

November 5 Lesson 10 (NIV)

Freedom from Expectations

Devotional Reading: Acts 17:22–34

Background Scripture: Acts 15:1–21

Acts 15:1–11

¹ Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Key Text

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.—Acts 15:8–9

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 3: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Lessons 10–13

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How to Say It

Antioch *An-tee-ock*.

Barnabas *Bar-nuh-bus*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost*.

Phoenicia *Fuh-nish-uh*.

Sidon *Sigh-dun*.

Theophilus *Thee-ahf-ih-luss* (*th* as in *thin*).

Tyre *Tire*.

Introduction

A. Steps to Resolve Disputes

Conflict management is not a new practice. Sometimes people resolve conflict through conversation, debate, and allowances. Resorting to stonewalling, avoidance, or even advancing the conflict to a court of law can do little to reconcile those who find themselves in dispute.

One method (of many) to resolve conflict involves three steps. First, the parties in dispute are to be identified. Second, both sides must clearly understand the nature of their conflict. Third, the involved parties' shared values or common ground should be recognized. When mediators address these steps, an agreement that serves the interests of all conflicting parties can be reached.

Today's Scripture involves a conflict between parties of the first-century church. The Christian movement was just beginning, and believers had to work out conflicting perspectives on certain doctrines. The resolution in Acts 15 sets an important precedent for the church and the identity of the people of God.

B. Lesson Context: First-Century Judaism

Most of Jesus' earliest followers were Jewish, and they still participated in many of the practices of Judaism. For example, until the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, Jewish followers of Jesus participated in some of the temple's ceremonies (examples: Acts 3:1; 21:26). Additionally, throughout the Roman Empire, Jewish believers continued to participate in the synagogues (example: 17:1–2). Jews gathered in these buildings for worship and teaching from the Scriptures.

Some Gentiles had become highly regarded within their local Jewish communities, partly because of their support of synagogues (example: Luke 7:1–10). The book of Acts mentions one such individual: Cornelius, a Gentile who was "God-fearing" (Acts 10:1–2, 22). There is no indication that these Gentiles took up the requirements of Judaism. As a result, they were not considered "fellow children of Abraham" (13:26).

There were, however, some Gentiles who chose to convert fully to Judaism (see Acts 13:43; compare 6:5). Male converts were required to be circumcised—a painful, even dangerous, surgical procedure in the days of rudimentary anesthetics and no antibiotics. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (see Genesis 17:9–14; compare Exodus 12:48). During the first century AD, some individuals had been teaching that Gentile followers of Jesus needed to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses (see Galatians 6:12–13). The reasoning for this position was that Israel had always been the distinct people of God. It was to Israel that God had revealed himself, given his law, and specified circumcision as the sign of his covenant. This group assumed that if God were making himself known to the nations, then the nations should be circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

C. Lesson Context: The Jerusalem Council

The book of Acts was written by Luke. Acts is the second of a two-volume work by Luke addressed to Theophilus (Acts 1:1; see Luke 1:1–4). See the Lesson Context from lessons 1 and 2 regarding details about the author, Luke.

Prior to the events in this lesson, Paul and Barnabas, leaders of the first-century church, had been traveling throughout Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). These travels are identified as Paul's first missionary journey in AD 47–49 (Acts 13:4–14:28). The two visited various synagogues, where they taught from the Scriptures and preached the news of Jesus' resurrection (example: 13:32–33). They were not selective in choosing their audience; they preached to both Jews and Gentiles (see 14:1).

After their journeys, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (Acts 14:26–27), a city in modern-day Syria (not to be confused with another Antioch located in Pisidia; see 13:14). Antioch in Syria was located approximately 300 miles north of Jerusalem.

The events of Acts 15:4–29 depict a meeting sometimes called the "Jerusalem Council." This meeting took place in approximately AD 51. This council was an early attempt to answer the vital question of how to incorporate Gentiles into the people of God. The church's future depended on how the council answered this question.

I. Conflict Described (Acts 15:1–3)

A. The Belief (vv. 1–2a)

1. Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

Judea is the southern region of Israel. The area is mountainous; the largest city in the region, Jerusalem, is situated on a mountain top. A traveler *came down* in elevation when leaving Judea.

The identity of these *certain people* is unknown. Their journey from Judea took them to Antioch in Syria because it was there that Paul and Barnabas were ministering (see Acts 14:23–28). The visit to *the believers* in Antioch was seemingly unauthorized by the church leaders in Judea (see 15:24). The visitors' message was direct: male Gentiles must be *circumcised* to identify as part of God's people. Because of this message, these visitors were likely either Jews or Gentile converts to Judaism.

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, circumcision had become a boundary marker for Jewish identity. And the first-century church had not entirely abandoned the practice. For instance, the apostle Paul circumcised Timothy because of the context into which the two were traveling (see Acts 16:1–5). At another time, however, Paul did not require circumcision for his associate (see Galatians 2:3).

The issue at hand was not *if* Gentiles would be admitted into the people of God. The church had already celebrated God's work in Gentiles (example: Acts 11:1–18). Even the Old Testament prophets agreed that the incorporation of Gentiles into God's people would someday occur (examples: Isaiah 14:1; 56:6–7; Zechariah 8:23).

Instead, the issue was the *means* through which Gentiles entered the community of God's people. The visitors argued that for Gentiles to be counted as God's people, they would have to

follow the law and *custom taught by Moses*. Their argument went as follows: since God provided the Law of Moses, then all people—Gentiles included—must keep that law to *be saved*.

2a. This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.

Paul—previously called “Saul” (Acts 13:9)—was from the tribe of Benjamin (see Romans 11:1). He was educated by a notable rabbi (see Acts 22:3) and trained as a Pharisee (see Philippians 3:4–6). Before meeting Christ, Paul approved of the persecution and killing of members of the first-century church (see Acts 7:59–8:3). After his conversion experience (see 9:1–9), Paul was accepted as a disciple of Jesus and was allowed to preach in the church (see 9:26–29). Following a season in the city of Tarsus (see 9:30), he returned to Antioch (see 11:25–28).

Barnabas was the first to introduce Paul to the other apostles (see Acts 9:27). The two men had traveled together on a missionary journey throughout Asia Minor (13:4–14:28; see Lesson Context). The two were identified as “apostles” (14:14) and, therefore, leaders in the first-century church.

That Paul and Barnabas expressed *sharp dispute and debate with* the visitors and their proclamation is unsurprising. The believers in Antioch had heard of the faith of Gentiles (see Acts 14:26–27). But the interlopers’ message contradicted preaching from Paul and Barnabas regarding justification by faith and the limits of the Law of Moses (see 13:38–39).

B. The Parties (vv. 2b–3)

2b. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The decision to send *Paul and Barnabas* and a *some other believers* reflects the respect held for the leaders in *Jerusalem*. Until *this question* of circumcision was answered, the believers in Antioch would withhold judgment—and their knives.

The apostles were the surviving members of the Twelve called by Jesus (see Luke 6:12–16; compare Matthew 27:5; Acts 12:1–2). *Elders* served in additional leadership positions in the church (see Acts 14:23; example: James 5:14). The council is one of the few places in Scripture where these two parties are listed together as church leaders (see Acts 15:4, 6, below; 15:22–23, not in our printed text; 16:4).

3. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.

Leaving *the church* in Antioch allowed Paul, Barnabas, and the others to visit churches en route to Jerusalem. The estimated 330 miles between the cities would have taken at least two weeks to travel on foot. Because of the trip’s length, the travelers relied on the hospitality of other believers.

Phoenicia is the region of coastal plains located north of Galilee. It includes parts of the modern-day countries of Syria and Lebanon. City-states dotted the area in the first century AD, including Tyre (see Acts 21:2–3) and Sidon (see 27:3). Followers of Jesus scattered to this region after the persecution began in Jerusalem (see 11:19).

Further south, bordering the western banks of the Jordan River and extending to the Mediterranean Sea, was the region of *Samaria*. By the first century AD, Jews did not associate

with Samaritans because of the former group's perceptions regarding the latter group's ritual cleanliness (see John 4:9). After Pentecost, however, the gospel infiltrated the region (see Acts 8:9–24) and led to the establishment of a growing church (9:31).

As the travelers proceeded through these regions, they proclaimed the news that God had welcomed *Gentiles* into his people. This welcoming occurred when the Gentiles experienced a circumcision of the heart (see Ezekiel 44:9; compare Romans 2:28–29). Conversion is turning away from evil and toward God (see 1 Thessalonians 1:8–10). The conversion of Gentiles demonstrated that God had kept his promise to Abraham regarding the blessing to “all peoples on earth” (Genesis 12:3).

II. Conflict Debated (Acts 15:4–6)

A. Receiving (v. 4)

4. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

The message of Paul and Barnabas to the *Jerusalem* church focused on the work of *God* completed *through* the two of *them*. They likely reported on the conversion of Jews and Gentiles during their missionary journeys (see Acts 13:1–14:27). Through them, Jesus' command that his disciples be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8) was being fulfilled.

B. Reminding (vv. 5–6)

5. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

The *Pharisees* were a *party* of first-century Judaism. They emphasized careful obedience to *the law of Moses* and its associated commentary and tradition (see Lesson Context, lesson 1). Their strict adherence to the Law of Moses and its interpretations made it understandable why these certain Christian Pharisees advocated for Gentile circumcision. Although the Gospels present the group as antagonistic toward Jesus (see lessons 1 and 2), some Pharisees (like Paul himself; see Philippians 3:4–11) had *believed* in Jesus.

6. The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

This meeting to discuss the *question* of circumcision appears to have been held in private, contrasting the initial church-wide reception of the believers from Antioch (Acts 15:4, above).

III. Conflict Resolved (Acts 15:7–11)

A. God's Work (vv. 7–9)

7a. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them:

Simon *Peter* was one of the twelve apostles selected by Jesus. As a disciple, he experienced testing of his faith (see Matthew 14:22–32), and he denied having known Jesus (see Luke 22:54–

62). However, Jesus reinstated Peter (see John 21:15–23). As a result, Peter became a leading figure in the church, just as Jesus promised (Matthew 16:17–19). The book of Acts describes how Peter led the apostles (Acts 1:15–26), preached the gospel (2:14–41; 8:14–25), and worked miracles (3:1–10; 9:32–35).

7b. “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe.

God had chosen Peter to proclaim *the gospel* message to “the circumcised” (Jews; Galatians 2:7–8) and *the Gentiles*. It was part of the long-promised plan of God to offer redemption to all people who would *believe* (see Romans 1:16).

8. “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us.

At this moment, perhaps Peter remembered his interactions with Cornelius, a Gentile who feared God (see Acts 10:1–2). After experiencing a vision (10:9–16), Peter went to the house of Cornelius and preached the message of Jesus’ anointing and resurrection (see 10:23–43). The crux of Peter’s declaration was that “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (10:34–35). Every person—Jew or Gentile—who believed in Jesus would receive the forgiveness of sins (10:43). As Peter preached to these Gentiles, “the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (10:44). This gift was evidence of the Gentiles receiving the gospel message and their responding in faith.

Although Peter preached the gospel, *God alone knows the heart* of both Jews and Gentiles. The presence of *the Holy Spirit* in Gentiles served as evidence that their lives had turned toward God. This pouring out of the Spirit was *just as God did to Jesus’* disciples at Pentecost (see Acts 2:1–5). The presence of God’s Spirit on Gentiles gave *showed* their inclusion into the people of God (example: 10:44–46; 11:15–18).

9. “He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Peter clinched his argument: the Gentiles’ reception of God’s Spirit was the sign of their acceptance into God’s people. God does *not discriminate between* Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles did not need to become circumcised. Instead, God cleans the *hearts* of all people who express faith in Christ (see Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22).

Faith is not merely a belief in a proposition. Rather, faith expresses trust and allegiance in Jesus as the Messiah and King. Such faith leads to a person being made right with God (see Romans 3:21–25; 5:1; Galatians 2:15–16; 5:4–6). Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit because of their faith in Christ. Through faith, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, ... slave nor free, ... male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28; see lesson 9).

B. Our Response (vv. 10–11)

10. “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

The tendency of God’s people to *test God* had occurred in Israel’s past. Such testing highlighted distrust of God and his plans (examples: Exodus 17:1–2; Numbers 14:20–25; Deuteronomy 6:16). Requiring Gentile circumcision amounted to testing God’s will for his people.

It was a faulty assumption that God's gift of the Spirit was mistakenly poured out to the Gentiles (see Acts 11:15–17).

A yoke is a wooden beam that pairs livestock together so they can work efficiently. The imagery of a yoke can have positive connotations, such as the yoke promised by Jesus (see Matthew 11:28–30). In Jewish teaching, the term *yoke* was used to describe the peoples' keeping of the Law of Moses. People's responsibility to the law guided and restrained them. To require law-adherence, especially circumcision, was equivalent to *putting* the burden of *a yoke* upon *the necks* of Gentiles (compare Galatians 5:1).

Neither Jesus (see Matthew 5:17) nor the apostle Paul (see Romans 3:31) desired to abolish the Law of Moses. The law was considered good (see 7:12; 1 Timothy 1:8) but inadequate for life and salvation (see Galatians 3:21). Such was not a new development in the first century. Certain limitations had marked the law since it had been received by Israel's *ancestors* (see Romans 4). If Peter's peers and ancestors could not *bear* the requirements of the Law of Moses, why would the Gentiles be expected to do so?

11. "No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Peter ended with a reminder of the core of the gospel. Salvation comes only *through* one avenue: by *the grace of our Lord Jesus*. No human work, including following the Law of Moses, could save a person (see Acts 13:38–39; Galatians 2:14–17).

Conclusion

A. Seeking Resolution

People try to hide conflict by avoiding or ignoring it altogether. Maintaining a facade of peace regardless of the underlying discord can be a severe failure. Evading problems usually makes the conflict worse.

The leaders of the first-century church did not dodge conflict regarding the question of Gentile circumcision. Instead, they resolved the dispute while staying faithful to the gospel. God's plan for salvation is beyond human expectations. We are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and not through our heritage or achievements!

B. Prayer

God of salvation, thank you for showing your mercy. Help us welcome as we have been welcomed and love as we have been loved. Show us how we can proclaim to others your plan for salvation. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Celebrate God's merciful gift of redemption!¹
