CORNERSTONECONNECTIONS
MARCH07 2026

Scripture Story: Acts 15:1-17.
Commentary: *The Acts of the Apostles* (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19-21.

us and them



Photo by Colleen Cahill

flashlight

"The traditions and maxims of men must not take the place of revealed truth. The advance of the gospel message must not be hindered by the prejudices and preferences of men, whatever might be their position in the church" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 200).

keytext

"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? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

(Acts 15:10, 11, NIV)

what do you think?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

____ "Holding to human traditions is more of a problem in the church today than racial prejudice."

____ "Legalism is more deadly to church life than apathy."

How do the issues the church faces also reflect the problems the human race faces? Explain your response.

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did you know?

The word used to describe anyone who was not a Jew was "Gentile." The Greek word ethnos (where we get the word "ethnic") refers to nations or people, but the distinction Jews made heightened national or ethnic differences. God's purpose was to use the Jews as an entry point to bring the knowledge of the true God into all the world. Instead, many simply accepted the privilege and not the purpose, which led to the creation of "insiders" (Jews) and "everyone else" (Gentiles).



INTO THE STORY

"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.' 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.

"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. 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.'

"The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 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. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 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? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.'

"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. When they finished, James spoke up. 'Brothers,' he said, 'listen to me. Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "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."'"

(Acts 15:1-17, NIV)

OUT OF THE STORY

Read the story and *underline* what you think are key phrases to understanding what this passage is about.

Draw a circle around all of the individuals and people groups mentioned in this story.

Describe what you see as the social and religious dynamics that are going on in the New Testament church at this time.

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Who are these "certain men" who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised? What do you see as their spiritual focus?

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Why did Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem, and why do you think they went through Gentile territory on their way to counsel with the apostles in Jerusalem?

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What is the yoke that Peter referred to in verse 10?

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After Peter speaks to the assembled leaders of the Christian church, Paul and Barnabas add their stories of Gentile believers they have met in their journeys. How do you think these stories impacted the congregation? How are such stories important to the decisions we make?

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What do you think God is trying to say to us today in this story?

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punch lines

"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all" **(Romans 4:16, NIV).**

"All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations" **(Psalm 22:27, 28, NIV).**

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" **(Genesis 12:3, NIV).**

"In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" **(Romans 9:8, NIV).**

"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" **(Galatians 3:29, NIV).**

further insight

"The greater the responsibilities placed upon the human agent, and the larger his opportunities to dictate and control, the more harm he is sure to do if he does not carefully follow the way of the Lord and labor in harmony with the decisions arrived at by the general body of believers in united council."

—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles,* p. 199

Sabbath

Read Romans 4:16.

Read and respond to the voting exercise in the *What Do You Think?* section of this week's lesson. This week's lesson deals with several themes: prejudice, gospel mission, legalism, church politics, and more. The closer you get to the lives of new disciples and to church life and mission, the more you see the problems. Perhaps one of the greatest problems they had to overcome was their prejudices about traditions. How have you found that still to be true today? But how do we break out of our rut? What changes do you think must be made in our hearts and minds before we can see others differently?

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Sunday

Read Psalm 22:27, 28.

Read the *Into the Story* portion and use the questions in the Out of the Story section to guide your study. The story is a look at the real church—one with obstacles and problems that need to be worked out as people are doing the mission of Christ.

How are the conflict and conversations of the New Testament church similar to the ones you hear in your part of the world? In what way are these problems universal and part of a "human problem"? What can we learn from this council of believers that might help us stay focused on the work we are called to do? What do you sense God is trying to teach you in this story?

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Monday

Read Acts 15:10, 11.

The Key Text to memorize this week emphasizes that the way to salvation is the same for everyone. There is an "us and them" mentality that cannot be avoided when doing the mission of Christ. There are those who believe and those who don't know. How we see "them" should be framed by how God saved "us." Through the lens of God's grace we see the people of the world not as different people with different problems, but as possibilities. How do you react when you hear mission stories or testimonies of people coming to find Christ?

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Tuesday

Read Genesis 12:3.

Read the quote in the *Flashlight* section and see if you can find anyone who disagrees with it in principle. But in practice, how do you define and distinguish "traditions" from helpful practices of the Christian life? Everyone has their preferences and prejudices, but how do we look past those and give our effort to the task of reaching the lost? What are some of your prejudices and preferences that you should be aware of?

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Whom do you know who can put their preferences behind them for the greater cause of bringing people to Christ? How do they do it?

Wednesday

The Punch Lines in this week's lesson focus on the relationship between believers and unbelievers—or those who haven't yet heard the gospel. If you had to address a room full of missionaries that were going out to share the message of Christ to your part of the world. Check the verse in the list of five that you think would be the most helpful or important to share with them? Star the verse that speaks to you personally today as you think about your friends who don't know Christ as their personal Savior. Perhaps you could pray today for an opening, a window to share your personal experience of God's saving grace to someone else.

Thursday

Read Romans 9:8.

This week's lesson captures the drama that comes as a result of many people working for a meaningful cause. There wouldn't be problems if the task didn't mean so much to the people involved. So as you look at the problems your church faces today—the big problems like the issues the New Testament church faced—what can you do to be helpful? One of the things that helped Paul and Barnabas and James and Peter sort this problem out was the reminder to stay focused on the mission.

If you were to say what the mission of your church is in 50 words or less, what would you say? Write your mission statement out based on what you believe and know to be true, and keep it before you in your Bible or where you can see it every day as a reminder.

Friday

Read Galatians 3:29.

Read this story and imagine the faces of James, the brother of Jesus, Peter, and the new guys Paul and Barnabas. Imagine a whole boardroom of believers, deacons, and elders. Many of them have full-time jobs and shops, or might be unemployed now that they have become Christians. There are no "Bibles," only people writing letters and connecting stories of old to the amazing things that are currently happening. Was church then and church today really all that different? In what ways? In what ways will it always be the same?

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this week's reading*

The Acts of the Apostles (or *Unlikely Leaders*), chapters 19-21.

* Unlikely Leaders is a special adaptation of *The Acts of the Apostles* created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press. Get more information about it at http://www.cornerstoneconnections.net/article/191/about-us/conflict-of-the-ages-companion-books#.URlhF1rBO9s. By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.