

## Truth & Unity

### Acts 15:1-21

How should the church maintain two of the most important Christian values, the values of truth and unity? When should we be inflexible for the sake of truth and when should we be flexible for the sake of unity? We see in the first church council how this is to be done. This church council was about both truth and unity.

First, and foremost this church council meeting was about maintaining **the truth of the gospel**. (15:1-19) According to some who came to Antioch from Judea, those who had been converted as Gentile men had to be circumcised to be saved. Also, according to Galatians, these men claimed to be sent from James, chief Elder of the church in Jerusalem. Was this what James, the writer of the book of James in the New Testament, believed? This was not what Paul taught. Would the church split, some siding with one or the other of these apostolic figures? Would there be two churches and two gospels, one following James and the other following Paul? Also, what did the apostle Peter think? The church at Antioch sent a delegation to Jerusalem about this question. Paul and Barnabas, who debated in Antioch with those who believed this, along with others, went to Jerusalem to find out whether this was what the apostles and elders in Jerusalem believed and taught.

After arriving, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem began to consider this matter. First there was much debate. Then, there were two, Peter and Paul (with Barnabas) who spoke against the idea that in addition to faith in Jesus, Gentiles needed also the works of the law of Moses to be saved. Both were witnesses of God's acceptance of Gentiles who had believed in Jesus, without circumcision or works of the law. Peter witnessed God giving Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit and Paul, along with Barnabas, witnessed God doing signs and wonders through them among the Gentiles.

Next, James quoted something Amos said which aligned with what Peter and Paul had witnessed. So, there was two kinds of evidence against what the party of the Pharisees were claiming: the apostolic witness and the prophetic word. This led to James making a proposal with two parts. Part one was that Gentiles should not be troubled by being told there was any additional requirement for salvation. The truth of the gospel was preserved. This proposal seemed good to the apostles, and the elders, with the whole church, according to the rest of Acts 15.

The truth of the gospel is that people are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. There are not two ways to be saved. All are saved by the grace shown by Jesus in his birth and death, and his resurrection and exaltation validated that he had satisfied justice and defeated death for his people. He lived (without sin) and died (for sin) for those who didn't deserve it. All people are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The second part of this proposal that was agreed upon, was that Gentiles should abstain from certain things. This was done to preserve **the unity of the church**. Gentiles would be asked to be considerate of the consciences of Jews who had heard Moses read in the synagogues every Sabbath day. The four things proposed for Gentiles to abstain from are not things that must be abstained from as a condition for salvation, but for Jewish Christians to have close fellowship with them as one church. If Gentiles Christians abstained from these things that were common in Gentile culture, Jewish believers would be able to share meals with them with a clear conscience and true community among them would follow.