



# to the ENDS of the EARTH

Studies in the Book of Acts

Sermon-Based Study Guide  
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Acts 15.1-21 | January 8, 2017

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## I. Introduction to this Study

This week we resume our series To the Ends of the Earth, picking up where we left off in the Book of Acts in November. If you would like to catch up, previous weeks' study guides are available online at [gspc.org/recent-messages](http://gspc.org/recent-messages).

Click on this symbol to download previous studies in PDF:



## II. Connecting with One Another

Recall a time you had a significant disagreement that was, ultimately, resolved. How was the resolution reached?

## III. Study the Text

### a. Before engaging chapter 15, read Acts 14.21-28.

How would you characterize these verses? What is the mood or feeling you get? Why?

### b. Read Acts 15.1.

While it's tempting to disregard these folks from Judea and Antioch as conservative reactionaries, we should at least understand their motivation. While they affirm that Israel's covenant included blessing all people (Genesis 12.3) and want to share their faith with Gentiles, the centuries-old sign of welcome into the covenant was circumcision – a ritual in which Jesus himself participated (as we saw in last week's study of Luke 2).

Will Willimon writes, "Without circumcision, how could a gentile possible participate in the blessings promised to the covenant people; in short, how could they be saved? The concern is not over racial exclusion but covenant inclusion... How dare Paul, Barnabas, and the church at Antioch take it upon themselves to abrogate these sacred demands?"

Read Genesis 17.1-27, 21.4, and Joshua 5.2-8.

How do you think Paul and Barnabas will react to this teaching? Why?

What cultural dos and don'ts have we added to the gospel?

### c. Read Acts 15.2-4.

While the folks from Judea and Antioch were thinking of the above passages, perhaps Paul and Barnabas were thinking of these: Isaiah 2.2-3, 25.6-8, 56.6-7, 60.2-22, and Zechariah 8.23.

And yet, instead of immediately engaging in theological debate, Paul and Barnabas are appointed to "go up to Jerusalem."

Why do they do so? What do you think of this decision?

- d. It's been written of verse 2, "Once again, when there is a dispute about innovation or new twists in the task of applying the gospel to contemporary challenges, our missionaries touch base with apostolic authority in Jerusalem, with normative tradition." What is our version of "apostolic authority" or "normative tradition"? How do we "touch base" on our own "contemporary challenges"?
- e. Read Acts 15.5-11.  
Peter asks, "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?"  
What do you think he means by that?  
William Larkin explains, "with respect to obtaining salvation, the responsible keeping of the law is futile." Paul clarifies this perspective in Galatians 3.10-14.  
How does that passage in Galatians help you understand Peter's impromptu sermon? (time permitting, see also Matthew 11.28-30)
- f. Read Acts 15.12.  
How do you think Paul and Barnabas' report on the "signs and wonders" influenced those listening in silence? Why?
- g. Read Acts 15.13-19.  
James, the half-brother of Jesus, was chief elder, and as such, may have been the chair of the meeting. This may explain why he "answers," the literal word used in verse 13 (though some translations have him merely "speaking up").  
In verse 14, he echoes Deuteronomy 14.2, which reads, "you are a people holy to the Lord your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the Lord has chosen you to be his treasured possession." (see also Exodus 19.5, Deuteronomy 7.6, 26.18-19)  
Why is quoting Deuteronomy 14.2 a bold thing to do?
- h. In verses 16-18, James quotes Amos 9.11-12.  
"Rightly interpreted the rebuilt Davidic tent refers to a restored Israel, which in the person of Jewish Christians God chooses to inaugurate the Gentile mission. That was, after all, the purpose of Israel's restoration: *that the remnant of men may seek the Lord.*"  
How does this restoration inform Good Shepherd's evangelistic efforts?
- i. It has been written, "The method of debate in 15.7-21 is a useful guide for how the church ought to argue." Reread these verses, noting below the principles that guide this discussion.
- j. Will Willimon writes, "New *revelation* along with confirmation by *experience* and with testing by *Scripture* are the proper measurements for the church. A church without these three standards is unable to have a good argument. All differences must be suppressed, and we dare not admit them for fear that the church be destroyed by our

debate, since we have no commonly recognized authority for adjudicating our disputes. Congeniality and openmindedness become the only values for a church without authority, values which ultimately prove inadequate for keeping the church faithful. Appeals to revelation, Scriptures, and experience do not settle the church's inner differences. But these three criteria determine the boundaries for our debates. They are the ultimate court of appeal."

Where do you agree or disagree with Willimon? Why?

k. Read Acts 15.19-21.

What do you think of James' "judgment"?

Why do you think he included things to abstain from?

l. If you'd like to dig into this study even further, read Galatians 2, where Paul reflects upon this event in Acts 15.

#### IV. Pray

a. Pray that Good Shepherd would continue to be and become a community that tests revelation and experience by the truth of Scripture,

b. Ask God to equip and empower you to invite those you know into a Christ-centered life in God's family,

c. Lift up those who feel "outside" of faith, who have encountered barriers to being welcomed into the church.

#### Weekly Reading Schedule

Monday, January 2nd	Acts 15.1-11
Tuesday, January 3rd	Acts 15.12-21
Wednesday, January 4th	Acts 15.22-35
Thursday, January 5th	Acts 15.36-41
Friday, January 6th	Acts 16.1-5