

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 15 records the Jerusalem Council, the first major deliberative assembly of the apostolic church, convened to resolve the question that had destabilized the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: whether Gentile converts to Christ must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved. The chapter moves in four clear stages. First, the crisis surfaces at Antioch when men from Judea arrive teaching that circumcision is necessary for salvation, triggering sharp debate with Paul and Barnabas (vv. 1–5). Second, the Jerusalem Council convenes — Peter, then Paul and Barnabas, then James each speak — and the assembly moves from controversy to consensus: God has already accepted the Gentiles by faith, the law was a yoke no one could bear, and it is through the grace of the Lord Jesus that both Jews and Gentiles are saved (vv. 6–21). Third, the council issues its formal letter to the Gentile churches, affirming their standing before God and asking only for practical accommodations to preserve Jewish-Gentile fellowship (vv. 22–29). Fourth, the letter is delivered to Antioch with joy, and Paul and Barnabas continue their ministry — though the chapter ends with a painful irony: the mission that unity secured is immediately fractured by a personal dispute between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark (vv. 30–41).

The theological heart of the chapter is Peter's argument in vv. 7–11 and James's confirmatory ruling in vv. 13–21. The gospel Paul has been preaching is not a deviation from the apostolic kerygma — it is the apostolic kerygma, confirmed by the testimony of the Spirit (the Cornelius event), grounded in the prophetic scriptures, and expressed in the shared grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Acts 15 is to establish, with the full weight of apostolic authority, that the gospel is grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone — and that this truth is non-negotiable, even when its implications generate conflict, discomfort, or structural disruption to established religious patterns. Luke records this council not primarily as ecclesiastical history but as theological verdict: the church's first formal assembly speaks with one voice on the most fundamental question of salvation. God is calling readers to receive the gospel in its full freedom, to resist every addition to it, and to recognize that the unity of the church is secured not by law-keeping requirements but by the common grace of Christ. The chapter also models how the church handles doctrinal crisis — through Scripture, testimony, authority, and consensus — without resolving every tension (the Barnabas-Mark dispute remains unresolved and painful).

Subject Sentence: The Jerusalem Council settles the gospel's terms — grace alone, not law — for all people.

Primary Claim: God is asserting, with the full authority of the apostolic church, that salvation belongs to all people — Jew and Gentile alike — through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and that every addition to that grace is a burden neither the church nor the gospel can bear.

Interpretive Evaluation

The core theological question: What did the Jerusalem Council actually settle?

The central interpretive issue is the scope and finality of the council's ruling. Reformed interpreters read Acts 15 as a definitive apostolic settlement of the terms of justification — salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, apart from works of the law, for all people without ethnic or ceremonial distinction. This reading aligns Acts 15 with Galatians 2 (widely understood as the same event or a closely related one) and with the broader Pauline argument that the law cannot justify. The council does not merely permit Gentile inclusion while leaving Jewish Christians free to continue observing the law as a means of standing before God — it rules that “through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved, even as they” (v. 11), a formulation that places Jewish and Gentile believers on identical footing before God.

Dispensational reading — evaluate and qualify

Dispensational interpreters sometimes read Acts 15 primarily in terms of the kingdom program: the council signals a shift in the administration of God's redemptive plan — the temporary setting aside of Israel's national program and the opening of the church age. On this reading, the council's decree is not primarily a ruling on justification but a structural-historical transition marker. There is a genuine insight here: Acts 15 is indeed a hinge point in Luke's narrative and in redemptive history. The Gentile mission's legitimacy is confirmed, and the Israel-church relationship is addressed. However, the text itself is emphatically soteriological. Peter's argument (vv. 10–11), James's citation of Amos (vv. 16–17), and the council's final formulation all address *how people are saved*, not merely which administrative period they inhabit. The dispensational framing illuminates the canonical-historical significance but underweights the direct soteriological verdict. The Reformed reading is preferred because it accounts for the full argument of the passage, not only its historical position.

Wesleyan/Arminian reading — acknowledge

Wesleyan interpreters bring a genuine emphasis to Acts 15: human decision and congregational deliberation matter in this text. The council doesn't issue a decree from

above without testimony, debate, and communal discernment. The Holy Spirit's work is confirmed through the testimony of experience (vv. 8, 12) as well as Scripture (vv. 15–18). This is a genuine contribution — the Reformed tradition must not read Acts 15 as pure top-down decree while ignoring the model of corporate discernment it provides. Where Arminian readings go wrong is in domesticating Peter's formulation in v. 11: "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." Peter argues that Gentile salvation by grace alone is the *norm*, not merely the Gentile exception — and Arminian frameworks that emphasize cooperative grace must reckon with the unilateral language of divine acceptance operative here (vv. 8–9: "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit...cleansing their hearts by faith").

Roman Catholic reading — refute

Roman Catholic readings of Acts 15 tend to emphasize the conciliar structure as a model of magisterial authority: here the church speaks definitively, and the decree of the council binds the churches. There is a surface plausibility to this — the council does issue a formal letter, and it does claim authority ("it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," v. 28). However, the Roman Catholic appeal to Acts 15 as a precedent for ongoing magisterial doctrinal development through councils encounters a critical problem: the Jerusalem Council's authority rested on its apostolic composition and its grounding in Scripture (vv. 15–18). James does not say "it seemed good to us, therefore it is binding" — he says "the words of the prophets agree" (v. 15), and *then* the council speaks. The authority flows from Scripture, confirmed by the Spirit and the apostolic testimony, not from institutional structure alone. Using Acts 15 to ground post-apostolic conciliar authority requires importing a framework the text itself resists.

The "four abstentions" (vv. 20, 29) — a hermeneutical puzzle across traditions

A persistent interpretive question is the nature of the four requirements given to Gentile believers: abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood. Reformed interpreters have read these variously as: (1) a practical accommodation for Jewish-Gentile table fellowship, not a theological condition for salvation; (2) a summary of the Noahic moral code binding all humanity; or (3) a prudential requirement for the specific context of churches with mixed Jewish-Gentile membership. The text is clear that these requirements are not conditions for salvation — the council has already settled *that* question — but practical requirements for *fellowship*. The Reformed reading of the four abstentions as fellowship-preserving prudential norms rather than soteriological conditions is well grounded in the logic of vv. 19–21 (James's concern is for the "rest of mankind" and for not "troubling" those who are turning to God, not for adding conditions to their salvation).

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 12:1–3** — God’s promise to Abraham that through his offspring “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” provides the foundational warrant for Gentile inclusion. Acts 15 is the apostolic confirmation that the Abrahamic promise is now being fulfilled in Christ; the Jerusalem Council is not a theological novelty but a covenant fulfillment.
- **Amos 9:11–12** (quoted in Acts 15:16–17) — James’s citation grounds the Gentile mission in the prophetic scriptures: the rebuilding of David’s tent is the eschatological gathering of the Gentiles into the people of God. This anchors the council’s ruling in the Hebrew prophets themselves — the Gentile inclusion is not an improvisation but the realization of Israel’s own scriptures.
- **Galatians 2:1–21** — Paul’s account of the same apostolic consultation (or a closely related one) provides the theological precision that Acts 15 narrates historically. Paul names the issue directly: the truth of the gospel is at stake. Galatians 2:16 — “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” — is the doctrinal formulation of what Peter states in narrative form in Acts 15:11.
- **Romans 3:21–30** — “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one — who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” Paul’s theological argument in Romans 3 carries the council’s verdict into its fullest doctrinal expression: one God, one gospel, one way of salvation, for all people.
- **Ephesians 2:11–22** — “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” The unity of Jew and Gentile in one body is the ecclesiological fruit of the very gospel Acts 15 defends. The council secures the theological ground; Ephesians 2 names the ecclesial reality that results.

Aim: To demonstrate that the Jerusalem Council’s ruling — salvation by grace alone through Christ alone — is the non-negotiable center of the gospel, and to call every reader to receive it in its full freedom, resist every addition to it, and recognize how much depends on getting this right.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Men from Judea teach circumcision as necessary	The presenting crisis: a false gospel with apostolic-

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	for salvation; conflict with Paul and Barnabas at Antioch	adjacent authority
2	Sharp dispute; church appoints Paul, Barnabas, and others to go up to Jerusalem	The local church cannot resolve this — it requires apostolic authority
3	Delegation passes through Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the Gentile conversion; great joy	The Gentile mission is already bearing fruit — the question being disputed is a question about existing converts
4	Welcome at Jerusalem; report to church, apostles, and elders	Full institutional reception — this is not a private consultation
5	Pharisee believers rise: circumcision and law of Moses are necessary	The false teaching is now formally stated before the full assembly
6	Apostles and elders gather to consider the matter	The deliberative process begins — this is structured authority, not mob consensus
7–8	Peter speaks: God chose him to preach to Gentiles; God bore witness to them by giving the Holy Spirit just as to Jews	The Cornelius event (Acts 10–11) is the theological exhibit A; God’s own testimony precedes the council’s
9	God made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith	The crucial statement: no distinction in the mode of divine acceptance
10	“Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”	Peter reframes the Judaizers’ position as testing God — strong language; the law as yoke is honest about its unbearable weight
11	“We believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”	The theological climax: Peter applies the Gentile standard <i>to Jewish believers</i> — “we” not “they”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
12	Barnabas and Paul report signs and wonders among the Gentiles; assembly listens in silence	Experiential testimony confirms what Peter has argued; silence signals the weight of what has been said
13–15	James speaks: Peter’s account agrees with Scripture — the prophets	James performs the hermeneutical move: Scripture interprets experience; not the reverse
15–18	James quotes Amos 9:11–12: the rebuilt tent of David, the Gentiles who bear God’s name	The Gentile inclusion is not an innovation — it is the fulfillment of Israel’s own prophetic hope
19	James’s ruling: “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God”	“Trouble” is the key word — the false teachers have been troubling the Gentile believers; the council rules against that troubling
20	Four abstentions required: pollution from idols, sexual immorality, what is strangled, blood	Soteriological conditions: none. Fellowship conditions: four practical norms for Jewish-Gentile community life
21	Moses has been proclaimed in every city — those in synagogues will be sensitive to these matters	Pastoral-prudential reasoning for the four norms: not law-keeping as salvation, but sensitivity to the Jewish conscience in mixed communities
22	Apostles, elders, and whole church choose delegates to carry the letter: Judas and Silas	The council’s decision is not Paul’s alone — it bears the full weight of the Jerusalem church
23–26	The letter: greetings; repudiation of the false teachers as unauthorized; commendation of Paul and Barnabas	The false teachers are explicitly disowned: “to whom we gave no instructions” — this is official repudiation
27–29	The letter delivered by Judas and Silas; the four abstentions named; “it has	Remarkable claim of joint authority — the Spirit and the council; the four norms

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”	are framed as a burden kept light (“no greater burden than these requirements”)
30–31	Letter delivered to Antioch; congregation reads it with rejoicing and encouragement	The intended effect is achieved: freedom received with joy
32–33	Judas and Silas encourage and strengthen the brothers; Judas returns to Jerusalem	The personal ministry of the delegates reinforces the written word
34	<i>(Textual note: some manuscripts add that Silas remained)</i>	Minor textual variant; does not affect the theological argument
35	Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, teaching and preaching	The mission resumes; the crisis is resolved; ministry continues
36	Paul proposes to Barnabas that they revisit the churches	The next movement of mission begins from the settled theological ground
37–38	Barnabas wants to take John Mark; Paul refuses — Mark had deserted them	The human conflict emerges: the principle of reliability in mission is at stake for Paul
39	Sharp disagreement; Paul and Barnabas separate — Barnabas takes Mark to Cyprus, Paul chooses Silas	The unity secured by the council is not immune to human friction; the text does not adjudicate who was right
40–41	Paul and Silas, commended by the brothers, strengthen the churches through Syria and Cilicia	The mission continues — doubled in scope, though painful in its origination

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–5	The Crisis: A Gospel Under Attack
2	6–12	The Testimony: God Has Already Spoken
3	13–21	The Ruling: Scripture Confirms What God Has Done
4	22–29	The Letter: Apostolic Authority Delivers the Verdict

Division	Verses	Label
5	30–35	The Reception: Joy, Encouragement, and Resumed Mission
6	36–41	The Fracture: Unity Secured, Mission Complicated

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim *(restated)*

Subject Sentence: The Jerusalem Council settles the gospel’s terms — grace alone, not law — for all people.

Primary Claim: God is asserting, with the full authority of the apostolic church, that salvation belongs to all people — Jew and Gentile alike — through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and that every addition to that grace is a burden neither the church nor the gospel can bear.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive the gospel in its full freedom — stop adding conditions to what God has declared complete. *(Mind/belief)*

The Jerusalem Council ruled definitively: salvation is by grace alone, through the Lord Jesus, with nothing added. Yet the human impulse to add conditions to the gospel is perennial — not always circumcision, but performance, moral improvement, denominational conformity, or cultural Christianity as proof of real faith. Acts 15 calls the reader to examine what they have placed alongside Christ as a condition of their standing before God. Peter’s question in v. 10 is addressed to every generation: why do you test God by placing a yoke on disciples that no one has been able to bear? Every yoke added to Christ is a yoke placed on Christ — and the council ruled against it.

2. Let the weight of what was at stake recalibrate your seriousness about the gospel. *(Affections/worship)*

The men from Judea who came to Antioch were not villains — they were sincere, probably devout, and theologically trained. And they were destroying the churches. Paul and Barnabas engaged in “no small dissension and debate” (v. 2) not because they were contentious but because they understood the stakes: if the false teachers were right, there was no gospel for the Gentiles — and no gospel for anyone, since Peter makes clear that Jewish believers are saved by grace “just as they” (v. 11). The reader is called to feel the weight of that. A gospel that requires anything beyond Christ is not a lesser gospel — it is no gospel. The right response to Acts 15 is not calm agreement but something closer to the congregation’s silence in v. 12 — a silence that comes from understanding what hangs in the balance.

3. Ground your confidence in God's acceptance of you in what God has already done, not in what you are managing to produce. (*Affections/worship*)

Peter's argument begins with God's testimony: "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us" (v. 8). The order is theologically decisive — God bore witness *first*, giving the Spirit *before* the Cornelius household had satisfied any ceremonial requirements, before circumcision, before legal compliance. God's acceptance did not wait for performance. It preceded it. The reader who lives with an unnamed anxiety about whether they are truly accepted — who is always measuring, always performing, always unsure — is being addressed directly by Peter's argument. God, who knows the heart, bore witness. The Spirit was given. The heart was cleansed by faith (v. 9). Your standing before God is secured by what He bore witness to, not by what you are managing to produce this week.

4. Handle doctrinal controversy in the church the way the Jerusalem Council did — through Scripture, testimony, and structured authority, not through power, volume, or faction. (*Will/behavior*)

Acts 15 models a specific pattern for handling genuine theological crisis in the church: testimony is heard (Peter, Paul, Barnabas), Scripture is consulted and applied (James's citation of Amos), those with authority render a judgment, and the ruling is delivered in writing with named delegates to represent it personally. This is not democratic vote, not personal charisma, not the loudest voice, not the most aggressive faction. When genuine doctrinal conflict arises in a congregation or denominational body, Acts 15 calls leaders and members to slow down, to gather those with genuine authority and responsibility, to let Scripture govern the deliberation, and to deliver the outcome with enough pastoral care (Judas and Silas, vv. 27, 32) that people receive it with joy rather than suspicion.

5. Refuse to let the gospel's unity become a casualty of legitimate personal disagreements. (*Will/behavior*)

The Barnabas-Mark dispute in vv. 36–41 is placed here deliberately by Luke. The council has just secured the gospel's unity across Jewish and Gentile divisions — and two of its chief defenders immediately fracture their partnership over a question of personnel reliability. The gospel was not wrong; Paul's concern about Mark was not without basis; Barnabas's generosity toward Mark was not without virtue. And yet the result is a broken partnership that required God's providence to turn toward fruitfulness. The reader is called to notice the pattern: the enemy of the church's unity is not always false doctrine. Sometimes it is unresolved personal conflict between people who are both right about the gospel and wrong about each other. Pursue reconciliation — and if you cannot, at least pursue outcomes that still extend the mission.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 15 is one of the most theologically consequential chapters in the New Testament because it establishes, by apostolic authority, that the gospel of grace is not a Pauline innovation but the unanimous teaching of the Jerusalem apostles. This matters enormously: the charge that Paul invented a “grace gospel” that departed from the Jewish-Christian original is refuted by the chapter’s own structure — it is Peter, not Paul, who delivers the decisive theological argument, and James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, who confirms it from Israel’s own prophetic scriptures. The passage also establishes that the Holy Spirit’s work in conversion is the normative evidence of divine acceptance — God’s testimony (v. 8) carries more authority than human tradition. And Peter’s formulation in v. 11 — that Jewish believers are saved by grace “just as” the Gentiles — demolishes any two-tier soteriology in which law-keeping provides a supplementary ground of acceptance. There is one ground: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 15 is a primary locus for the Reformed doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone and for the doctrine of the covenant of grace as encompassing both Jew and Gentile. The chapter demonstrates that the Reformation’s central contested issue — whether law-keeping contributes to the ground of a person’s acceptance before God — was not a sixteenth-century novelty but the first crisis the apostolic church faced, and that the apostolic resolution was precisely the Reformation answer: grace alone, through Christ alone, for all people alike. The Reformed reading of Peter’s “yoke” language (v. 10) is significant: this is not a comment on the law’s difficulty but on its covenantal incapacity — the law was not designed to save and has never saved anyone; to impose it as a condition of salvation is to test God by demanding what God never promised the law could deliver. James’s hermeneutical move — grounding the present work of the Spirit in the fulfillment of prophetic Scripture — also reflects the Reformed commitment to the unity of the covenants: the church age is not a bracket inserted into Israel’s story but the fulfillment of Israel’s story, the gathering of the nations under the name of the LORD that Israel’s prophets foresaw.

Main Takeaway

The Jerusalem Council has spoken, and the gospel it delivered is the same gospel you need today: you are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ — nothing added, nothing subtracted, no yoke attached. God already bore witness to that in the gift of the Spirit, the cleansing of the heart by faith, and the resurrection of His Son. Stop living as though the verdict is still pending. Stop adding conditions to what the apostles declared complete.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is enough — and the whole weight of apostolic authority stands behind that word: *enough*.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Acts 15 as church governance rather than gospel defense.** The council's deliberative structure — testimony, Scripture, ruling, letter, delegates — is genuinely instructive for how churches handle conflict. But if the preacher leads with “here's how to run a business meeting” and buries the gospel under polity lessons, the chapter's actual claim goes unpreached. The governance model is in service of the gospel being defended; it is not the point. The point is vv. 10–11.
- **Treating the four abstentions as a moral code for Gentile Christians rather than as fellowship-preserving prudential norms.** Some expositors, particularly in traditions with a high view of food and sexual ethics legislation, use the four abstentions (v. 20, 29) to derive a binding moral code — as though the council created a “Gentile law.” The text is explicit: James explicitly contrasts “no greater burden than these” (v. 28) with the circumcision-and-law burden being proposed. The four abstentions are the *minimum* required for Jewish-Gentile table fellowship in a specific historical context, not a universal Christian moral code. Sexual immorality is condemned everywhere in the New Testament on independent grounds — it does not require Acts 15 as its proof text. Conflating the fellowship norms with soteriological conditions reintroduces exactly the confusion the council was called to resolve.
- **Harmonizing the Paul-Barnabas dispute too quickly into a tidy “God used even this.”** It is true that the split resulted in two mission teams and broader coverage. It is also true that the text gives no divine commentary on who was right, and that Luke records the rupture with a word (“sharp disagreement,” v. 39) that carries genuine pain. Rushing to “God works all things together” domesticates a real failure of reconciliation between two men who had been partners in gospel ministry. Preachers should let the painful irony stand: the men who defended the gospel's unity could not maintain their own. The application is more searching, not less, when the text is allowed its full weight.
- **Preaching Peter's speech in vv. 7–11 without noting who is saying it.** Peter is the apostle who, in Galatians 2, Paul publicly opposed for his inconsistency on precisely this issue — eating with Gentiles when Jewish observers were absent, withdrawing when they arrived. The Peter of Acts 15 is the Peter who has been confronted, corrected, and now speaks with the full force of apostolic clarity. This is not a minor biographical detail — it is testimony to the gospel's power to correct even apostles. Preachers who miss this miss the human drama that makes the theological argument more, not less, credible.

- **Failing to connect the “grace alone” verdict to the reader’s present anxiety about their standing before God.** Acts 15 is frequently preached as a historical doctrinal settlement — important for the church’s past, significant for understanding the canon. But Peter’s argument is directly address to the person who lives under the weight of religious performance anxiety: “Why do you put God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10). That yoke is not only circumcision. It is every performance system by which people attempt to secure or maintain divine acceptance. Preachers must bring the council’s verdict to bear on the present: the question of your acceptance before God has been answered, and the answer is grace alone.
- **Overlooking Luke’s canonical placement of Acts 15 as the theological spine of the book.** Acts 1–14 narrates the movement of the gospel outward from Jerusalem to the nations; Acts 16–28 narrates its extension to the ends of the earth. Acts 15 is the hinge — not merely a historical council but Luke’s theological justification for everything that follows. The gospel that will go to Rome, to the ends of the earth, is the gospel the council defined: grace alone, for all people, through Christ alone. Preachers who treat Acts 15 as a standalone chapter without situating it in Luke’s narrative architecture miss the chapter’s canonical weight.