



The First Church Council

Birth of the Church

About the Story

Today, we return to Jerusalem for our story. At this point, several successful missions have occurred outside of Jerusalem, including the story we heard last week about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Now, we catch a glimpse of what is happening “back at home” in Jerusalem. Here we step in on a conversation at a church council, and it may not seem too different from a church council meeting today: that is, not everyone is on the same page about the topic at hand. Today’s disagreement is about what is (or is not) required to be a member of the Christian community.

Paul and Barnabas return to the Jerusalem congregation to find that other preachers have been teaching that circumcision is required to be saved—that is, loved and forgiven by God. (See sidebar: “What Is The Deal With Circumcision?”) Paul and Barnabas, two of the community’s preachers, engage in a debate about this question. Following their discussion, they are sent to the church leaders for further guidance on the matter. Along the way, Paul and Barnabas share reports of their successful mission efforts among the Gentiles (See sidebar “Bible Nuts & Bolts: Gentiles”), relaying the great joy brought about by the many conversions.

The Point:

God’s will is revealed in Scripture and conversation with each other. In today’s story, the church elders engage in a debate by discussing personal experience, historical Jewish practices, and the words of Scripture. Their thoughtful approach to a divisive issue challenges us to be similarly thoughtful in divisive issues in our own lives and congregations.

What Is The Deal With Circumcision?

Circumcision was a sign of God’s promise to Abraham, so it had become a way faithful Jewish males were identified. At the heart of today’s question is whether non-Jewish—that is, uncircumcised—persons could also receive of this promise. While the physical question of circumcision did not directly affect women, women were considered recipients of such promises by association with men—so of course they, too, were impacted by this debate.

All the while, the community considers the question of circumcision. Is it still a requirement for salvation, they wonder, or has the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ changed this requirement? Throughout the conversation the leaders consider their own religious experiences and the words of Scripture, offering an example of thorough and thoughtful discernment in the face of a divisive issue. The discussion concludes with a brief summary from Simeon (assumed to be Peter—the same guy who speaks in verses 7-11), in which he quotes Amos 9:11-12. Circumcision is no longer required for salvation, Simeon says, since God has shown in Scripture that God desires to love uncircumcised Gentiles.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, we met Philip on the road, where he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch (a castrated, royal official) on a journey outside of Jerusalem. Today's lesson returns to Jerusalem, where leaders debate the church's stance on whether circumcision is required for salvation. Next week, we will hear the apostle Paul's account of a similar disagreement about circumcision within the church.

Opening Prayer

You may open by naming and praying for people who may not feel welcomed at a church—or simply read this prayer:

God of all peoples, thank you for welcoming us here. We pray for all who may not feel welcomed into our doors and ask that you empower us to welcome them in the weeks and months to come. Open our eyes today to see the ways you have always worked to open up your church for all people. In your name we pray. Amen.

Into the Story

As a group, discuss how you prepared to come today. Did you take a shower? How did you decide what to wear? The idea here is to consider some unspoken “requirements” we all hold in coming to church or a small group time—and thus in being part of the church community.

Learning the Story

Today we read about a meeting of church leaders. They discuss what is (or is not) required being part of the church community.

Read Acts 15:1-6 – The Circumcision Question

- ❓ Paul and Barnabas are said to have had “no small dissension and debate” (verse 2) over the circumcision requirement. Imagine what that looked like and sounded like. What strikes you about the way this disagreement was handled? How does this relate or not relate to the way you see disagreements handled in your church?
- ❓ Paul and Barnabas reported all that God had done through them on their missionary journeys with the Gentiles. What do you imagine God had done? How have you seen God do similar things in your community?
- ❓ The question of circumcision comes up twice in these first six verses. What topics cause frequent debate in the church today?

Read Acts 15:7-18 – The Debate

- ❓ Peter shares his stance on the circumcision issue. What stands out to you about what he says or how he says it?
- ❓ What do you think Peter means by “putting God to the test” (verse 10)? How do you put God to the test in your own life?

- ❓ In the middle of this debate, Barnabas and Paul talk about the signs and wonders from their missionary journeys. How do you think this relates to the debate? What are they trying to communicate by weaving these stories into the discussion?

Living the Story: Fellowship

Take five to ten minutes to think about (or write) an experience of either feeling welcome or unwelcome in your own church past. Sharing personal stories is preferred over sharing others' experiences to encourage empathy for those who do not feel welcomed. Then, break into groups of two or three to talk about these experiences. At the end of the time, say to one another, "[Name], God welcomes you here. Thanks be to God."

Closing Prayer

Close in "popcorn prayer" style, with anyone who wishes to may name persons who have not been welcomed into the church, either communities of people or individuals you know, during the prayer:

God, we give thanks that you love [popcorn-style names]. Teach us how to welcome them and all people here, so everyone may know your love and your grace. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Bible Connections

- ✚ God declares circumcision to be the sign of the promise with Abraham (Genesis 17:10).
- ✚ "Signs and wonders" (verse 12) are mentioned in other parts of Acts and the Paul's letters. (Acts 2:19, 22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 15:12; and 2 Corinthians 12:12)
- ✚ James quotes the prophet Amos in today's story to support his argument that God has always planned to save Gentiles (Amos 9:11-12).

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Gentiles

The Gentiles were people who were geographically and culturally outside of Israel—that is, not Jewish. In the Bible, they represent persons not included in God's promise to Moses (Genesis 17). Gentiles were not allowed to worship God in the temple, so they were not considered to be part of Israel. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus open up places for Gentiles in God's kingdom—and now in the Book of Acts we see Gentiles becoming members of the Christian community.

At Home

- ✚ Invite one person to worship with you next week—a friend, neighbor, or stranger whom you know has not felt welcome at church. If the person declines your invitation, tell them that they are welcome to join you any time.
- ✚ Think honestly about people or groups who might not feel welcome in your congregation, perhaps non-English speakers, people who are homeless, members of the LGBTQ community, or even people of different political views. Pray for them.
- ✚ Read the story of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. What can you learn about the roots of our Christian tradition?

Daily Readings

Sunday – Read Acts 15:1-18

A group of church leaders thoughtfully consider a divisive issue. Make a plan for a thoughtful approach on a divisive issue in your own life, church, family, or work.

Monday – Read Acts 13:1-12

Paul and Barnabas are “set apart” by God for preaching. Give yourself or a family member a “commissioning” for your own work: how can you serve God at work or at school?

Tuesday – Read Acts 14:8-20

Paul and Barnabas heal a man who has been unable to walk since birth, but the miracle leads to a violent misunderstanding. Pray for those whose good work goes misunderstood or ignored.

Wednesday – Read Acts 15:22-35

The council writes a letter of recommendation for leaders to preach to the Gentiles. Write a letter to someone in your church, preferably a young person, sharing your gratitude for their gifts and the ways they serve God with their gifts.

Thursday – Read Acts 16:11-15

A woman named Lydia hosts Paul on a missionary journey, and God opens her heart to hear the good news. In the spirit of Lydia’s hospitality, invite someone to your home for dinner or coffee.

Friday – Read Acts 17:16-31

Paul tells people in Athens about the God, in whom “we live and move and have our being” (verse 28). Think of one thing for which you are thankful, and offer thanks to God for it.

Saturday – Read Acts 22:6-21

Paul shares the story of his conversion and his call by God to preach to the Gentiles. Write down your story to share with others or to remind yourself: how has God called you?