Acts Chapter 15: The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15 is a major turning point, this is when the New Covenant is understood to completely replace the Mosaic Covenant in God's plan of redemption. Jesus fulfilled the Law, the believers were under the New Covenant, this was a hard concept for the Pharisees who were invested in the Laws of Moses, but also believed in Jesus. As the Gospel started to spread to the Gentiles, they felt it was their personal responsibility to make sure these new believers kept the Laws of Moses, circumcision being a major component of those laws. The Pharisees Jewish believers in Jesus, came to Antioch to correct the problem. Paul, being a Pharisee himself, was not having it. He and Barnabas opposed them head on, rejecting their teaching on salvation as faith plus works

The Law of Moses vs. the Gospel for Salvation

Acts 15:1-5
1 But **some men** came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, **you cannot be saved**."
2 And after Paul and Barnabas had **no small dissension** and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to **go up to Jerusalem** to the apostles and the elders about this question.
3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both **Phoenicia and Samaria**, describing in detail **the conversion of the Gentiles**, and brought great joy to all the brothers.
4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.
5 But some believers who belonged to the **party of the Pharisees** rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and **to order them to keep the law of Moses**."

What do you need to do to be "saved"? This is kind of what we're seeing in Acts chapter 15. Because the Jews, **some men**, who were from Jerusalem were Pharisees, who believed Jesus was Messiah. And they had come to Antioch, after they heard the Gentiles were becoming believers in Jesus. These Jews wanted to the Gentiles to adhere to the law. They taught the Gentiles, the non-Jewish believers, the had

to follow the Mosaic Law, and if you didn't, you were not saved. So, this group felt it was necessary for them to come to Antioch and correct the teachings of the apostles. They taught salvation comes from faith plus works. Believe in Jesus but you must also follow the law to be saved. This is the same group confronting Peter in Acts 11:2, known as the *Circumcision Party*.

No small dissension means it was a rough and tumble debate. It got to the point where they said let's go to Jerusalem to have it settled, because the believers in Antioch were being confused, they assumed that the Pharisees had authority and that was putting in question the authority of Paul and Barnabas. And the church in Antioch had the believers questioning their salvation, and did they need to now follow the Mosaic Law and believe in Jesus?

The Mosaic Covenant to be Replaced by a Better Covenant (600 BC)

Jeremiah 31:31-34
31 "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when **I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah,
32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.
33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' **for they shall all know me**, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For **I will forgive their iniquity**, and **I will remember their sin no more."**

Jesus clearly taught, Salvation was through faith alone; the people asked Jesus, "what must we do, to be doing to the works of God". Jesus replied, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent", because Jesus did all the work, Salvation is a free gift.

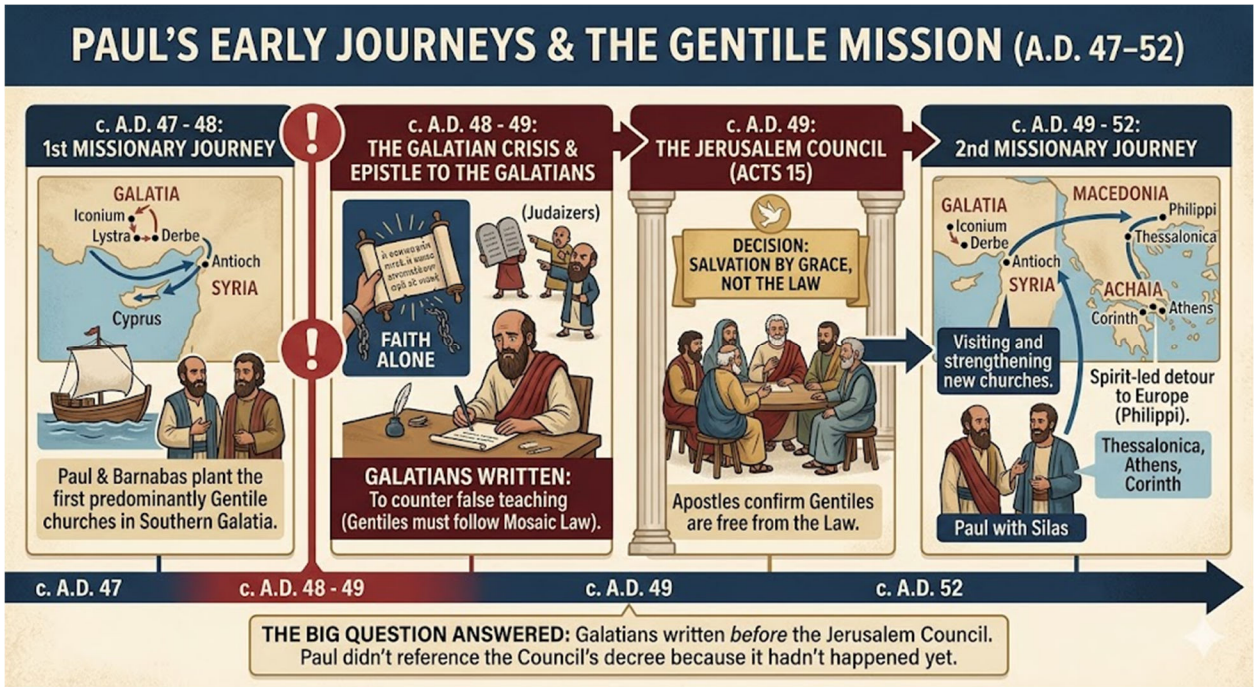
John 6:28-29
28 Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"
29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

This was the same message Paul taught, salvation was through faith alone, in the city of Antioch Pisidia, Paul preached his first recorded sermon, and he taught salvation is by faith in Christ alone.

Acts 13:39
39 and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Paul, after he returns, he writes the new churches of Galatia in the letter to the Galatians, and tells them to not be confused by the Judaizers or the Circumcision Party. Salvation is not by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, alone.

Galatians 2:15-16
15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;
16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.



The Jerusalem Council

Acts 15:6-21
6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.
7 And after there had been much debate, **Peter stood up** and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.
8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them **the Holy Spirit** just as he did to us,
9 and he made no distinction between us and them, **having cleansed their hearts by faith**.
10 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?
11 But we believe that **we will be saved** through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."
12 And all the assembly fell silent, and **they listened to Barnabas and Paul** as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.
13 After they finished speaking, **James replied**, "Brothers, listen to me.
14 Simeon has related how God first visited the **Gentiles**, to take from them a people for his name.
15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,
16 "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it,
17 that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things
18 known from of old.'
19 **Therefore my judgment** is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,
20 but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.
21 For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

This matter was dividing and confusing for the church. This matter was already addressed in Acts Chapter 10. **Peter stood up** to defend Paul and Barnabas, he related the events of Acts 10, when he saw the vision on the roof and later met with Cornelius and his whole house and these Gentiles were saved. And they were saved without being circumcised, and they were saved without following the law. They received the same **Holy Spirit**, that Jews received in Acts 2. Peter affirmed Paul and Barnabas' position by saying, "**having cleansed their hearts by faith**" (vs.8). Peter seconds this again by saying of the Gentiles in verse 11, "**We will be saved** through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will", not by following the Laws of the Mosaic Covenant.

The Pharisee sect was hard pressed to let go of the Mosaic law and accept the New Covenant because they fully did not understand that salvation was through faith in Jesus Christ alone. They wanted to cling to the old traditions and Law, which were all fulfilled in the “Blood of Jesus”.

Paul and Barnabas shared. The miracles and the salvation of the Gentiles to the different cities on Cyprus and in and in Asia that they visited. This affirmed. Salvation by faith alone because these individuals were not circumcised, they were not following the law of Moses, but they were following faith in Christ alone. And they received the Holy Spirit. Thus, they were saved without submitting to the laws of the Mosaic covenant.

James, the brother of Jesus, agreed and quotes from Amos 9:11-12 and Isaiah 43:7, affirming the **Gentiles** inclusion in the kingdom of God. We don’t really understand how revolutionary this thinking was in the early days of the church. The Jews were thoroughly convinced that the Kingdom of God was strictly a Jewish event, and there was a very strict separation between Jews and Gentiles. Peter broke the mold in Acts 10 with Cornelius the Centurian, Paul is moving forward with this new reality in the First Missionary Journey.

James as the leader of the Jerusalem elders, since he was not an apostle, but was the brother of Jesus, who became a believer after the resurrection (I Cor 15:7, Gal 1:19), gave his definitive **judgment.** The Gentiles were to stay away from food offered to **idols**, **sex immorality**, what had been **strangled**, and from **blood**. These were all common practices in the Gentile world; by visibly rejecting these offenses the Gentile believers would impact the world around them.

The Jerusalem Decree

Acts 15:22-35
22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with **Paul and Barnabas**. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,
23 with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.
24 Since we have heard that **some persons** have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although **we gave them no instructions**,
25 it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,
26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
27 We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.
28 For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:
29 that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

The Jerusalem Council gave its stamp of approval to the teaching of **Paul and Barnabas**, and sent two individuals to affirm its words, Judas and Silas. They also in no uncertain terms rejected the inclusion of Mosaic Law for salvation, the teaching of the Pharisee believers, called **some persons**, also they included in their announcement, their lack of authority, **saying, we gave them no instructions**.

Continuing Ministry in Syria

30 So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter.
31 And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.
32 And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.
33 And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them.
35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

The Church of Jesus Christ was unified, Peter, James and Paul, leaders of the Church to both Jews and Gentiles have a unified position. Now Paul wanted to remove the confusion, he gathered the church in

Antioch and delivered the words of James and Peter. Salvation was by faith in Christ alone.

Division over John Mark

The Chronological Timeline

The 1st Missionary Journey

c. A.D. 47 – 48

Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the church in Antioch. They travel to Cyprus and then into the southern region of the Roman province of Galatia (visiting towns like Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe). They plant the very first predominantly Gentile churches and return to Antioch.

The Galatian Crisis & Writing of Galatians

c. A.D. 48 – 49

Shortly after Paul returns to Antioch, legalistic Jewish Christians (often called "Judaizers") arrive in Galatia. They tell Paul's new Gentile converts that they cannot be saved unless they are circumcised and follow the Law of Moses.
Hearing this, a furious and heartbroken Paul writes the **Epistle to the Galatians** from Antioch to counter this false teaching immediately.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15)

c. A.D. 49

The theological firestorm reaches a boiling point. Paul, Barnabas, and other leaders travel to Jerusalem to settle the Gentile-Law question once and for all. Peter, Paul, and James agree that Gentile believers are saved by grace through faith alone and do *not* need to follow the Mosaic Law. They issue an official letter to the Gentile churches confirming this.

The 2nd Missionary Journey

c. A.D. 49 – 52

With the Jerusalem Council's letter in hand, Paul sets out again—this time with Silas. They travel overland to revisit the Galatian churches to deliver the Council's decree and encourage them, before the Holy Spirit redirects them toward Europe (Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth).

Acts 15:36-41
36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."
37 Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.
38 But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work.
39 And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,
40 but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.
41 And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Paul wanted to go back to the churches on the 1st Missionary and make sure they were being established in the truth of the Gospel. This would have included Cyprus and Southern Galatia, since John Mark abandoned them after Cyprus, Paul did not want to give him another chance. It was a sharp disagreement, so they divided, Barnabas and Mark would go to Cyprus, while Paul and Silas would go to churches in Southern Galatia, Antioch Pisidia, Iconium and Derbe.

Paul and John Mark are reconciled later, when Paul requests his presence.

2 Timothy 4:11
11 Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry.