

# WORKING TOWARDS UNITY

## Acts 15.1-35

In the ancient world, there was a sharp divide between the Jews and the Gentiles. Now that the Gentiles have come to faith in YHWH, the God of Israel, how could these groups coexist?

How can unity exist with plurality? Put differently, how can we be “one body” even though we see some things differently?

### **The church must repeat and clarify the Gospel message**

Acts 15 features a debate between professing believers. We can think of this as an inner church dispute. Do the Gentiles need to be circumcised to be full members of God’s family (See D. Harper’s sermon on Galatians from June 2, 2024)?

When a group insists on this “work” for admission, they shift to a man-centered means of getting right with God. This nullifies the sufficiency of Christ’s work. It “unsettles the mind” because more is always demanded (Acts 15.24). What kinds of teachings undermine the gospel message?

Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James all speak in this chapter to reinforce the idea that there is one people of God consisting of Jews and Gentiles. Notice how Peter uses the phrase “just as” to bring everyone together. God’s grace levels all people before the cross.

Conflict allows for clarification of what the Gospel is and how we work together for our Lord’s mission.

### **We must practice the “one anothers”**

James contributed a few stipulations to the discussion. He suggests dietary restrictions and sexual boundaries (Acts 15.20). Why are there restrictions in these areas? These issues were associated with pagan temple rituals and would have been particularly offensive to Jewish people. They were clearly areas of tension for table fellowship. James appeals to the sensibilities of the Gentile believers to think of the consciences of the Jewish believers. In sum, these stipulations considered the growth of others. Mindfulness of others is a mark of a loving church.

All believers are called to live in obedience to Jesus, which is something entirely different from a man-centered view of salvation.

We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. In other words, we come to God by faith and then obey as His sons and daughters.

We always want to think of our brothers and sisters and not act provocatively. “We do well” to serve others (Acts 15:29; Cf. Philippians 2.3).

### **We can “please the Holy Spirit and us”**

How did this group come to agreement? “The whole church” moved together (Acts 15.22).

They sat under God’s authoritative Word (Acts 15.16-17).

They observed what God had done and was doing (Acts 15.7-12).

Those in leadership spoke with godliness and direction.

They sensed that the proposed way forward best honored God.

**Key Point:** Gospel clarity brings Gospel unity.

### **Small Group Application Questions:**

Examine and discuss the contributions of Peter, Paul & Barnabas, and James to this debate?  
On what is there wide agreement?

What did the Reformer Luther mean when he wrote “Concerning faith, we ought to be invincible and more hard, if possible, than the adamant stone; but as for love, we ought to be soft, and more flexible than the reed or leaf that is shaken in the wind, and ready to yield to everything” (Commentary on Galatians 2.8). How does this apply to the decisions of Acts 15?

How can long time Christians fall into the trap of adding to the Gospel?