

By Grace Alone

Acts 15:1-35

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Regarding Circumcision

To better understand our study today, we must consider the role and importance that circumcision had in the Jewish community. The act of circumcising all male children on the 8th day was one of Judaism's most essential and critical practices. It was the mark of the covenant God had made with Abraham, the Father of the nation of Israel (Genesis 17:9-14). It was the physical marker that they were set apart as the people of God. The practice was also given as part of the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 12:3). In the minds of some of these first-century Jews we encounter in Acts, there was no way to become part of the family of God apart from also being circumcised and coming under the Law. If a gentile wanted to join the Jewish religion and all its religious days and practices, he would have to be circumcised and come under the Law of Moses. This gentile convert was known as a proselyte. Some of these Jewish believers were unwavering in their position that this was still the case for gentiles who believed in Jesus. However, as we had seen with the Cornelius event in Acts 10, God was bringing together Jews and Gentiles to faith in Jesus, **and all of them were saved by the grace of God alone**, with the evidence being the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This fact was not accepted by all the believing Jews and led to several disagreements and conflicts.

Defining The Disagreement (15:1-5)

When engaging in a conflict over a disagreement, it is critical to define what is being debated. In this case, there are two views represented. In the first group, there were believing Jews, who were convinced that for the gentiles to receive justification salvation, they must believe in Jesus AND come under the Mosaic Law, specifically seen by all converting males receiving circumcision. The second group were believing Jews who had seen numerous gentiles come to faith in Jesus. Their justification was evidenced by the indwelling Holy Spirit, without enacting circumcision or adopting the Mosaic law. (See Acts 10:44-45)

So the key question was: "Do gentiles need to come under the Mosaic law, and be circumcised, to be justified?" The answer to this question is so important and potentially so divisive that Paul and Barnabas were sent by the believers in Syria Antioch to get an answer from the Church leaders in Jerusalem. This was a massive fork in the road for properly understanding the very nature of the church, and the believers in Antioch were mature enough to recognize that they needed to seek additional counsel.

Resolving The Disagreement (15:6-21)

Once Paul and Barnabas, and their companions arrived in Jerusalem, the elders and apostles gathered together to look at the evidence and come to a decision. Due to its immense importance, this disagreement took considerable time, energy, and patience, but in the end, the arguments against the necessity of circumcision for salvation won the day. Luke recorded for us a few of the key moments. Peter spoke again of how the Holy Spirit had come to gentiles and Jews without distinction and that both Jews and gentiles were saved by grace alone. Paul and Barnabas related the signs and wonders God had done among the gentiles. James, the brother of Jesus, took a different approach. He made an argument using what Peter (Simeon) had said and tying it into a prophecy from Amos. It seems that the point James made with the Amos prophecy, was that Jesus the messiah had begun the process of rebuilding the house of David, and that God had made clear through the prophets that when that happened, the Gentiles also would be brought in. This prophecy, coupled with the clear testimony of God's direct work with the gentiles, apart from the Mosaic law, brought James and the other elders and apostles, to the definitive conclusion that **there was no additional requirement for salvation beyond faith in Jesus the Messiah.**

Distributing the Resolution (15:22-35)

This decision had implications for all the new churches being planted, and it was critical to get the word out to them quickly. So this counsel composed a letter to be sent out that explained there was no need to be circumcised as a gentile, but that there were some pagan behaviors that it was important for gentiles to abstain from in order to have fellowship with their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Antioch was the first stop for the letter to be read, and they received the news with rejoicing. It was clear that through Jesus the Messiah, God was bringing together His children from all tongues, tribes, and nations. And entrance into this new family of God was through faith alone, by God's grace alone.

- Voice of the Martyrs Needs for October: Foam nerf balls / Chapstick