



## “Unity and Community”

### WITNESSES

#### Acts 15

#### Small Group Plan

After the church began in Jerusalem in 30 AD and in Antioch approximately 10 years later, Paul and Barnabas began their missionary journey in 46-47 AD.

This means that the earliest Christian experience had a decidedly Jewish flavor in regard to kosher food, clothing styles, holiday celebrations and circumcision of infants. After almost 20 years of a Jewish church life, a new flavor was introduced — Gentile.

Of course, this came about because the Christian “Witness” was continuing to unfold.

As Jesus had said:

*You will be my witnesses in  
Jerusalem, (stage 1)  
and in all Judea (stage 2)  
and Samaria, (stage 3)  
and to the ends of the earth. (stage 4)*

— Acts 1:8 —

And with each stage the circle got wider, and more uncomfortable:

Stage 1 – **Jerusalem** – *the heart of Judaism – very comfortable*

Stage 2 – **Judea** – *pure blooded Jews – still comfortable*

Stage 3 – **Samaria** – *Half-breeds – uncomfortable*

Stage 4 – **the earth** – *Gentiles – very uncomfortable*

### **OPEN IT / INTRODUCE IT ...**

- What happens when a closed mind stands in front of an open door?
- Honestly, what are you usually like when you disagree with someone?

## LOOK AT IT / STUDY IT ...

### — THE DISPUTE —

#### Acts 15:1-5

<sup>1</sup> 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.” <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.”

- From the point of view of those who came down from Judea (v. 1) and the Pharisees (v. 5), what was objectionable about Gentiles becoming Christians?
- Why do some respond with joy at the news of Gentile conversions (v. 3) while others reacted with concern (v. 1)?
- What changed in Paul’s mind that brought him into such a “sharp dispute”?
- Stepping back and looking at the big picture, what is at stake in this debate?

### — THE DISCUSSION —

#### Acts 15:6-18

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup> He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” <sup>12</sup> The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. <sup>13</sup> When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. <sup>15</sup> The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: <sup>16</sup> “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’— <sup>18</sup> things known from long ago.

- Considering the fact that Peter was the spokesman to both the earliest Jewish converts (Acts 2) and the earliest Gentile converts (Acts 10), why does he allow so “much discussion” before he finally stands up to address the issue?
- What does this teach us about managing conflict and differing opinions?
- What risks are involved in having a public discussion of a church problem?
- What are the benefits?
- Describe the lesson of grace that Peter reports.
- Notice that James affirms Peter’s words. Being in agreement with Peter he could have chosen to remain silent. Why is it important to openly and verbally display unity, camaraderie and support in the face of conflict?
- Why did James underscore Peter’s words with scripture (vs. 15-18)?

— **THE DECISION** —

**Acts 15:19-21**

<sup>19</sup> “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. <sup>20</sup> Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

- Is James “dumbing down” God’s will in an effort to “not make it [too] difficult” for the Gentiles (v. 19)? Explain.
- James outlines a letter (“write to them”) to Gentile Christians (v. 20).
- How would you expect a Jew to respond to such a letter? Explain.
- How would you expect a Gentile to respond? Explain.

**USE IT / APPLY IT ...**

- How can cultural diversity bring tension into the church today?
- How can the Jerusalem conference be a model for handling conflict today?
- Are Law and Grace at odds with each other? Explain.
- How can we maintain the high standard of holiness without making salvation “too difficult” for those who are seeking God (vs. 19, 10)?
- Close by asking God to help you see others with a gracious heart.