

## Navigating Middle Ground

(*Godly Practical Wisdom*)

Acts 15:1-35 on June 20, 2021

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Last month we came to the halfway point of the book of Acts, at chapter 14, and we took a break for a few weeks. This morning, we're going to pick things up where we left off, at Acts 15. But first, let's review a few big ideas from earlier in the book. Back in Acts 1:8 Jesus told His followers: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And then, in Acts 2, Jesus' followers received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and they begin to preach BOLDLY! They declared the Good News about Jesus... beginning, in **Jerusalem**. Before long, Jesus' followers faced intense persecution, and they ended up being scattered all throughout **Judea and Samaria**, spreading the gospel everywhere they went.<sup>1</sup> Acts 10-11 records the story of a Gentile named Cornelius. In Acts 10:34-35 Peter says, "...I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." Peter ends up needing to explain this to his fellow Jews. Acts 11:18 records, "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life." Sometime later, Paul and Barnabas head out on the 1<sup>st</sup> official Missionary Journey. When they return from that journey, they give their report in Acts 14:27, "...they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." "A door of faith to the Gentiles" was a cause for MUCH praise and celebration and giving glory to God! Hallelujah! Lost sinners are being saved by God's grace!

And now, everything is "hunky dory" right?<sup>2</sup> Well... not quite. Having all of these new Gentile believers around, was creating some stress, some incredibly challenging dynamics within the church fellowship. You see, Jews and Gentiles didn't have much experience with how to hang out together, how to eat meals together, or how to share life together. The intimacy of being untied as one body, one Christian family, and one Christian church was not a particularly EASY adjustment. After all, Jews and Gentiles had a long history of bad blood, due to various religious and cultural differences. So even though they were all most certainly redeemed by one and the same Savior, Jesus Christ, that didn't necessarily make it easy for them to get along. The friction caused by this intermingling, led to what's called the "Jerusalem Council."

Please turn/click in your Bible to Acts 15. Acts 15:1 begins, "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are

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<sup>1</sup> See Acts 8:1.

<sup>2</sup> "This American-coined adjective has been around since the 1860s, from the now-obsolete hunkey, "all right," which stems from the New York slang hunk, "in a safe position," and the Dutch root honk or "home." The origin of dory is unknown. <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/hunky-dory#:~:text=This%20American%2Dcoined%20adjective%20has,origin%20of%20dory%20is%20unknown.>

circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” Circumcision was a distinctive religious custom of the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> This cutting away of the male foreskin was a sign “of belonging to God’s people.”<sup>4</sup> Since these new Gentile Christians were now claiming to belong to God’s people, there were some Jewish Christians who felt they needed to be circumcised OR, they could NOT be saved. Acts 15:2 tells us, “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>5 6</sup> This confusion and conflict was a potential powder keg among the younger church plants, which were FILLED with brand-new, baby Christians. We see here not just an appeal to the Mother Church in Jerusalem, but also an appeal to the collective wisdom of the more senior saints. Godly, practical wisdom is MUCH needed right now!<sup>7</sup>

Acts 15:3-4 goes on, “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. 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.” “VERY glad” was EXACTLY the right response to all these new believers! Praise the Lord for His salvation, whether it be Jews OR Gentiles coming to faith. But not everyone shared this sentiment.

Acts 15:5 says, “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.” Acts 15:1 only mentioned circumcision, but verse 5 now clarifies, circumcision AND keeping the law of Moses. These two things were inextricably linked in Jewish thinking.<sup>8</sup> These Christian Pharisees<sup>9</sup> wanted to combine the full gamut of their Judaic practices with Christianity. Practices like dietary laws and Sabbath rules. However, during their entire 1<sup>st</sup> Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas hadn’t been doing things this way at all. So, in verse 6, “The apostles and elders met to consider this question.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Genesis 17:10-14.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 495.

<sup>5</sup> This decision will not be made by Paul and Barnabas. Despite their spiritual authority, and their deeply vested interest in these churches, the church in Antioch calls for aid from an authoritative council of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 495.

<sup>6</sup> Peter represents the Apostles; James represents the elders. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2250 footnote on Acts 15:13-21.

<sup>7</sup> Rather than trying to cover it up, Luke accurately records the history of how believers conducted themselves when they disagreed with each other. Today’s sermon title hints at this: “Navigating Middle Ground.” Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is transparent about the realities of disagreement in the Early Church. See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 496.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, in Galatians 5:3 the Apostle Paul says, “...I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.”

<sup>9</sup> “Christian Pharisees” almost seems like an oxymoron, but they may have been well-intentioned in their efforts here, simply wrong in their own understanding of this new Christian faith. See Kevin DeYoung, Acts sermon “The Church in Controversy.”

<sup>10</sup> Literally “looking at this matter.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 499.

Acts 15:7-9 tells us, “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. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, JUST as he did to us. 9 He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.” Here Peter is referring back to the story of Cornelius, which happened as much as 10 years earlier.<sup>11 12 13</sup> One scholar summarizes this nicely: “What is important here is that God gave the Spirit without ANY circumcision being done. God accepted the Gentiles as they were when the Spirit came. The theological implication here is that the Spirit would not have come to indwell Gentiles unless they are completely accepted and cleansed.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, if anyone should be blamed for accepting the Gentiles apart from circumcision and the Law, it was God. God Himself is the one who these Christian Pharisees are actually challenging.<sup>15</sup> So, for Peter, God had already settled the matter LONG before this Jerusalem Council was convened.<sup>16</sup>

Peter asks a SEARING question in Acts 15:10, “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?” A yoke is something that is hung on the shoulders of work animals; it harnesses them to their work, so that they can pull the load. Here Peter is using the word “yoke” to refer negatively to the overwhelming weight of the OT Law, of trying to become righteous through our own human efforts. Being a Jew himself, Peter was well aware that the requirements of the law were too heavy of a burden for humans to bear. Peter knew very well, from firsthand experience, that humans can ONLY be made right with God, through the righteousness of Christ.<sup>17 18</sup> On the cross, Jesus did the heavy lifting, and set us free from the law of sin and death. This is why Jesus said that His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.<sup>19 20 21</sup> Peter then concludes in Acts 15:11, “No!

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<sup>11</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 499.

<sup>12</sup> This is now the 3rd time that Luke, the author of Acts, refers to the story of Cornelius, which highlights just how significant it was in God’s master Redemptive Plan. See also Acts 10; 11:1-18.

<sup>13</sup> **Peter’s own personal eyewitness account is recorded back in Acts 10:44-48**, “While Peter was still speaking these words [to Cornelius and those who’d gathered with him], the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit JUST AS WE HAVE.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 500.

<sup>15</sup> Darrell L. Bock quotes Bruce and then discusses in *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, pp. 500-501.

<sup>16</sup> Back in Acts 11:19-26, many Gentiles in Antioch had also responded to the gospel without any requirement to get circumcised or obey the law of Moses. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2250 footnote on Acts 15:1.

<sup>17</sup> “The burden of the righteous demands of the law as a means for gaining God’s favor [is] an intolerable burden for sinful humanity.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1977 footnote on Galatians 5:1

<sup>18</sup> Romans 8:2-4 explains it this way, “...through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 11:30.

We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, JUST AS THEY ARE.”<sup>22</sup>

Barnabas and Paul now lend further support to Peter’s argument. Acts 15:12 says, “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.” So, in addition to sending the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles, God also did “signs and wonders” among them. This was yet “another divine indicator for Gentile inclusion.”<sup>23</sup> God Himself was the one behind all of this.

Finally, James speaks up. This is not the Apostle James, who was martyred back in Acts 12, but rather James the half-brother of Jesus, who had now become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem Church.<sup>24</sup> Acts 15:13-14 says, “When they [Barnabas/Paul] finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. Simon [another name for Peter] has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles.”<sup>25 26 27 28</sup> There is STRONG agreement, among all of these key church leaders. In addition to the Apostle Peter, and to Barnabas and Paul, James now throws in his support as well.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the evidence of the Holy Spirit, and the signs and wonders, James now adds the testimony of Old Testament Scripture. In Acts 15:15-18 James says, “The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is

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<sup>20</sup> **1 John 5:3-4 clarifies**, “... this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” In other words, the Christian faith calls us to fully depend on Christ to make us righteous rather than on our own human efforts to be holy.

<sup>21</sup> The Christ-followers in Galatia were threatened by this same return to the burdensome yoke of the law’s stringent demands. Paul lovingly warns them in Galatians 5:1-4, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

<sup>22</sup> These are the final words that the book of Acts will record coming from the mouth of the Apostle Peter. What an incredible closing salvo! “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved.” The gospel of grace sets us free from the burdensome yoke of the Law. This is what Peter, himself a Jew, was proclaiming. Shockingly, the Apostle Paul actually had to confront the Apostle Peter for falling back into Jewish patterns in Galatians 2. In Galatians 2:16 Paul declares, “... a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.” Then, a few verses later, in Galatians 2:21, Paul concludes, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 502.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, James had initially been among Jesus’ skeptics. See John 7:1-5.

<sup>25</sup> “James uses Peter’s Hebrew name in its Hebrew form.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1856 footnote on Acts 15:14.

<sup>26</sup> Συμεών = Simeon, i.e., “Semitic (יונה) name.” Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 957). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>27</sup> “... a people for his name from the Gentiles.” This may be who Jesus was referring to in John 10:16, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” See Bruce’s comment in Darrell L. Bock *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 502.

<sup>28</sup> “God’s hope does not call for proselytes to Judaism but for a fresh work in Jesus.” Darrell L. Bock citing Larkin, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 504.

<sup>29</sup> We can see here how Luke is being intentionally selective in Acts 15. Rather than recording the entire debate verbatim, he is including the key arguments that informed their final decision.

written: <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> “ ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’—things known from long ago.” <sup>32</sup> In other words, the Old Testament Scriptures had predicted salvation for the Gentiles long ago. <sup>33</sup>

James then pretty much tells the Christian Pharisees, these dear fellow brothers in Christ, “to STOP bothering the Gentiles!” <sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup> In Acts 15:19-20 James concludes, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 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.”

Now, all four of these stipulations in verse 20, are directly connected to pagan worship practices. The concern was that these particular things might trip up these Gentiles in their newfound Christian faith. First, we have...

**1) Food polluted by idols.** The Apostle Paul explains this concern in 1 Corinthians 8:7-13, “...Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” <sup>36</sup> A 2<sup>nd</sup> connection to pagan worship practices was...

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<sup>30</sup> “in agreement” >>> συμφωνέω = “fit (in) with, match (with), agree with” or even match in sound or harmonize. Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., pp. 960–961). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>31</sup> “Literally means ‘share the same sound,’ and thus ‘match’ or ‘agree.’” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 503.

<sup>32</sup> “James shows deference and sensitivity in the debate by citing the Greek version of the Old Testament text, which the Gentiles would recognize.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 504.

<sup>33</sup> **James affirms 2 things: 1) God is the one who chose to save the Gentiles** without any requirement of circumcision or following the law of Moses. **2) Gentile inclusion is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.** In other words, including Gentiles was NOT a change or contradiction to Scripture, but rather a fulfillment of it. The Early Church was experiencing a unique transition moment in the God’s Redemptive Plan. (See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2250 footnote on Acts 15:13-21.)

“The prophets affirm what is taking place now. So both divine events [*the Holy Spirit and miracles among the Gentiles*] and Scripture sustain the church’s inclusion of Gentiles.” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 504.)

<sup>34</sup> “... (v. 19). God’s initiative must be appreciated for what it is; a full inclusion of Gentiles without making them Jews.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 493.

<sup>35</sup> “In effect, James agrees with Peter’s point in 15:10.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 505.

<sup>36</sup> See also Revelation 2:14, 20.

**2) Sexual immorality.** Sexual activity was a common practice in the pagan temples. And culturally, sexual immorality was a sin taken FAR “too lightly by the Greeks.”<sup>37</sup> Back then, going to a pagan temple to worship an idol, often involved having sex with a shrine prostitute. Not only was sexual immorality sinful, but it also created a temptation to return to pagan worship. The 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> connections to the pagan worship practices were...

**3/4) The meat of strangled animals and blood:** I lumped these two together because they are both about BLOOD. It’s a little gross, but when you kill an animal by strangling it, it retains the blood. Eating blood, was forbidden for the Jewish people.<sup>38</sup> Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” *The NIV Study Bible* has a helpful explanation about the significance of blood in Jewish thinking: “The blood shed in the sacrifices was sacred. It epitomized the life of the sacrificial victim. Since life was sacred, blood (a symbol of life) had to be treated with respect...Eating blood was therefore strictly forbidden....”<sup>39</sup> By contrast, many pagan people groups throughout history thought that they could “increase the life-force within them by eating...the blood.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, the phrase at the very end of verse 20, “from blood,” may actually be referring to “consuming blood apart from meat.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, we can see how eating blood may very well have been a trigger, that could have reminded these Gentiles of their former pagan practices.

The point of all of this, is that the Jerusalem Council was deeply concerned, that these precious Gentile believers, who were SO young in their faith, might get tripped up by their former pagan worship practices. The four stipulations in verse 20, are not meant to be rules for salvation though. Rather, they are necessary safeguards. They offered 2 SAFEGUARDS:<sup>42</sup> First of all, 1) To protect the Gentiles from stumbling spiritually. And secondly, 2) To enhance relationships within the culturally blended church. James makes an interesting statement in Acts 15:21, “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.” The point he seems to be making, is that Jews were living in almost every city, and they would likely be confused, if not outright offended, if these new Gentile believers behaved in such barbaric and inappropriate ways.<sup>43</sup> Also, since the law of Moses had been preached everywhere, these food distinctions and beliefs

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<sup>37</sup> “...and also associated with certain pagan religious festivals.” *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1856 footnote on Acts 15:20.

<sup>38</sup> See Genesis 9:4.

<sup>39</sup> “...Practically every sacrifice included the splashing of blood against the altar or the sprinkling of blood within the tabernacle...thus teaching that atonement involves the substitution of life for life. The blood of the Old Testament sacrifice pointed forward to the blood of the Lamb of God, who obtained for his people ‘eternal redemption.’” See Hebrews 9:12, 22. *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 pp. 181-182 footnote on Leviticus 17:11.

<sup>40</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 22 footnote on Genesis 9:4.

<sup>41</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1856 footnote on Acts 15:20.

<sup>42</sup> “The limitations are probably to keep relations from becoming strained in a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles as well as to warn about association with idolatry.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 506.

<sup>43</sup> For example, the very idea of the Gentiles eating blood, probably grossed out their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

about blood, would likely be well known to most Gentiles; therefore, these four stipulations wouldn't come as any surprise to them.<sup>44</sup> The Jerusalem Council offered these stipulations, as reasonable and helpful guidelines, in order to help the new, blended church get off to a good start. What we see here is the application of godly, practical wisdom for the challenge at hand. These four stipulations “were in areas where the Gentiles had particular weaknesses and where the Jews were particularly repulsed by Gentile violations.”<sup>45</sup> It would help both the individual, and [the community] the relationship between Gentile and Jew, if these requirements were observed.”<sup>46 47</sup>  
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It would be wise for us Christ-followers at E-Free Bemidji, to apply this same kind of godly, practical wisdom, to issues of our own day. For example, we should be asking how we might help Christ-followers from a Muslim background, assimilate into the Christian faith? Can Christians from a Muslim background still participate in Ramadan, and the 30 days of fasting? If so, in what ways? Should there be certain limits or boundaries to this participation? These kinds of concerns call for godly, practical wisdom.

Another obvious example, which is more prominent in the Bemidji area, is regarding those of us who come from a Native American background. How do we decide which Native beliefs and practices can be incorporated into the Christian faith, and which cannot? For example, should Christian Native Americans participate in pow-wows or sweat lodges, or other Native traditions? If not, why not? If so, to what degree? These kinds of concerns call for godly, practical wisdom. (It's one of the reasons we need events like the United in Christ Conference, which is coming to Bemidji July 15-17.)

We could also broaden this application of godly, practical wisdom to other areas of church life, areas that go well beyond just cultural concerns. Recently, our church diligently tried to apply godly, practical wisdom to the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to make all kinds of decisions about social distancing and face-coverings, about church autonomy vs. respecting our governing authorities. Not all of us agreed, on HOW and WHEN to practice these various protocols, but we did our very best to “Navigate the Middle Ground.” Navigating the Middle Ground means giving our absolute best effort to pleasing God, while at the same time loving one another.

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<sup>44</sup> *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2251 footnote on Acts 15:21.

<sup>45</sup> Acts 21:25 shows that this list continued to be used in future situations.

<sup>46</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011 p. 1856 footnote on Acts 15:19.

<sup>47</sup> “There is a cultural sensitivity here where the issue is not establishing a fixed set of practices but respecting the practices of others and not forcing oneself on another because of such views.” Darrell L. Bock citing Larkin, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 507.

<sup>48</sup> These stipulations “display a cross-cultural concern that leads to harmony.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 507.

<sup>49</sup> This is similar to what we find in Romans 14-15.

Well, that's enough application for now. Let's finish up today's text. Acts 15:22-35 concludes, "Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter.<sup>50 51 52</sup> The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord."

One of the things I find most intriguing about the content of this letter, is what it DOESN'T say. The letter from the Jerusalem Council doesn't come out and explicitly say, "Gentiles DON'T need to be circumcised." But apparently, that was understood, since it was clearly implied by the rest of the contents of the letter. In other words, after the main decision was made, not to require circumcision, the council then decided to FOCUS the letter on the important questions of Navigating Middle Ground for this new culturally blended church.<sup>53 54</sup>

I also absolutely LOVE the Gentile Christians' response to this letter! They don't even flinch at these stipulations. In fact, they welcome them. Acts 15:31 says, "The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message." They were glad to get some clarity, but they were also glad to set up safeguards that would help them leave their empty pagan religion behind. All the idol worship, all the bloody customs, all the

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<sup>50</sup> This letter would not only be shared with the local church in Antioch, but also with the churches that Paul and Barnabas had planted all throughout the region. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015 p. 2251 footnote on Acts 15:22-35.

<sup>51</sup> "Acts 16:4 suggests that other communities are informed as well." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 511.

<sup>52</sup> You see, the Jerusalem Council wasn't just setting policy for one particular local church, they were making arrangement for this new, blended, Christian community. They were applying godly, practical, wisdom to the immediate and obvious challenge of bringing Jews and Gentiles together into one family.

<sup>53</sup> See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 491.

<sup>54</sup> The letter results in "a compromise sensitive to Jewish conscience." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 492.



immoral sex. They were also glad to lovingly place the concerns of their newfound Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ, before their own spiritual rights and freedoms. What a powerful example for us today!<sup>55 56</sup>

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may we demonstrate this same kind of godly, practical wisdom, here at E-Free Bemidji. Let's learn to Navigate the Middle Ground!

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<sup>55</sup> It seems that the Gentiles aren't told to flaunt their dietary and Sabbath freedoms, while at the same time the Jews aren't scolded for continuing to practice them. Neither culture needs to impose its personal convictions and practices of these secondary items. The Gentiles weren't forced to become Jews but neither were the Jews forced to become Gentiles. In other words, nobody was forcing the Jewish Christians to become more Gentile either.

<sup>56</sup> One author summarizes the various lessons that we can learn from the Jerusalem Council: "Christian fellowship means that grace should be shown for differences that are not central to the truth of salvation, as an expression of love. This deference preserves the church and protects it from fragmentation....[The Apostle Paul has been described] as being hard, even adamant, on the gospel but soft and flexible when it comes to love...an iron pillar in essentials and a reed in nonessentials." Darrell L. Bock, Acts, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 508.