

Exegetical Notes, Acts 15:1-21

**“The Elders Meet”**

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**Acts 15:1-21**

**Verses 15:1-4**

***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.***

- A group of unidentified persons came from the area of Judea to Syrian Antioch. These men were believers who taught that before a man could become a Christian he had to be circumcised according to the law of Moses.
- Paul and Barnabas disagreed with this teaching.
- A delegation from the leaders of the church in Antioch was formed. It consisted of Paul, Barnabas, and other selected men from that congregation. This group was to take the matter to the Apostles and Elders in Jerusalem for resolution.
- The delegation passed through the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria as they traveled to Jerusalem. In these non-Jewish communities they told how non-Jews in other places had accepted Jesus as their Savior. This made the Christians in those places happy.
- When the delegation arrived in Jerusalem they were warily received by the congregation, the Apostles, and the Elders there and they told them, in detail, what had been happening in the places where they preached.

### **Verse 5**

***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.”***

- Then, those who believed that non-Jews must first be circumcised in order to become Christians raised their objections to the Apostles and Elders.

### **Verses 6-11**

***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.”***

- After hearing both sides, the Apostles and Elders withdrew to consider the question. They met in private session to discuss the arguments which had been presented to them by the opposing sides.
- After a long discussion, Peter, the Apostle, addressed the other Apostles and Elders. In his address, Peter referred to the time when he was called to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion and a non-Jew. (See Acts 10:1-11:18) He explained that when he preached to Cornelius and his non-Jewish friends about Jesus, they accepted Jesus as their Savior, the Holy Spirit fell of them, and he baptized them. He claimed that God made no distinction between Cornelius and his friends and Jews who accepted Jesus.
- He then asked why the Apostles and Elders would consider asking non-Jews to be circumcised before they accepted Jesus since all this happened to Cornelius and his friends without them ever being circumcised. He pointed out that Jews, who were circumcised, were not saved unless they accepted Jesus as their Savior. So, circumcision, or other works, did not affect salvation. Salvation was a matter of God’s grace.

### **Verses 12-21**

***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.*

<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.”*

- After Peter spoke, Paul and Barnabas, who were gathered with the Apostles and Elders because they were Elders in Antioch (see Acts 13:1), told the others about the confirming signs of the Holy Spirit among the non-Jewish Christians in the cities they had visited.
- When they had finished speaking, James, the brother of Jesus and apparently the president Elder in Jerusalem at that time, spoke. He said that the words of the Scripture supported the arguments of Peter, who he called Simon (see Amos 9:11-12). He ruled that non-Jews should be admitted to the Church without being circumcised first. He suggested that a letter be sent to the new Gentile Churches requiring that, after accepting Jesus as Savior, they should not eat food which had been sacrificed to idols, they should not commit adultery, and they should abstain from meat which was not butchered according to Kosher customs.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Elders Meet*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)