

Embracing Our Diversity
Acts 15:1-35 **(31 May 2026)**



What if this morning you walked into church and a woman was sitting in a pew by herself wearing a hijab – a Muslim head covering?

You remember Craig has begged you to greet new visitors – so you channel your inner Craig.

You introduce yourself and she says her name is Fatima – and she has just come to Christ from Islam.

But what if you then helpfully mention – I don't know if you know this Fatima but now you are a Christian you don't have to cover your head and wearing your hijab might make some of the less enlightened here feel uncomfortable.

Also, you do know you can now eat pork? – You don't know what you have been missing.

Here is the thing – you would be right – she doesn't **have** to wear a hijab – and she **can** eat pork.

But what have you just communicated to her?

Fatima – you won't really fit here unless you bare your head and eat some crackling with us.

Fatima probably knows she can now do these things – but it goes against her cultural heritage.

And it is not wrong for her to keep those things and she may well drop them in the years to come.

But if we impose our western culture as the standard – that might drive her away and it is **not** how we will reach the nations.

This morning we are going to see that Jesus wants us to give a message to men and women from every nation, social group, background.

And that message is – He loves you and wants you to come to Him.

And if helping them hear that message means – no pork at our potluck or even a few ladies wearing head coverings to make Fatima feel welcome – we should at least consider it.

And if showing love in that way sounds wrong – I remind you – if you walked into the early Jerusalem church – you with your bacon breath and your wife with her bare arms and head – it is you who would be seen as scandalous – it is Fatima who would fit in.

But this morning's passage would say – Jerusalem church – please welcome these scantily clad, pork eating Aussies for the sake of Christ.

We come from very different backgrounds which can put up barriers to the gospel without us even realising it.

So, how do mature churches handle such diversity?

That is the problem we come to this morning.

We are in the book of Acts, and we have seen that the message in this book is:



We must strive to see His kingdom come, through the empowering of His Spirit, by witnessing to the nations, until He comes again.

Jesus made it clear we are **on mission** – until our General returns to relieve us.

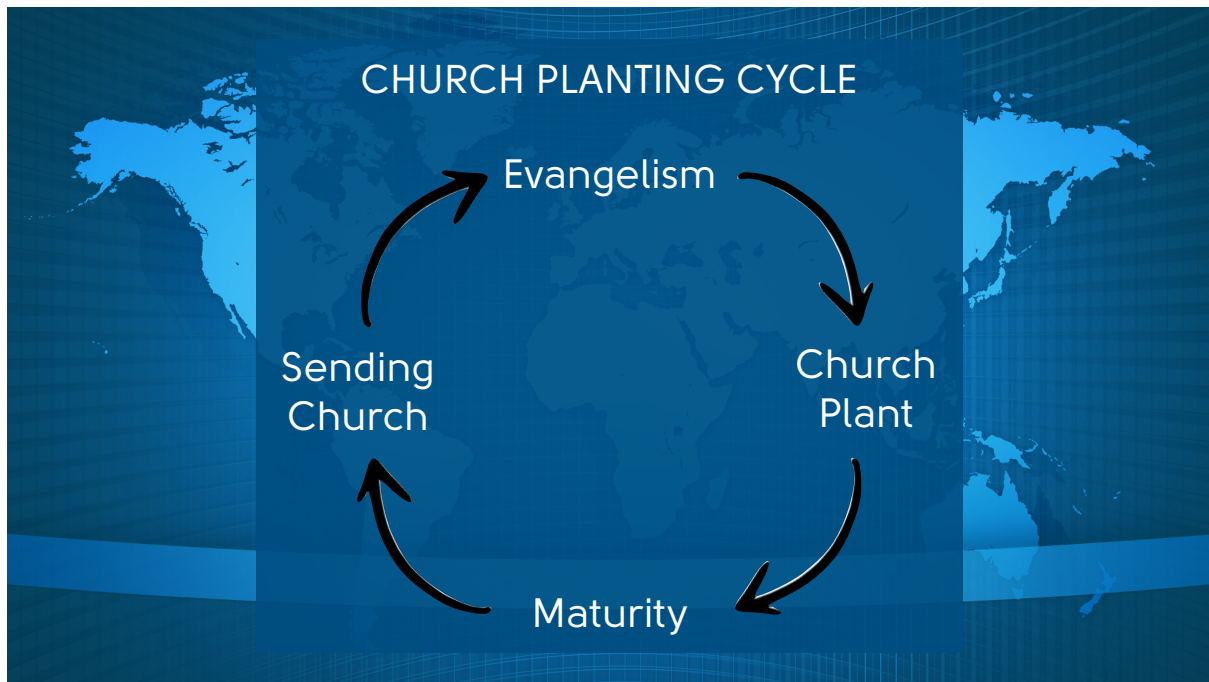
We are in the part of Acts where **Paul's first missionary journey** lays out our mission:



13:4-16:5 The Pattern For Missions

13:4-14:20	Evangelising
14:21-28	Planting
15:1-15:41	Maturing
16:1-5	Sending

This pattern is often referred to as:



The Church Planting Cycle.



Today, we will see these early churches **maturing**.

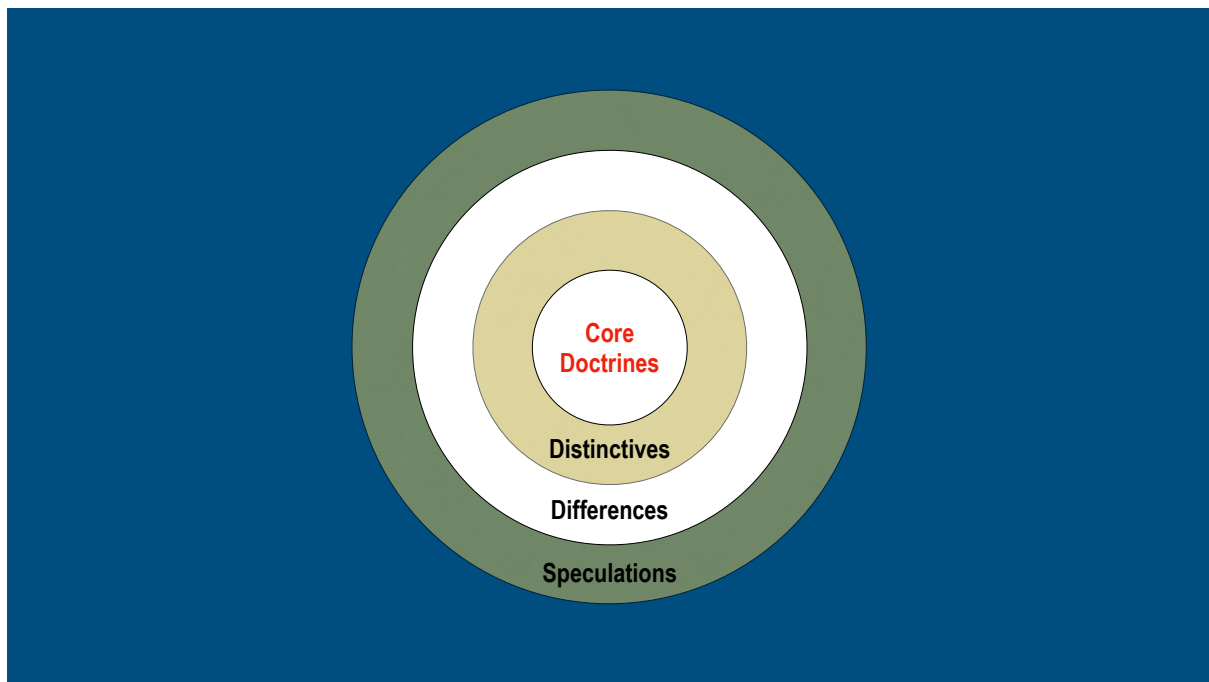
Luke could have spoken of:

Serving, equipping, learning, becoming Christlike, developing leaders.

He chose to look at maturity in terms of dealing with the divisions that can arise from our diversity.

There are many kinds of diversity that can affect churches.

Doctrinal diversity.



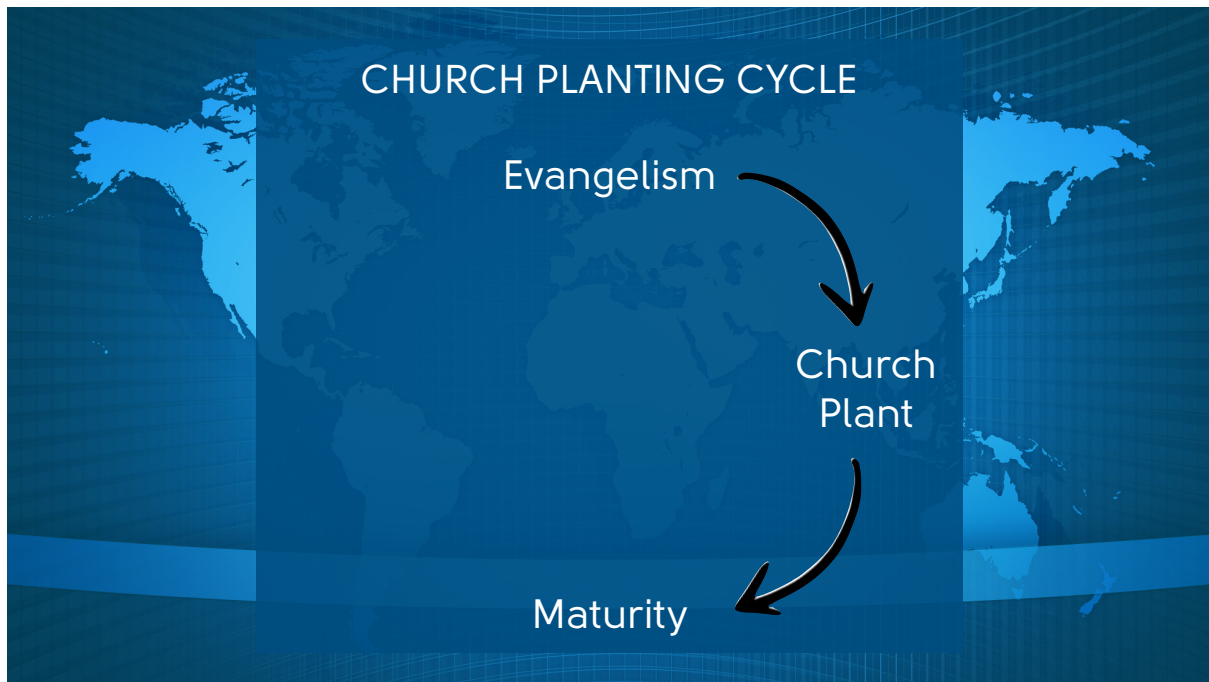
Churches and Christians have managed to divide over everything from core doctrines like the deity of Christ to speculations like the timing of the Lord's return.

Plenty of passages give wisdom for handling doctrinal diversity.



But here in Acts 15, Luke chooses to look at **two** other areas – **cultural** and **personal** diversity.

Today we will look at **cultural diversity**.



Let me state the glaringly obvious – churches are filled with very diverse sinners – so **disagreement will come**.

But a mark of maturity in a church is that deals with it well.

Here is the point of today's passage.



A church on mission must learn to embrace gospel-shaped diversity.

Why?

What is wrong with an Anglo church here, a Chinese Church there, a Jewish church down the road, a rich liberal Party church in the city, a homeless church in the Valley?

The issue is that when you read the Bible – you get a recurring picture of **diversity within unity**.

It begins with God. He is *diverse* – He exists as three persons and He is *united* – He is one God.

And He calls His people to reflect that diversity within unity.

Revelation describes the final state of the people of God. A vast multitude drawn from every tribe and tongue and nation – united together worshipping Christ as one.

Colossians 3:11 makes it clear this diverse unity is meant to begin now:

In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.

So, local churches are to be a smaller, imperfect snapshot of our eternal reality.

It cries – what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

The gospel is meant to look diverse – many – but united as one.

Now, please don't hear me saying we should welcome **all** diversity.

Some diversity is sin.

Polygamy, promiscuity, homosexuality might be acceptable in some cultures – but it is sin.

They are welcome but it means repenting and turning from their sin.

But there are areas that are not sin. It is not sin if you don't eat pork, wear a hijab or adopt other cultural markers.

Churches are called to find ways to embrace that kind of diversity as the people of God.

If we fail to understand the sensitivities in different cultures and people groups – we will become an insular, isolated church that struggles to carry out its mission to the nations.

Up until Paul and Barnabas set sail on their first missionary journey most of the church's outreach had been Jews evangelising Jews. This meant there was little cultural diversity.

But Antioch changed things up. In this one local church you had Jews **and** Gentiles from many nations.

And after churches were planted in Asia – you had all of these multiethnic churches – Jews and Gentiles from many nations of the Roman Empire.

And what a surprise they had conflicts to deal with.

Today – our conflicts are not usually Jew/Gentile – but the principles for dealing with this type of diversity still apply.

Today we deal with our own forms of **cultural diversity**.

It is often *racial* or *ethnic*.

It might also be *generational* diversity – Older leaders refusing to understand and integrate the next generation into leadership.

Or *social* diversity – a wealthier church struggling to welcome a poorer cohort. Or churches not dealing well with those who are single or divorced or have blended families.

First, we need to understand:



A church on mission:

Experiences division that flows from our diversity 1-5

I listened to recent a podcast where churches in the US that had been almost exclusively mono-cultural – white, black, Asian, Latino – became convicted that they needed to actively welcome those of different cultures and ethnicities.

They preached from the Bible on this, announced what they wanted to do and then received significant push back from members.

It is not easy to embrace diversity. It is more comfortable to stay with just those more like you.

This church at Antioch was flying. People coming to Christ, missionaries sent out, multicultural leadership.

But then a cultural question threatened to destroy it.

In the early church, the greatest area of cultural conflict was Jew/Gentile.

You have this multicultural church doing great and then some men arrived from Judea, claiming to come with the authority of James and began to teach the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom prescribed by Moses, you cannot be saved.”

I have this picture in my head of them with placards outside the assembly:

No circumcision, no salvation.
No Moses, no Jesus.

This appealed to the Jewish Christians – but would have divided the Gentile ones.

Paul and Barnabas realised – this is not just some minor cultural difference – they were teaching heresy.

You might think that Cornelius coming to faith 10 years earlier would have settled the issue.

But remember the centrality of Moses was so ingrained that even Peter – who had the clean/unclean vision – who baptized Cornelius – even he struggled.

If you read Galatians 2 – Peter visited Antioch. Initially, he fellowshiped with and ate with the Gentiles.

But then some men turned up claiming to be from James.

I don't think they did actually come from James. I think these are the ones James refers to in verse 24 where he says men went out *claiming* to be from us but **without authorization**.

They arrived and found Peter eating with Gentiles so they confronted him.

I would have hoped Peter would say – begone demon speakers.

He didn't.

I can only imagine that these Judaisers must have been **very** convincing.

Peter, we need to let you know that things have changed since you left. James and the other Apostles thought more about this and concluded we were railroaded. We dismissed the place of the Law and the centrality of Israel too easily.

It rattled him.

He withdrew from eating with the Gentile Christians and Paul had to confront him.

That is how ingrained this stuff is.

So, these men arrived in Antioch and Paul and Barnabas had a serious argument and debate with them.

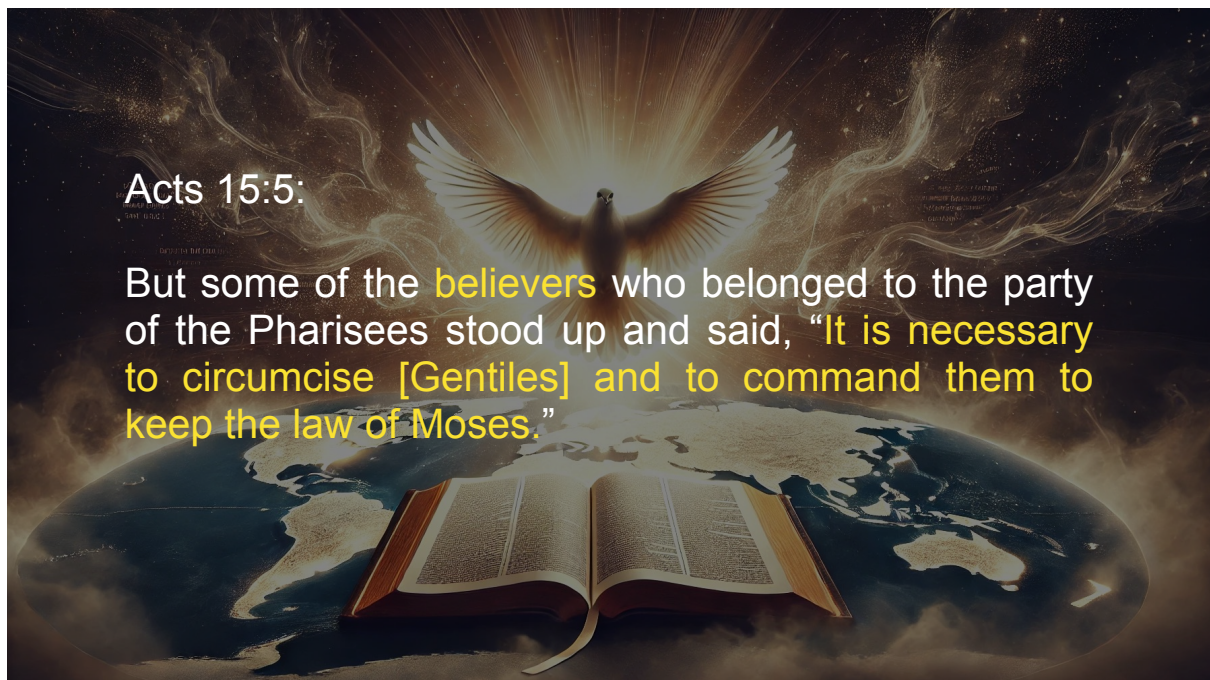
This is Luke's way of saying things got really, really heated. This wasn't going away.

The result was they decided to send Paul, Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to speak with the apostles and elders to sort this out.

Verse 4:

When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, the apostles, and the elders.

But the Judaisers were not going to let this go easily.



Verse 5:

But some of the **believers** who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “**It is necessary to circumcise [Gentiles] and to command them to keep the law of Moses.**”

The sign wavers were there in Jerusalem.

They were Pharisees who had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah. But they insisted that salvation for Gentiles required – circumcision and obedience to the Law of Moses – they had to become Jews.

The question is – why does Luke say they are *believers* if they are teaching what seems to be heresy?

Mormons might say they follow Jesus – but we don’t refer to them as believers.

There are three possible answers.

They might be **false brothers**.

Claiming Christ but not actually saved.

OR they might be **weak brothers**.

Saved but with a terrible understanding of the gospel.

OR They might be a mixture of **false** and **weak brothers**.

I think at least some of them are **false brothers** – because in Galatians 2:4 Paul says:

This matter arose because some **false brothers** had infiltrated our ranks.

But likely there were also some who were weak.

How do you tell the difference?

When you confront their error – *false* brothers double down – *weaker* brothers repent.

But the point of verses 1-5 is that in some form or another – heresy keeps assailing the gospel.

Today it usually looks more like JW’s, Mormons, cults – however like some perverse zombie even this very old heresy that you have to be Jewish to be saved keeps coming back.

The G3 website has three recent articles on the growing danger of the *Hebrew Roots Movement*.¹

¹ <https://g3min.org/shepherds-be-aware-hebrew-roots-movement/> and <https://g3min.org/attractive-but-errant-hebrew-roots-movement/>

Here is what Ethan Jago says in those articles:

They believe authentic Christianity requires recovering first-century Jewish practices such as Sabbath observance, dietary laws, and the biblical feasts. ...

[same old heresy]

in extreme cases, [some] reject the authority of the Apostle Paul, ... What may appear at first to be a fringe curiosity is already finding its way into congregations. In many cases, it does not arrive with open defiance, but with the language of deeper devotion, greater authenticity, and a supposed recovery of “lost” biblical practices. Yet beneath that language lies a dangerous drift away from the sufficiency of Christ and the clarity of the gospel.²

Over the years we have had at least two families leave our church and join this movement.

Despite councils and confessions clarifying exactly what the gospel is – attacks on core truths keep coming.

So – a church on mission will face division. When it comes – first – it:



A church on mission:

Experiences division that flows from our diversity 1-5

Refuses compromise on gospel truth 6-11

Refuses compromise on gospel truth 6-11

When there is a division – the first thing to ask is this – is the gospel at risk?

Sometimes at the heart of the division is a false gospel.

² <https://g3min.org/shepherds-be-aware-hebrew-roots-movement/>

It might flow from:

- **Cultural** diversity – you have to become a Jew to be saved.
- **Doctrinal** diversity – you have to be baptized to be saved.
- **Personal** diversity – you can't be saved if you are divorced, same sex attracted or read the NIV.

If the very gospel is at stake – we don't embrace those who hold this – we call them out and throw the kitchen sink at their heresy.

Christian maturity begins with knowing what things to divide over.

At the time I came to Christ – I found myself with a Mormon girlfriend, Catholic friends and within a short time a close friend teaching I had to be baptized by his church to be saved.

At first, I thought we are all just different flavours of one greater church – like Baptists and Presbyterians.

Part of my personal maturing was coming to realise – they were in false churches. It cost me a girlfriend and some close friends.

Heresy does not come with horns and hooves – it comes with a veneer of orthodoxy and a call for love and unity.

What we learn here is that if it is a core gospel truth – we must **never** compromise for any reason.

Verse 6:

The apostles and the elders gathered to consider this matter.

And there was much heated debate.

It is at this point, Peter stands up and basically says you know God chose me to take the gospel to these first Gentiles – Cornelius and his household.

They heard the gospel message and believed. No circumcision, no dietary laws, no keeping the Mosaic Law involved.

And God confirmed their salvation by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he also did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith.

They believed and were saved just as we were.

This is not the same Peter who was rattled in Galatians 2.

Notice verse 10:

Now then, why are you testing God by putting a yoke on the disciples' necks that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?

You Pharisees want to add something to the gospel – after these Gentiles were saved by faith alone?

And what is worse – that something you want to add is Law which no Jew has ever managed to keep well enough to be saved?

No one – not Abraham, Moses, David – or any of you were saved by keeping the Law.

Why are we now contemplating putting this failed yoke on the necks of the Gentiles?

Verse 11:

On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way they are.

Salvation by faith *alone* is not cultural. It is how we Jews under the Old Covenant were saved.

It is how Jews and Gentiles are saved under the New Covenant.

Adding works, law, tradition, circumcision – things that were a cultural part of the covenant with Israel – changes the very gospel and renders it void.

Peter is emphatic. He has said his piece and that is the last we hear of him in Acts.

But his point is clear – we must stand firm on the gospel – **we cannot compromise**.

But be sure, there would have been enormous pressure to compromise.

They had enough trouble from enemies outside the church without division within.

It was a big deal that some from the party of the Pharisees wanted to follow Christ.

There was obviously a great deal of pressure to appease them and keep them happy.

It would be so much easier to attract Jews if they could point to Pharisees who believed.

But you **cannot** compromise if the cost is the gospel.

In 1994 – Charles Coulson – a Protestant – and John Neuhaus – a Catholic – launched *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*.

Let's heal the rift and rebuild the bridges.

There was great pressure to compromise.

But to do so meant blurring the gospel and especially salvation by faith alone.

The goal was admirable. The cost was untenable.

When a core gospel truth is at stake – we must **never** compromise.

We can't earn our salvation.

Jesus earned our salvation for us on the cross.

We join Him by placing our faith in Him. Nothing else saves.

If the gospel is at stake – division is necessary.

That was the message to the Jewish believers – if you add Moses to faith you have another gospel and we won't stand for it.

But that was not the only message.

A church on mission:



Values Christ's mission above cultural preferences 12-21

This assembly which had been consumed by much debate heard the testimony of Peter and fell silent.

Then they listened to Barnabas and Paul describe all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Gentiles entered the church through faith alone and **not** works. No circumcision or dietary laws necessary.

Then James speaks.

This James is the brother of Jesus.

He says – I am fully with Peter, Paul and Barnabas – God is indeed taking from the Gentiles a people for His name.

He then reinforces this by saying – this is exactly what we should expect because all our prophets said this would happen.

He doesn't cite the go to passages like the Abrahamic Covenant – the salvation of the nations in Psalms or Israel as a light to the Gentiles in Isaiah.

Nor even the great Gentile promises in Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Malachi.

James primarily goes elsewhere – to Amos.

Amos is a book that speaks of the sin of Israel and her judgment by God. It is graphic. It looks like the end for Israel.

But then unexpectedly in Amos 9:11 the prophecy moves to a later day.

A day when God will rebuild David's fallen tent.

But even more unexpected than a future for Israel is who will join Israel in that tent:

I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, so that the **rest of humanity** may seek the Lord— **even all the Gentiles who are called by my name.**

The truth is that it won't be just Jews in the tent – like it or not we need to make room in the tent for Gentiles.

They are not interlopers – they were always invited.

So, in verse 19 – James gives his ruling.

Therefore, in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those among the Gentiles who turn to God.

Basically:

We must not place any yoke from the Law of Moses on the necks of Gentiles. They are saved apart from the Law.

At this point, the core issue has been ruled on. They could have ended the council here.

But James knows many Jews will struggle to fellowship with Gentiles who keep doing Gentile things.

So, he adds an appeal to the Gentile believers.

What would you expect James' appeal to be? Me – I would think something like:

Gentile brothers understand this is going to be tough for your Jewish brothers – so I appeal to you – don't use your liberty in a way that will disrupt your fellowship with them.

Here is what he actually says. Verse 20:

But instead we should write to [Gentile Christians] to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from eating anything that has been strangled, and from blood.

OK now we have one controversial verse.

On the face of it he seems to say – we must not add any yoke to Gentiles – so here are three bits of Mosaic yoke for you Gentiles to keep anyway.

And why these things? Surely, he didn't need to tell Gentile Christians to avoid idolatry and sexual immorality any more than he needed to add – oh Gentiles remember don't murder and steal OK.

And why only mention these three things? Why not add Sabbath keeping, circumcision or dietary laws?

And what does this mean for us today?

Can we Gentile Christians eat a kebab prepared in a Halal way – or is it a bit too Muslimy?

Do we have to ask our butcher – I just need to make sure this meat didn't come from a strangled cow and I want to confirm it was fully drained of blood – OK?

So, how should we understand this verse?

I think this **is** James' way of saying – **And Gentile brothers don't use your liberty in a way that will disrupt your fellowship with your Jewish brothers.**

It is just we are so removed from that culture it seems a really strange way to say it.

First, notice he absolutely is **not** saying they need to do this to be saved. He is sending this to Gentiles who in verse 19 have already turned to God – they **are** saved.

Whatever these directions are – they are **not** for salvation – they are for fellowship.

So James is clear:

Hear this Jewish believers – Gentiles do not need to keep the Law to be saved.

But now, he adds an appeal to the Gentile believers.

The most likely understanding of why James says it this weird way is that these three particular prohibitions refer to specific practices that unsaved Gentiles might consider permissible to continue – but Jews would find them detestable and defiling.

Verse 21 – seems to back this up. He says listen Gentiles – you know that in every city there are synagogues where Moses is proclaimed. These Jews were raised in this environment. It affects how they think and view certain practices.

Culture gets ingrained.

Muslims who come to Christ often struggle to eat pork.

Vegetarians who come to Christ often struggle to eat meat.

Jews who come to Christ will struggle with any whiff of idolatry.

Often, we only realise how much culture we have overlaid on our Christianity when we spend time in another culture.

We need to understand this clash of cultures.

In every Gentile city in the Empire there were pagan temples and strange as it seems to us – it was a normal part of life for Gentile families to worship there and fellowship there.

It is hard for us to imagine it – but families would go to eat a meal in the temple, worship the gods and then partake of the sexual immorality provided by the temple prostitutes.

This was seen as normal.

Sort of a what happens in the temple stays in the temple.

Almost the equivalent of a family going to a Broncos or Lions game today.

When you read the New Testament, it seems Gentiles who became believers thought – I am now a Christian, so I **do** have to change some of my practices but **not** all of them.

To live as a Christian, all I need to do is **not** actually worship the idols – **not** actually partake in the sexual antics – **then** I can still go and eat the meals and fellowship with my family and friends – I can keep my relationships with unsaved friends and family.

But believers from a Jewish background would be horrified.

How were Jews raised?

They were raised to see anything associated with pagan temples as defiling and unclean. So much so that it would likely prevent any Jewish Christians from fellowshiping with Gentiles who still had anything at all to do with the temples.

These three things were *all* associated with temple worship.

Gentile Christians would see them as acceptable – Jewish Christians as an abomination.

Things polluted by idols

Understand, this isn't just saying – don't practice idolatry. They knew that.

This seems to refer to what Paul dealt with in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14.

The polluted things are likely meat offered to idols and then used in temple meals or resold in the market.

A Jew believed that eating this meat made you defiled.

And if you ate at a Gentile's home – you might be defiled.

SO:

Can a Christian eat this meat?

Yes.

We know those idols are mere wood and stone – and we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Our liberty says – we can.

Should a Christian eat that meat?

That is the better question.

Both Jews and Gentiles in Christ *can* – it doesn't mean they *should*.

Some Gentile Christians came out of idolatry and this would be triggering for them – it might draw them back to idolatry. That seems to be the main focus of 1 Corinthians 8.

But even more relevant for our passage is Romans 14 where the issue seems to be the effect on the conscience of Jewish believers.

Most Jews who came to Christ would see this meat as defiling and unclean. They would never eat it with you. They would struggle to fellowship with you.

James is saying – in a church with Jewish brothers – Gentiles don't use your liberty to partake of this kind of meat because it offends your brother and affects your fellowship.

Sexual immorality – *porneia*.

This doesn't just mean – don't have sex outside of marriage. They knew that.

So what does it mean?

Gentiles were more comfortable with some sexual practices forbidden to Jews – such as marrying close relatives. It could refer to that.

Or it could refer to pushing the line sexually.

Gentiles might be comfortable with scanty clothing or even nakedness – if it didn't actually involve sex.

Something similar to what you sometimes hear today – porn is OK because it is not actual sex.

That is possible.

Personally, I think this likely refers to an association with the cult prostitutes in the temple.

A temple meal was likely prepared by a temple prostitute.

A Gentile might think – letter of the law – I am not physically involved with them – I am just here with my family enjoying a meal.

And they might argue Jesus said it is not what you eat that makes you unclean – but what is in you – and He ate with prostitutes.

But to a Jew, just being around these men and women would be seen as making you unclean – especially if you ate a meal prepared by them.

Whatever the actual meaning – it is clearly a reference to some sexual practice that Gentile Christians might think is OK but crossed the line for Jews.

And don't eat anything strangled that still has blood in it.

Jews were forbidden in the Law from eating food with the blood in it. The life is in the blood.

Leviticus 7:26–27:

Wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. Whoever eats any blood is to be cut off from his people.

The Jewish practice was to slaughter animals and drain the blood.

Gentiles did not usually drain the blood. And, crucially we also know that many of the animals used in temple idolatry were killed another way – they were strangled – so those animals still had **all** their blood.

The Law these Jews followed said you should cut off fellowship with anyone who eats animals with blood like this.

In summary, these three things likely refer to some association with pagan temple practices.

A Gentile might think – I am not actually worshipping an idol or being immoral – you Jews need to get over your Old Covenant hangups and realise our liberty in Christ allows this.

But to a Jew – a temple meal – or even a meal in a home made from meat from the temple – meant an association with meat offered to idols, killed by strangling, filled with blood and handled by temple prostitutes.

Even after coming to Christ, most could not bring themselves to fellowship with someone – even a fellow believer – if there was even a whiff of temple idolatry.

In 2013, I went with a group from our church on a short-term mission trip to Thailand – with the Higgs.



Like much of the country, the guest house we stayed at was filled with idols and shrines. This was in the courtyard.



And most days some food was put before the shrine.

I suspect none of this ended up in the food we ate – but even as a very Gentile Christian – when you had chicken stir fry for dinner that night – you pause a bit and you do wonder.

I can only imagine what a Jew thought knowing it was likely food in a Gentile home had once been offered in a temple.



A church on mission:

Experiences division that flows from our diversity 1-5

Refuses compromise on gospel truth 6-11

Values Christ's mission above cultural preferences 12-21

So, James is saying – Gentile brothers – consider laying aside your rights and liberties for the sake of your Jewish brothers.

Importantly, I don't believe James meant this meant to be an exclusive list or a list for all churches in all places.

He could have added others – but these are three big ones given so we can understand the principle.

Mature Christians do not merely ask:

“What am I free to do?”

They ask:

“What helps me walk with my brother in Christ?”

In 1 Corinthians – Paul is clear we have rights.

We all have a right to eat meat offered to idols.

Gospel workers have a right to be supported.

But, if eating meat offered to idols or taking support caused some to stumble and affect fellowship – we should choose not to exercise our rights.

This principle reshapes life in the church.

Alcohol is an often-cited example.

If someone is raised to think drinking alcohol is sin and no amount of Bible verses has convinced them otherwise.

Or if a believer has come out of addiction to alcohol.

Love says don't use your liberty to invite them over and say – do you want white or red with that?

Or what if in the mercy of God – this church saw many Muslims from the local Sudanese community come to Christ.

We have a perfect right to keep doing things exactly as we do today.

But, a desire to fellowship well and see Christ reach this community may cause us to do things differently.

They might struggle with how we dress.

They may well struggle if your home served alcoholic drinks or pork.

They might struggle with our music or what we watch on TV.

We don't have to change a thing. We have Scripture on our side.

But love says perhaps we should not.

Understand that the way we in the west dress, the media we watch, our excesses in terms of food, alcohol and displays of materialism are deeply offensive to many cultures.

If we want the nations joining us – we need to be aware of where we inadvertently offend.

Finally, a church on mission:



Communicates wisely to preserve gospel unity 22-35

Over the years I have learned a hard and painful lesson – Wise leadership is not merely making good decisions — it is helping people understand why those decisions were made.

This council understood that.

Read James' letter. It is clear, neither side will like this. It will land like a lead balloon with both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Here is a near universal truth.

Members come and ask Elders for wisdom. We give it. Often one side or at times both sides hate it – and turn on the Elders. Obviously we should have sided with them.

I have learned – how we communicate our thoughts is the key.

So, notice what the apostles, elders and the leaders from the whole church did.

They don't just write a letter. They chose godly men from different churches to communicate the message.

To explain the decision and answer questions.

Notice verses 25–27:

We have unanimously decided to select men and send them to you along with our dearly loved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who will personally report the same things by word of mouth.

They chose Paul and Barnabas – from the mainly Gentile church at Antioch – but also Judas, called Barsabbas – and Silas from the mainly Jewish church in Jerusalem.

If the only messengers were Paul and Barnabas – the Jews might say – typical – they presented their biased view so of course we got a biased result.

But leaders from the Jews in Jerusalem are there to say – no brothers the report is fair – all views were aired freely and fully and this is the decision of all – James, the Apostles, the Elders of all churches. It is a good decision.

And Paul and Barnabas can unpack and explain to the Gentiles why these suggested prohibitions are here – not as yoke, not for salvation – but for gospel unity.

This letter also makes it clear – the Judaisers went without the authority of James and the Elders – this was them alone.

Notice verse 28 – this is not just man's wisdom. We believe the Holy Spirit led us to these conclusions.

They outline the decision.

- No Mosaic Law burden for salvation.
- But wisdom says consider choosing to sacrifice your liberties for unity and fellowship.

Verse 29:

You will do well if you keep yourselves from these things.

These three prohibitions do **not** become a *command* for every church in every age. These become *principles* for fellowship every church would be wise to apply in their situation.

They went to Antioch – gathered the assembly and read it.

And incredibly, the result of this wise communication is not more division – but rejoicing.

Judas and Silas made it clear; this is not just a Gentile perspective – this should be the perspective of us all.

The point is that a wise decision can be ruined by poor communication or a perception of bias.

When leaders make a decision – present it clearly, fairly, let them know all sides were heard and explain your reasons.

Some will still disagree. But I have found that if you do that – even those who disagree with the decision will admit – their view received a fair hearing and are more willing to heed the decision for the sake of unity.

So how do we apply this?

The principle is to remember – you are on mission – and that mission is to reach the nations – the diverse nations.

But that requires two things.

1. We are to share the gospel – so we have to **know** the gospel – the one gospel that saves.

Know it so well we can spot a fake, not be deceived and defend the truth.

2. And we must think through how we can lower cultural barriers to welcome those who come from very different backgrounds.

We want the nations – we want those who are blue collar, country, woke, rich, divorced – those from Iran, Korea, New Guinea – the gospel of Jesus is for everyone everywhere.

Most of the time we read Acts 15 and think – this is just old time Jew/Gentile stuff.

That blood free, non-strangled meat stuff has nothing to do with me.

Perhaps – but the principles absolutely apply to us.

How might this have played out in AD 50?

The Jewish Christians in Antioch might have said – I am now under the New Covenant. I don't want to confuse my Gentile brothers about the gospel so I will get over my upbringing and eat blood-filled pork in the shadow of the Temple of Diana in a Gentile's home and praise Jesus together.

Truth is – that was always unlikely to happen.

So, for the sake of the gospel, the Gentiles received this letter and said brother – I never want you to struggle with your conscience – be assured our home is pork free without any tinge of association with idolatry – just many songs of praise to the Saviour. Come eat with us.

Our love should be greater than our culture or preferences.

Here is ideally how this might play out today.

Fatima might realise her liberty and jettison her hijab and have a ham sandwich with you at lunch.

Usually that is a bridge too far – at least for a number of years.

So even better, we should say – love the hijab Fatima. Please come and eat and drink to God's glory in our home. And in case you are worried you need to know there is nothing at all piggy that will be served.

We want her to feel comfortable as she is joining us in fellowship and worship of Jesus.

When we see a brother or a sister struggling, we might change some things until they are comfortable fellowshiping with us.

I will add that we must never use this principle as a weapon to change a practice in a church we don't like – Christmas offends me – so nothing Christmas at all please.

That is a wrong application.

My prayer is that we will all be on mission. Jesus did not die merely to save us as different nations.

He died to create one people from every tribe, tongue, nation, class, age, and background.

The church is where the world should see that miracle displayed.

People who would never naturally love one another...

worshipping together,
loving together,
sacrificing for one another,
and calling one another family —

All because Christ welcomed us first.

Embracing Our Diversity

Acts 15:1-35 (31 May 2026)

Main Point: A church on mission must learn to embrace gospel-shaped diversity.

Please Read: Acts 15:1-35

What did I learn/take away from the message?

What convicted me in the message?

What will I do in light of the message?

General Questions:

1. Have you ever felt out of place in a new church, group, or community? What helped you feel welcomed or made you feel out of place?
2. Are there any cultural traditions or preferences that are important to you or your family?
3. Why do you think God desires His church to display unity amid diversity?
4. How does a diverse church provide a picture of heaven?
5. What problem threatened to divide the church in Acts 15?
6. Why was it such an issue for Jewish believers?
7. Why was this issue more than simply a cultural disagreement?
8. What would have happened to the gospel if the council had required circumcision and Moses for salvation?
9. What decision did the Jerusalem Council ultimately make in regard to the gospel?
10. What are some modern examples of people adding requirements to salvation beyond faith in Christ?
11. Why do we think this decision for the Gentiles is a principle rather than law for all churches?
12. Why did James ask Gentile believers to avoid practices that would offend Jewish believers?

13. What is the difference between compromising the gospel and voluntarily limiting our freedoms for the sake of others?
14. Why is "What helps my brother or sister in Christ?" often a better question than "What am I allowed to do?"
15. Can you think of a time when someone gave up a preference or right in order to help you?
16. What cultural practices may create barriers for new believers in our church?
17. How can poor communication create unnecessary division in a church?

Application Questions:

1. Are there groups of people who might find it difficult to feel at home in our church? Why?
2. What practical steps could help our church become more welcoming to people from different backgrounds?
3. Are there any cultural preferences, traditions, or freedoms that you tend to treat as if they were biblical requirements?
4. Is there someone in your church who is very different from you that God may be calling you to understand better?
5. How can you personally help display the unity of Christ's body this week?