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The Council's Letter to the Gentile Believers 15: 22-35

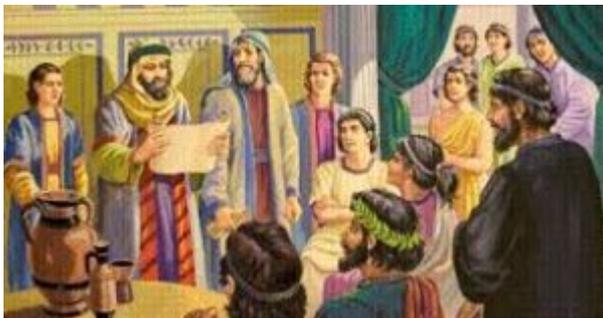
48 AD

The Council's letter to the Gentile believers DIG: Why would a letter and representatives from the Messianic Community in Jerusalem be a good way to communicate the apostles' decision? What is the tone of the letter? What are the main points? How do Judas and Silas personally add to this letter? What else brings unity to the Messianic Community in Jerusalem and the primarily Gentile church in Antioch? How would things be different if the Pharisees who wanted to add circumcision and taking on the yoke of the Torah (15:5) had won out? How is abstaining from unhealthy practices different from the practice of pure legalism?

REFLECT: From the debate, the resulting letter, and the way in which it was delivered, what do you learn about the way to solve disagreements among believers? How is your style of handling disagreements similar to the way the issue was handled in Chapter 15 or different from it. In your community's Messianic community or churches, what are the ethnic, social, and racial lines of division? What is your relationship like with believers from different places of worship? How might verses 30-33 be a model for unity within diversity? In light of 1:8, how important is it to work for this kind of relationship?

The Council agreed with **James'** summary (**to see link click Bs - The Council at Jerusalem: The Decision**). Then it seemed good to the apostles (those in authority over the universal **Messianic Community/Church**) and elders (those in authority over the local **Messianic community in Jerusalem**). The combination of prophetic Scripture and **apostolic** experience seemed conclusive to **them**, as it had done with **James**. And **James'** proposal of **Gentile** abstinence in four culturally sensitive areas seemed a wise policy to promote mutual tolerance and fellowship.³⁴³ It is apparent that at some point a vote was taken and **the whole community**

voted unanimously **to choose leading men from among themselves to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to** authenticate and represent the **Jerusalem Council** regarding **their** report. It seems that **those of the circumcision (15:24)**, who disagreed with the majority decision, abstained from voting, although without bitterness or revenge. **The whole community** decided to **send Judah (also called Barsabbas, meaning *son of the Shabbat*)** of whom we know nothing more, **and Silas**, which was **his Jewish** name (and Silvanus, which was **his** Roman name, who became the companion of **Paul** on **his** second missionary journey), **leading men among the brethren (15:22)**, and **this letter**, in the proper form of an official document, **along with them:**



“The apostles and the elders, your brothers (members of the Messianic community), To the Gentile brothers of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia where **Paul** had ministered and taught during his first missionary journey: **Greetings (15:23)!**” This letter was written specifically to these **churches** where **Jews** and **Gentiles** were mixed together and faced those tough questions.

We have heard that some from among us have troubled you with words disturbing (Greek: *anaskeuazo*, is a military metaphor for *plundering a town*) **to your souls, although we gave them no such authorization. These men were those of the [sect] of circumcision (15:24). They** were **Pharisees** who were **believers**, but mistakenly wanted the **Gentile** converts to be circumcised and keep the Torah and all its 613 commandments, in addition to **the Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law**). But **they** were acting on **their own** without **the endorsement** or **approval** of **the apostles** or **the elders** of **the Messianic community in Jerusalem**. So here we have a complete disclaimer and repudiation of **those of the circumcision** attempt to impose **circumcision, the Torah** and **the Oral Law** on the **Gentile believers**.

Today there are all kinds of sects and denominations that likewise lead people down

the wrong path by unscriptural teaching like the Hebrew Roots Movement. Some Christian pastors beat the sheep with things like attending movies is a sin, or that observing one day rather than another as a day of worship is a sin, or that drinking even a small amount of alcohol is a sin. Fundamentalist Christianity gets a bad name from misguided teachers who lay a heavier yoke on **believers** than our **Lord Yeshua** has done.³⁴⁴ This amounts to a Christian **Oral Law!**

Therefore, it seemed good to us, having come to one accord (it seems that **those of the circumcision** decided to abstain and not to vote against the majority), **to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul** (the only reason **Barnabas** is listed first here is because it is **the leaders of the Messianic community** who were writing this letter and to **them Barnabas** was the more prominent one) - **men who have risked their lives in Pisidian Antioch** (see **Bo - Paul's Message in Pisidian Antioch**) and **Lystra** (see **Bq - Paul's Message in Lystra**), **for the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah (15:25-26).**

We therefore have sent to you Judah and Silas as witnesses (**Second Corinthians 13:1**), **who themselves will report to you the same things by word of mouth** since a letter could be a forgery. Despite **Paul and Barnabas'** status, **Judas and Silas** appear to represent the **Jerusalem community's** official delegates because **Paul and Barnabas** were still considered to be under the immediate authority of **the Messianic community** in **Tziyon**.³⁴⁵

It seemed good to the Ruach ha-Kodesh (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Kv - The Spirit Will Guide You Into All Truth**) **and to us not to place on you any greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. By keeping away from these things, you will do well. Shalom (15:27-29)!"** These four **essentials** were merely a basis for fellowship between **Jewish** and **Gentile believers**. There were two books in the Bible that were byproducts of the Council of **Jerusalem's** decision. One was the book of **James (Jacob)** and the other was the book of **Galatians**.

After **the delegates** had received **their** instructions from the **Jerusalem Council**, **Paul and Barnabas** of **the church** of **Antioch**, and **Judah and Silas** of **the Messianic community** of **Jerusalem** were **sent off**, **they went down to Syrian Antioch**; and when they had gathered the whole group together, they **delivered the letter**. **The people read it** out loud, **and rejoiced over its**

encouragement (15:30-31). We can imagine how those **Gentile believers** felt, wondering how the decision would be handed down. Would the **Jerusalem** Council decide that they were really not **saved** after all because **they** didn’t submit to **circumcision**, Levitical **Judaism** and **the Oral Law**? But when **they** heard the contents of the letter, it was an overwhelming feeling of relief to know that **they** were **saved** and right with **God** after all.³⁴⁶

Judah and Silas, prophets themselves, encouraged the brothers and sisters with a long message and strengthened them. In **15:41 Paul and Silas** will travel through **the churches** of **Syria** and **Cilicia** to **strengthen** those **believers**. In **18:23** it is **the churches** in **Galatia** and **Phrygia** that are **strengthened**.³⁴⁷ It was very clear that salvation was **grace through faith** (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). **After spending some time there, they were sent off with shalom by the brothers and sisters in Syrian Antioch to those who had sent them in Jerusalem (15:32-33).**

Verse 15:34 is omitted from the best manuscripts. It reads, “It seemed good to **Silas** to remain there (in Antioch).” This is probably a scribe’s attempt to explain how **Silas** can leave with **Paul** on the **Second Missionary Journey** in **verse 40**, if both men went back to **Jerusalem** in **verse 33**. There seems to be a discrepancy and that is why some scribe probably added **verse 34** to try (in his mind) to reconcile it. This ignores the fact after **Judah and Silas** went to **Jerusalem** some time could have passed and **Silas** could have easily returned to **Syrian Antioch** to accompany **Paul** on his **Second Missionary Journey**.

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Syrian Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord with many others (15:35). In other words, **they** continued **their** ministry where **the men of the circumcision** had interrupted it.

There were ten results of the Jerusalem Council:

- 1.** The gospel of **grace** was reaffirmed. Salvation = **faith** + nothing.
- 2.** The unity of **the Messianic Community/Church** was preserved, because this incident could have very easily split it into a **Jewish Community** and a **Gentile Church**.
- 3.** The evangelism of **the Gentiles** could now proceed. **The Messianic**

Community was now open to salvation by **grace through faith** apart from works, whether that is pagan works or Jewish works of circumcision or the Levitical sacrifices. This decision allowed **Paul** to go on **his Second and Third Missionary Journeys**.

4. The Gentile churches were encouraged.

5. The future of the universal **Church**, includes both **Jews** and **Gentiles: for Yeshua Himself is our shalom, the One who made the two one and broke down the middle wall of separation (Ephesians 2:14a)**.

6. The principle of freedom from legalism was established.

7. The problem that arose was settled by discussion, guided by **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**, which serves as a model for all disputes within **the congregation of God**.

8. The **Jerusalem** Council freed the gospel from the entanglement with Rabbinic Judaism, which included **circumcision**, the Levitical sacrificial system, and **the Oral Law**.

9. Gentile Christianity was confirmed as being valid.

10. There was the recognition of both **Messianic Jewish** missions and **Gentile** missions. This is true to this day.

Therefore, apostolic **church** survived the greatest challenge it had yet faced and established the doctrine of salvation by **grace**. The Adversary’s attempt to inject heretical teaching had failed. So also was his attempt to split the **Church** along racial and cultural lines. With the vitally important truth about salvation safeguarded, the universal **Church** experienced greater days of ministry than ever before.

There has always been, and always will be, only one way to be **saved**. No one expressed this truth any clearer than **Paul** when **he** wrote the familiar words: **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not from yourselves - it is the gift of God. It is not based on deeds, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)**.³⁴⁸