

Council at Jerusalem**Acts 15:1–21**

Paul and Barnabas have just finished traveling throughout the southern region of modern-day Turkey. They were able to start a number of churches and strengthen many others. They probably ended their journey by sailing to the coastal city of Seleucia, and then traveling 15 miles inland to Antioch. Once they arrived, they gathered the church together and reported all the things which the Lord had accomplished through them. They especially reported how God had opened up a door of faith to the Gentiles. This once again highlights an important change in God's dealing with mankind. Previous to Paul's salvation, the Jews were entrusted with the gospel and any Gentile who wanted to come to God had to come through Israel. Now, following his conversion, and made known to Peter through Cornelius' salvation, God was showing them that He was now working directly with the Gentiles instead of going through the nation of Israel.

Scripture says that they spent a long time with the disciples at Antioch following their first apostolic journey. They will stay there no more than two years before departing on Paul's next major apostolic journey. While there, Paul was called to Jerusalem for a very important meeting between the church at Antioch and the Hebrew church at Jerusalem. This account is recored for us by Luke in Acts 15.

There is another account given to us by Paul in Galatians. When these two accounts are dovetailed, we get a much clearer picture of what happened between Paul and the church at Jerusalem. This meeting was important because the Hebrew church gives Paul's ministry their stamp of approval signaling that they acknowledge his authority as an apostle, and that their own ministry to Israel is fading away.

Contention and division (verses 1–2)

Quarrels and disputations were breaking out between those who were saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom and the believers saved under the Gospel of Grace. Believers from Judea were traveling to Antioch to teach the believers there that it was necessary for them to become circumcised. Notice that they were believers who understood that the works of the Law were necessary for salvation under the Gospel of the Kingdom. They were saved by faith and they were to prove their faith by their works (James 2:14–26). Circumcision did not save them, but, under the Kingdom gospel, any believer needed to be circumcised. Those who were not circumcised demonstrated that they did not have a true faith.

According to Luke, there was much heated debate between Paul and the men from Judea, until finally it was decided for them to go to the church at Jerusalem to arbitrate the issue. It appears that the leaders at the church in Antioch were encouraging Paul, Barnabas, and some others, to go to Jerusalem, while Paul said he went up because of a revelation of the Lord (Galatians 2:1–2). This is one reason that some people say Acts and Galatians are two separate events. However, I believe Paul and Barnabas were urged to go to Jerusalem by their church leaders and they finally went after the Lord told them to go.

Presentation to the Hebrew church (verses 4–12)

According to Acts, Paul and company went to the Jerusalem church and presented what the Lord had been doing through their ministry. According to Galatians, Paul presented to them the gospel that he had been preaching among the Gentiles. The Acts account says that there were some believing Pharisees in the group who wanted to put the Gentiles under the Mosaic Law. Galatians says that there were false brothers brought in secretly who were checking out their liberty in Christ and desiring to put them under the bondage of the Law. Notice that there were two groups who were opposing Paul. The first were believers who were saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom and understood that the saved Gentiles should also be put under the Mosaic Law, as they were. The second group were unbelievers who were

trying to destroy Paul's ministry. Note that If Paul were preaching Peter's gospel, then the Gentiles would be obligated to follow the Law. However, because the gospel had changed (this is one proof that Paul was not preaching Peter's gospel), and now believers were no longer bound by the Mosaic Law (Romans 6:14; 3:28; Galatians 5:18).

Paul met with a smaller group of important Hebrew church leaders to describe God's work among the Gentiles. There was much debate about the things that Paul was telling them. If Paul were preaching and teaching the same message as they were, there would be no reason for much debate. One of the ways the Holy Spirit lead the Hebrew church to see that Paul was doing God's work was through signs and wonders (Acts 15:12). As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:12, the signs of a true apostle were performed among you...by signs and wonders and miracles.

During the heated discussion, Peter stood up and related to them what he had learned from his encounter with Cornelius. He reminded them that God had given the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, and that He no longer was making a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles. Peter now understood that all people are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. He also questions why they would want to put the Gentiles under the same Law that Israel found impossible to obey.

The outcome (13–21)

Now that the discussion had come to an end, James, the leader of the Hebrew church, got up to summarize the debate, and to make his final judgment. He begins by using Peter's testimony about God working among the Gentiles, and then quotes Amos 9:11–12 to show how the believing Gentiles will have a place in the Millennial Kingdom.

During all this debate, Paul did not yield to them even for a moment, but he held firm for the truth of the Gospel of Grace (Galatians 2:5). Not only that, but they were able to add nothing to what he was telling them. Instead of the Hebrew church persuading Paul to make the Gentiles follow the Law, they understood, through the working of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:1–5), that Paul was the bearer of the Gospel of Grace to the Gentiles, in contrast to Peter being the one charged with the Gospel of the Kingdom to the Jews (Galatians 2:6–9).

Ephesians 3:1–5 says that Paul received the Mystery by revelation. This revelation came directly to him from Jesus Christ, according to Galatians 1:11–12. The information contained in the Mystery doctrine was made known to the other apostles and prophets, who were alive at that time, through the apostle Paul. We see this happening when the Holy Spirit primed the pump of change when He sent Peter to Cornelius. Later, Barnabas came to understand what Paul was preaching, and he reported back to the Hebrew church (Acts 11:22–24). Paul also was able to personally explain to the Hebrew church the message that he was preaching and how God was working among the Gentiles, as recorded in Acts 15. Paul was given sign gifts to prove that he was a true apostle. The Holy Spirit used all these things to convince the Hebrew church that Paul's message of Grace was from God.

The standard explanation of Ephesians 3:1–5 is to say that Paul received the same revelation as the other apostles and prophets. There is no support in Scripture that God revealed the same thing to Paul after revealing it to the others. If Paul had received the same message, there would have been no reason for him to explain why he is teaching what he is teaching. There would have been no confusion on Peter's part about what Paul was teaching (2 Peter 3:16), and Paul would have not needed to distinguish his gospel from the other gospel (Romans 16:25; Galatians 1:11; 2:2; 1 Corinthians 15:1).

Their agreement was confirmation of Paul's apostleship. If they had not agreed with him, they would be saying that Paul was not speaking for God. That would have opened up the possibility for them to stone him for being a false prophet (Deuteronomy 1–5).

For previous notes and additional mid-Acts materials please visit www.MidActsTruths.com