

ACTS

GROUP GUIDE: WEEK 5

CONVERSATION STARTER

If you could call up anyone in the world and have a one-hour conversation, who would you call and why?

A TURNING POINT FOR THE EARLY CHURCH

Tensions reach a boiling point for the early Church as Paul shares a message of salvation and forgiveness of sins to both Jews and Gentiles. He talks about a family of God no longer defined by nationality or ethnicity but open to everyone regardless of their heritage. The Jews, on the other hand, taught that the only way to be part of God's family was to become Jewish through the rite of circumcision. And as the message of Jesus spread like wildfire through the Gentiles, the movement reached a crisis point.

Paul, his partner Barnabas, and other representatives gather in Jerusalem to talk about the issue. The central question at the heart of the Council of Jerusalem is how to handle the Gentiles who want to worship the God of Israel—do we have to be Jewish to follow Jesus? On one side are those who believe that salvation comes through works—keeping the law by circumcision, for example. Others, including Peter, argued that salvation was a matter of faith. Just as Abraham was justified through his *belief*, we too, are justified not by what we do, but through our trust in God. By the end of the debate, they all agreed. God's grace and salvation were open to all people as they are, with faith in Jesus as the only requirement for entry.

Take a moment to discuss these ideas with your group. We know that justification comes through trust in God, not what we do, but we don't always act like this is true. Are there times you slip into a mindset of believing you need to earn God's love or acceptance? How might our culture unintentionally reinforce that message today?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
2. The middle of Acts is a story about the Gospel spreading to new frontiers. Where do you sense God nudging you to share the good news about Jesus both within your community and beyond it?
3. The Jerusalem Council was called as a way to settle a deep divide within the early church. What can we learn from this story about how to handle conflict today?
4. Are there ways we may be unintentionally making it harder for people to come and worship God? What responsibility does the church have to identify and remove unnecessary barriers to faith?
5. We know salvation comes through faith alone, but what role do works play in our faith journey? Read [James 2:17-26](#) together. What is the relationship between faith and works? Do you think God cares about how we live?

WEEKLY PRACTICE

For at least a moment in Acts, it would appear as if the church was of one mind and Spirit, united in the name of Jesus Christ. Even in Acts, the Spirit of unity doesn't last all that long. Today, centuries after these events in Acts, the Church continues to face divisions and debates over all sorts of things, including social issues, theological issues, issues surrounding culture, and more. Today, spend a few moments in prayer for the Church. Pray that we would once again find the kind of unity of mission and Spirit as we encounter in Acts 15. If you're unsure what to pray, consider these words from the Book of Common Prayer as inspiration:

O gracious God, we pray for your holy Church universal,
that you would be pleased to fill it with all truth, in all peace.
Where it is corrupt, purify it;
where it is in error, direct it;
where in any thing it is amiss, reform it;
where it is right, establish it;
where it is in want, provide for it;
where it is divided, reunite it;
for the sake of him who died and rose again,
and ever lives to make intercession for us,
Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.