Paul as a helper while Paul was on house arrest in Rome (Colossians 4:10). About three years after that, when Paul was awaiting the death penalty, he asked for John Mark to be brought to him because he considered him helpful in his ministry (2 Timothy 4:11). Either John Mark had greatly matured, or Paul had learned to be more patient with younger disciples, or both. Regardless, it is good to see they eventually reconciled, as did Paul and Barnabas. Only five years later, Paul talked about Barnabas positively as a fellow worker for the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:6–7).

**QUESTION** *Consider both Paul's and Barnabas's viewpoints. Why might both have had valid points?*

**QUESTION** *What do you think would have happened if they had sought the guidance of the Spirit and prayed together for unity?*

**APPLICATION POINT** / People can disagree about many different things within the church, from theological to personal conflict to the kind of music or color of the carpet. We shouldn't let those kinds of things divide us. Of course, we should not compromise on truth or condone sin if someone is refusing to repent. If we have confronted someone living in sin and they refuse to repent, we should break fellowship (Matthew 18:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5:9–13). If we confront a false teacher who will not listen to sound doctrine, we should get them out of the church before they lead others astray (2 John 1:10–11). For regular disagreements or conflicts with fellow believers who really are trying to follow Jesus, we cannot let those things divide us. We should always seek unity by the Holy Spirit in all things. If we remain humble, really seek the Lord, and pray together for unity, the Spirit will unify us. That is the Spirit's role. He is not the author of confusion but of peace. Not of division but unity. If we can't seem to come to a consensus, we need to keep praying until we do. He will unify us.

**QUESTION** *Reflect on personal disagreements you have had with fellow Christians. How did you handle them? How should you have handled them?*

**QUESTION** *How can we work to build unity in our church? How can we seek the Holy Spirit's guidance together?*

## [NEXT STEPS]

This section shows us how important unity is in the church and how we can always find unity when we seek the Spirit's guidance. This week, focus on seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance in your life and your family. Start every morning with prayer, asking for Him to lead you in every decision. Pray together for the Spirit's guidance as a family. Spend time in His Word, asking Him to reveal Himself to you through it. Ask Him to show you things that need to change in your life to follow Him more fully. See how intentionally focusing on asking the Spirit to guide you changes your daily decisions.

## [PRAY]

*+Pray for unity in our church as well as unity among the churches in our city and the church universal. [Feel free to add any specifics to the following prayer based on your personal knowledge or experience.]*

*Our gracious Father,*

*We thank you for calling us out of darkness and making us one body in Christ. You have redeemed us by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.*

*Forgive us for the pride, selfishness, and divisions that grieve your Spirit. Teach us to love one another deeply, to bear with one another in humility, and to pursue peace grounded in your truth.*

*Bind your people together—here in our local church, across our nation, and around the world—so that we may stand firm in the gospel, encourage one another, and reflect the love of Christ to a watching world.*

*Keep us faithful until the day we are united in glory, gathered before your throne, singing with one voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!"*

*We pray this in the name of Jesus, our Head and Shepherd. Amen.*