

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 15:1-35 AS A PARADIGM FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN TODAY GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of Acts 15:1–35, the account of the Jerusalem Council, as a paradigmatic model of conflict resolution in the early church. Drawing on historical, theological, and narrative approaches, the paper situates the council within the wider context of disputes over Gentile inclusion, circumcision, and adherence to the Mosaic law. The analysis highlights the roles of key participants—such as Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James—in framing arguments, appealing to Scripture, and employing deliberative dialogue. By comparing patristic, exegetical, and contemporary interpretations, the work demonstrates how the council's resolution reflects both continuity with Jewish tradition and openness to the Gentile mission. Special attention is given to conflict management strategies evident in the text, including listening, testimony, theological reasoning, and communal consensus. The study also engages with modern theories of negotiation, mediation, and interreligious conflict resolution to show the enduring relevance of Acts 15 for addressing divisions in contemporary religious and socio-political contexts. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Jerusalem Council exemplifies a balanced model of principled decision-making—anchored in Scripture, guided by the Spirit, and oriented toward unity without uniformity. This model not only provides theological insight into early Christian identity but also offers transferable lessons for managing conflict within modern ecclesial and interfaith communities.

Keywords: Exegetical, Acts 15:1-35, Paradigm, Conflict, Global and Resolution

Introduction

The Jerusalem Council, as narrated in Acts 15, is positioned as a crucial event in the history of the early Christian church. The theologian Ben Witherington described it as "the most pivotal

chapter in the whole book" of Acts, as it marks a decisive theological and narrative turning point. From this point forward, the narrative's focus shifts definitively to the mission to the Gentiles, led by the Apostle Paul (Seo 2024). The story of the Council at Jerusalem is not just a historical record but a literary "hinge," linking the first half of Acts, which focuses on the Jerusalem-centric mission and the prominence of Peter, with the second half, which follows Paul's missionary journeys and the gospel's spread throughout the broader Roman world (Story 2010).

The Genesis of the Dispute: Antioch and the Judaizers

The conflict that led to the Council at Jerusalem did not begin there but in Antioch, a burgeoning hub of Gentile Christianity. "Certain men which came down from Judaea" began teaching the Gentile believers there that salvation was contingent upon circumcision "according to the custom taught by Moses" (Seo 2024). This teaching was not a minor doctrinal point but a direct challenge to the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, who had been successfully evangelizing Gentiles without imposing the Law of Moses ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The dispute escalated into a "sharp dispute and debate" with these Pharisee Christians, prompting the Antioch church to make the "wise decision" to send delegates, including Paul and Barnabas, to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders on this matter (Seo 2024).

The conflict was more than a simple doctrinal disagreement; it was an immense socio-theological crisis. The core issue of circumcision was not only a theological marker of the Abrahamic covenant but also a primary cultural and social barrier ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The theological debate—"Can Gentiles be saved without becoming Jews?"—was a proxy for a practical, underlying problem: "How can law-observing Jewish Christians and law-ignoring Gentile Christians coexist?" (Mahan 2013). The "implied theology" of the Judaizers was that one

must first assimilate into Jewish culture and adhere to its laws to be a Christian, which posed a serious threat to the unity of the church and the universal spread of the gospel (Seo 2024).

The Participants and their positions

The Jerusalem Council featured a number of key leaders, each representing a distinct perspective on the issue of salvation and the Law. The "Pharisee Christians" held the legalistic view that Gentiles must be circumcised and follow the Law to be saved (Seo 2024). This position was seen as a dangerous teaching that attacked the integrity of the gospel and the principle of sola fide (salvation by faith alone) (Precept Austin 2025). Opposing them were Paul and Barnabas, who testified to God's work among the Gentiles and defended their freedom from the Mosaic Law ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025).

The most significant contributions to the resolution came from two other leaders. First, Peter delivered a pivotal speech in which he drew on his personal, divinely-initiated experience with the Gentile centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). Peter reminded the assembly that God had already shown acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, making no distinction between them and the Jews. He powerfully argued that imposing the Law on the Gentiles was a burden "that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear" and that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Peter's testimony was crucial because it shifted the discussion from an abstract theological debate to a matter of discerning God's direct, observable action (Seo 2024).

Finally, James the Just, as the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, provided the authoritative final judgment (Story 2010). James affirmed Peter's testimony, providing a scriptural justification by quoting from the prophet Amos, thereby aligning God's present work

with His promised redemptive plan for the Gentiles. His ruling proposed a collaborative solution that affirmed Paul's mission while requesting a minimal set of prohibitions from Gentile converts for the sake of fellowship and harmony with Jewish believers (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025).

The Core Issue: *Sola Fide* versus The Mosaic Law

At its heart, the Jerusalem Council resolved the most "momentous doctrinal question" of the early church: "What must a person do to be saved?". The debate was a direct confrontation between the principle of salvation by grace alone through faith alone (*sola fide*) and the requirement of works of the Mosaic Law (Precept Austin 2025). If the argument of the Pharisee Christians had been accepted, Christianity would have risked being reduced to a mere sect of Judaism, forever shackled by a complex system of laws that no one could fully obey (Seo 2024). The Council's decision to forbid the inclusion of works as a part of salvation "affirmed for all time the truth that salvation is wholly by God's grace through faith alone, apart from any human efforts" (Precept Austin 2025). This theological clarification was foundational to the Christian identity as a distinct faith, liberated from the ritual and legal requirements of Judaism.

The Resolution Process and the Apostolic Decree

The resolution process was a structured, multi-stage deliberation. The narrative suggests it involved at least three separate meetings over several days. The process began with Paul and Barnabas giving a report of "all that God had done" among the Gentiles (Seo 2024). This mission report, which led to both "great joy" and "protests," set the stage for the definitive debate. Following a period of "much discussion," Peter and then James spoke, providing their respective testimonies and scriptural justifications (Mahan 2013).

The final outcome was the Apostolic Decree, a formal letter that communicated the Council's decision to the Gentile churches ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The decree freed Gentile converts from the obligation of circumcision and most of the Mosaic Law but retained four prohibitions: "to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood" (Seo 2024). The entire process is presented in the book of Acts as a prime example of conflict-resolution–advance. The successful resolution of this internal conflict legitimized the Gentile mission and propelled the gospel forward into new geographical and ethnic territories, demonstrating how the church could find a divine solution to its internal disputes and thereby strengthen its mission. (Story 2010)

Scholarly Interpretations and Critical Perspectives

While the narrative of the Jerusalem Council appears straightforward, it has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate and critical inquiry. These discussions highlight the complexity of the text, its relationship to other New Testament writings, and its historicity.

The Acts versus Galatians Debate

A central point of contention among scholars is whether the Jerusalem Council of Acts ((Edling 2017)) is the same event as the visit to Jerusalem described by Paul in Galatians 2. The events share many similarities: both involve Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James; both address the core issue of Gentile converts and circumcision; and both result in the apostles' recognition of Paul's mission to the Gentiles (Keener 2025).

However, some scholars argue that the two accounts are contradictory. The narrative in Acts presents a harmonious and unanimous decision, whereas Galatians describes a more confrontational relationship, particularly concerning Paul's later rebuke of Peter in Antioch. This

has led some to question the historicity of Luke's account (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025). It is important to recognize that Acts and Galatians are different literary genres with different purposes. Galatians is a polemical letter from Paul, written to defend his authority and the gospel of grace against his opponents. Its focus is personal and confrontational (Keener 2025). In contrast, Acts is a historical narrative written by Luke to portray the unified, divinely guided expansion of the early church (Story 2010). Luke's narrative style appears to have a bias toward demonstrating harmony and consensus, as evidenced by his inclusion of arguments against circumcision but none in favor of it (Grace Communion International n.d.). Therefore, the apparent discrepancies may not represent a historical fabrication but a reflection of the different authors' literary and theological agendas.

The Historicity of the Council at Jerusalem

The historicity of Acts has been questioned due to the absence of explicit references to the Council in non-biblical historical sources. However, this historical silence is not considered sufficient to undermine the credibility of the event. The early Christian community was a small religious movement in the mid-1st century, and its internal doctrinal debates would likely have been viewed as minor by secular Roman historians (Bible Hub,2025). Furthermore, several points of evidence corroborate the plausibility of the Council's historicity. The consistent theological stance on Gentile inclusion found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (for example, Ignatius of Antioch) implies that such a definitive, unifying decision must have occurred. The presence of the passage in early and consistent manuscript traditions (such as Papyrus P45 and Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) confirms that the account was historically accepted from the earliest centuries and was not a later textual addition. Finally, archaeological

and historical data support the existence of a notable Jewish-Christian community in 1st-century Jerusalem, providing a plausible context for the meeting (Bible Hub n.d.).

The Purpose of the Apostolic Decree

The purpose and origin of the four prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree are a key area of scholarly debate (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025). There are main interpretations:

A Food Law Interpretation: This view, supported by certain manuscripts and early Christian traditions, holds that the decree was a food regulation aimed at ensuring table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (Moehlmann 1912). The prohibitions on eating blood and strangled animals are directly related to Jewish dietary laws. However, this interpretation is confronted by its apparent contradiction with Paul's advice in other letters, where he appears to grant Gentiles freedom regarding food (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025).

A Moral Law Interpretation: Some manuscripts, particularly the "Western" text tradition, omit or modify the prohibitions related to food, suggesting the decree was primarily a summary of fundamental moral precepts for new converts (Moehlmann 1912). The inclusion of sexual immorality alongside the other prohibitions supports this reading.

1. **A Fellowship Compromise:** This interpretation, which reconciles the others, posits that the decree served a dual purpose. The prohibitions were a practical, socio-theological compromise designed to enable "co-existential unity and diversity" between Jewish and Gentile believers. The prohibitions on blood and strangled meat, while not required for salvation, were essential to avoid violating the deep-seated cultural and religious sensibilities of Jewish Christians, thereby allowing them to share meals and community life with their Gentile counterparts (Mahan 2013). This worldview recognizes that the issue was

not purely theological but also centered on the practical matter of fellowship and ritual uncleanness.

The debate over the decree's purpose demonstrates the importance of textual criticism and the nuanced reading of the narrative. A holistic analysis suggests that the final decision was a creative and collaborative solution that affirmed the central theological truth of salvation by grace while making practical concessions for the sake of unity and shared community life.

Foundational Principles of Contemporary Conflict Resolution

To effectively compare the Jerusalem Council's process with modern models, it is necessary to first establish the foundational principles of contemporary conflict resolution. These principles provide a theoretical framework for analyzing and understanding disputes across various contexts.

Models of Conflict Management

Modern theories of conflict management often distinguish between two primary approaches. Khun and Poole's model identifies a distributive approach, which is a zero-sum, win-lose scenario where one party's gain is another's loss. In contrast, the integrative approach seeks to address the underlying needs and concerns of both parties to achieve a mutually beneficial, "win-win" solution. The integrative model is generally considered superior because it leads to more sustainable and positive outcomes (Communication Theory n.d.).

Rahim's Meta Model further refines these approaches by identifying five major styles for handling conflict: obliging, integrating, avoiding, dominating, and compromising. While each

style has its use, the most effective long-term solutions are typically found through collaborative and integrative methods (Communication Theory n.d.).

Five Core Styles

The five styles of conflict resolution represent a spectrum of responses (Communication Theory n.d.):

- i. **Accommodating:** This style involves putting the other party's needs first, often for the sake of maintaining peace on a minor issue.
- ii. **Avoiding:** This involves ignoring the conflict or taking a break from it, which can be useful for cooling off or gathering more information before engaging.
- iii. **Compromising:** In this style, both parties relinquish something to reach a quick solution. It is a middle ground where both sides give up some of their initial aspirations.
- iv. **Competing:** This is a win-lose approach focused solely on one's own goals, often at the expense of the relationship.
- v. **Collaborating:** This is the ideal style, where parties work together to find a novel solution that addresses the core concerns of all involved, creating a new, mutually beneficial outcome.

The research suggests a hierarchy of effectiveness, with collaboration being the most ideal, as it transcends the limitations of a simple compromise by focusing on creative solutions that satisfy all parties' fundamental interests.

Acts as a Paradigm for Conflict Resolution: A Comparative Analysis

The Jerusalem Council's process and outcome provide a compelling ancient paradigm for modern conflict resolution. Its success lay in its ability to navigate deeply held religious and cultural differences through a principled and collaborative approach. The Council's process was not a simple political negotiation but a structured deliberation guided by a shared commitment to a "higher calling" and the pursuit of a common goal. All parties, despite their disagreements, shared an identity "in Christ" and sought to "find the will of God" and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Story 2010). This shared, non-negotiable authority provided an objective standard for the discussion that transcended individual or factional interests ("Question about Acts 15: Council of Jerusalem" 2025).

The leaders, particularly Peter and James, acted as impartial facilitators. They did not simply impose a solution but instead guided the assembly through a process that allowed for open discussion and the presentation of evidence. Their final decision was not a personal judgment but was presented as the collective conclusion of the leaders and the Holy Spirit, which gave it moral and theological weight ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). This approach aligns with the modern concept of principled negotiation, which seeks to focus on underlying interests rather than rigid positions and to use objective criteria to guide the outcome. The Judaizers' position was "circumcision is necessary," while Paul's was "it is not." The council's resolution moved past these rigid positions by addressing the deeper interests of both groups: the Gentiles' need for salvation by grace and the Jewish Christians' need for fellowship and adherence to core religious sensitivities. A critical element of the Council's success was the use of narrative and personal testimony to build empathy and shift perspective (Mahan 2013). Paul and Barnabas recounted the miraculous "all that God had done with them" among the Gentiles (Calvin n.d.). Peter's account of God's saving of Cornelius was even more impactful, as it demonstrated God's direct

involvement in the matter (Seo 2024). The use of these stories humanized the conflict, moving it from a theoretical debate about the Law to an empirical observation of God's work. This aligns with modern conflict resolution strategies that use shared narratives and personal stories to bridge divides, foster understanding, and transform the opposing party from an abstract opponent into a fellow human being (Mason 2011).

The final decree was not a victory for one side but a collaborative, integrative solution. It affirmed the core of Paul's gospel of grace by removing the "heavy yoke" of the Mosaic Law from the Gentiles, while also requesting four concessions from the Gentiles for the sake of harmony and fellowship with Jewish believers (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025). This solution allowed for the "co-existential unity and diversity" of the church, recognizing that different cultures could maintain their unique identities while being bound by a higher, shared identity in Christ (Welch 2022). The resolution was not a simple compromise where each side lost something, but a creative, integrative outcome that satisfied the fundamental needs of all parties.

The following table provides a comparative analysis of the principles employed at the Jerusalem Council with contemporary conflict resolution theories.

Jerusalem Council Principle	Contemporary Theory/Principle	Description
Conflict instigated by outsiders (Edling 2017)	Root Cause Analysis	The conflict's origin was identified and addressed at

		the source in Antioch before a full-scale division could take root in the broader church.
Paul and Barnabas reporting God's work (Seo 2024)	The Power of Narrative/Testimony	Shared stories of God's action built empathy and a common purpose, moving the discussion from abstract doctrine to lived experience.
Peter's appeal to the Holy Spirit (Seo 2024)	Appeal to Objective Criteria	The group used a shared, non-partisan authority (God's actions and the Holy Spirit's guidance) to inform and legitimize their decision.
James's Scriptural justification ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025)	Shared Principles/Values	Finding common ground in a revered text (the prophets) provided a biblical basis for the new direction, fostering

		consensus among the leaders.
Apostolic Decree (“Council of Jerusalem” 2025)	Integrative Solution/Compromise	The solution was not a win-lose but a new, creative outcome that upheld the core gospel message while addressing the practical needs of both sides.
Delegates sent with the letter (Seo 2024)	Clear Communication/Follow-Through	The decision was formalized, written down, and personally delivered to ensure understanding, build trust, and prevent future disputes.

5. The Jerusalem Council's Principles Applied to Modern Global Conflicts

The principles derived from the Jerusalem Council can be applied to modern conflicts, particularly those rooted in religious, ethnic, and ideological differences.

Lessons for Religious and Ethnic Conflicts

Many modern conflicts, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Northern Ireland "Troubles," have deep ethnic and political roots that are often intertwined with religious identities and grievances ("Religious war" 2025). The Jerusalem Council provides a framework for resolving an *intra-religious* dispute by first identifying and addressing the theological issues separately from the political or ethnic dimensions. The Council's ability to distinguish between the core issue of salvation and the practical issue of fellowship provides a model for modern peacebuilders.

Religious leaders, by virtue of their credibility and non-partisan standing, can act as "credible peace brokers". As demonstrated in the Northern Ireland peace process, religious leaders appealed to "shared religious values" to convince their communities to pursue a negotiated peace (Glazier 2018). Similarly, the Jerusalem Council's model of consensus-building and finding a solution that respects the identities of different groups can provide a pathway for peaceful coexistence in conflicts where religious and ethnic divisions seem intractable (Welch 2022).

Lessons for Ideological and Cultural Disputes

The "culture wars" in Western societies are a secular analog to the Jerusalem Council, as they are conflicts over fundamental values and identity (EBSCO n.d.). The Council's emphasis on finding a "higher unity" and a shared identity to transcend the conflict is a powerful principle. The challenge in modern ideological disputes is finding a common, non-partisan principle that all parties can appeal to, as divine authority is not a shared framework (Kaufmann 2022). However, the Council's example of formalizing a decision and communicating it clearly and with humility can be a model for resolving these disputes and preventing escalation (Story 2010).

Conclusion

The success of the Jerusalem Council hinged on the wisdom and humility of its leaders (Bengtson 2025). Leaders like Peter and James demonstrated humility by listening to opposing views and seeking a biblically and divinely-guided solution rather than imposing a personal one (Calvin n.d). This stands in stark contrast to the "competing" style of conflict resolution and aligns with the need for impartiality, respect, and a focus on reconciliation over "winning the argument" (Communication Theory,2025).

While the Jerusalem Council offers valuable principles, a critical evaluation must acknowledge the significant challenges and limitations of applying an ancient, religiously-rooted model to modern, diverse, and often secular contexts. The Problem of Divine Authority in Secular Contexts.The most profound limitation is the Council's reliance on a shared belief in a divine initiative and a final decision attributed to "the Holy Spirit and we ourselves" ("Religious war" 2025). This religious framework, which provides an ultimate, non-negotiable authority, is not available in most modern, multi-faith or secular conflicts (Mason 2011). The epistemological gap between a framework based on revelation and one based on reason, negotiation, and power dynamics is immense. Therefore, while the *process* of the Council can be instructive, its core motivational and legitimizing force—divine authority—cannot be replicated. The model is more of an aspiration for what could be achieved with a shared worldview than a directly applicable methodology for a world with asymmetrical worldviews.

The Jerusalem Council was an internal conflict within a single, albeit nascent, religious tradition. Many modern conflicts, however, are between different faiths or between a faith and a secular system. These conflicts often involve "indivisible and non-compromising" issues such as the nature of the state, control over sacred sites, or the place of religion in public life. In such cases, a collaborative solution may be impossible (Mason 2011).Furthermore, applying a religious

conflict-resolution model can be problematic if it oversimplifies the conflict's origins. Focusing on the religious dimension can "obscure more deeply rooted causes" such as political, economic, or ethnic grievances (Silvestri and Mayall 2015). The Jerusalem Council was a conflict over salvation and fellowship, not territory or political power. Therefore, while its principles are valuable, they must be used as part of a broader, comprehensive strategy that addresses the full range of a conflict's root causes.

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