



cell outlines
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UNPACKING THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM (ACTS 15:1-35)

WELCOME

There's only one way to find out...

Welcome the group and provide some space for them to share about their week. Show them this clip from Harry Hill's TV Burp: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np6gyUb0E7o. Explain that this features one of the most famous bits of the show, where the host pits two random people or objects against each other to decide which is better. We're going to start tonight's session by doing the same thing. Below are a list of items to argue between. Go through each argument, selecting one member of the group to argue on behalf of each side, with 30 seconds to present their case. After each person has made their case, the rest of the groups votes on the winner of that particular argument:

Chips or crisps?

Football or rugby?

Always being really cold or always being really hot?

Being able to go invisible or being able to fly?

Barefoot forever, or forever having to wear socks with sandals?

If you had to lose a sense, which one would you choose?

You can add any of your own that would be specific to your group as well. After this activity, explain that tonight we're going to dig into a part of the story of the Early Church where they all got together and had a big argument, one that had profound implications for the future of the movement...

WORD

The Council of Jerusalem

There's a lot of background to this passage, and the story doesn't make loads of sense without a load of context. The Wikipedia page for 'Council of Jerusalem' is a helpful starting point and gives plenty of links to more detailed background information: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Jerusalem#Historical_background.

But in essence, here's what you need to know: The Early Church was born out of Jewish roots, and for much of its early history it still mainly existed within this Jewish world. Many of these first-generation followers of Jesus then still affirmed all of the beliefs and practices of the Judaism they'd come from, but with the (fairly crucial!) addition that Jesus was the Messiah. But as the gospel spread beyond Jewish confines, this created some really important questions: Would converts need to be circumcised? Were they still expected to keep all of the laws in the Torah (the Law of Moses)? Some of their leaders, such as James, believed the Torah needed to be followed, whereas Paul, who had been out witnessing to the Gentiles since his dramatic conversion, disagreed. And so with this context, the leaders of the Church convened in Jerusalem...

Now you've got that context, read the passage below – Acts 15:1-35. Print off a copy for everyone or hand out Bibles so they can follow along. You may like to invite the group to read it out loud, with people taking a few verses at a time, or invite one of the young people more confident in this area to read it all.

Acts 15 New International Version (NIV)

The Council at Jerusalem

15 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³ The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through

Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.’

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.’

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. ‘Brothers,’ he said, ‘listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ ‘After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,

¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’ –

¹⁸ things known from long ago.

¹⁹ ‘It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.’

The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

³⁰ So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁴ ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

After you've read it through, give the group a few minutes to read through the passage on their own, inviting them all to bring to mind one thing that stands out to them from this passage and ask if anyone would like to share what stood out with them.

What's interesting about this passage is that we know what the disagreement was, and we know what the conclusion was, but we don't see the argument fully play itself out. So we're going to do that now. Split the group in two and give each section one side of the disagreement to prepare. Each group should prepare a short presentation on their side of the divide (whether they believe it or not), and then respond to what the other side have presented. Give them 15 minutes to prepare their arguments, and then let it play out.

Invite the group to reflect on this experience: How did it feel to make these arguments? Did it change what they thought about it at all? After this, discuss these questions, either as a whole group, or in smaller groups, depending on numbers:

- * Why do you think the Bible doesn't go into detail on the discussion?
- * Why do you think the apostles came to the conclusion that they did?
- * Are you pleased with their decision? Why, or why not?
- * What can we learn from the way they moved on from this decision, even those who disagreed with it?

WORSHIP

Tell the group that we're going to spend some time considering what Jesus might be saying to us in all of this. Invite them to make themselves comfortable and to close their eyes. You might want to play some worship music in the background. Ask the group to reflect on relationships and disagreements in their own lives, maybe in their own corps/ church. Are there any broken friendships that need healing at the moment? Do they need God's help to disagree well? Invite the group to hand these issues and relationships over to God, and to ask him to be with them as they face challenge and disagreement.

WITNESS

Set the group a challenge as they leave. How can they embody the spirit of the apostles this week? What does it look like to disagree well and move on in relationship after disagreement? Ask them what difference this would make to their lives. Challenge them to respond differently to disagreement this week, and to come back next week with some stories of the difference this has made.

WHAT DOES THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM MEAN FOR US TODAY?

WELCOME

We both have blue socks!

As the group gathers, ask how they got on with last week's challenge to react differently to opposition and disagreement. What impact did that have? Has anyone got a story they would like to share?

In today's session we're thinking about inclusion, and here's a game to kick it off:

Often we think that people who are different from us in one obvious way are completely different from us, so we never bother to find out more, integrate or include. This is a game all about finding unlikely things in common. Get the group into pairs, deliberately into pairs with someone who perhaps they don't know as well. The pairs now have three minutes to find as many things that they have in common (things that everyone has in common such as 'breathes in and out' don't count!). The pairs who find the most things in common wins.

WORD

Who's in and who's out?

We're heading back to the Council of Jerusalem again this week. Last week we focused on the details of the passage and how they came to the decision that they did. Ask the group if anyone would like to recap the story and what was discussed last week. After someone has done this (or you have done it if no one comes forward) ask the group to discuss what has most stood out to them since we look at it last week – have they had any new insights or observations? Then explain that today we're going to examine what impact this decision has on us today.

Rather than giving the group the answers, ask them what practical impact they think the decision discussed last week made back then, and what difference it makes today. You may want to re-read the passage – Acts 15:1-35 – to get their heads back into the story.

Once you've had that feedback, say: This story is one of inclusion. For the Early Church leaders, it was about how they included and treated non-Jewish followers of Jesus and to what extent those converts had to assimilate into Jewish culture and tradition. This one meeting had a profound impact on the way all of us today follow Jesus – our lives would be very different if they'd come to the opposite conclusion. Jesus' followers must have been fairly nervous about making such a big decision, but they did so with his blessing. During his time on Earth he'd told them that whatever they 'bound on Earth' would be 'bound in Heaven' and whatever they 'loosed on Earth' would be 'loosed in Heaven' (Matthew 18:18). These terms 'binding and loosing' refer to the process rabbis went through when they attempted to figure out what God's word meant for them today. Jesus was giving his followers permission to interpret what it meant to follow Jesus, even after he'd gone.

Jesus' promise wasn't just for a specific group of people – Paul wasn't there when Jesus said it, and he had a key role in the discussion. This same authority and permission is given to us today. In light of this passage we've talked about, we're going to examine what this could mean for us. When it came down to it, this was a story about inclusion and change – how far should the Early Church go to include new members, and how much did those new members need to change to be involved? This is a question we should be asking of ourselves today. Who are the people who feel excluded from our churches? What would it mean for us to be intentionally inclusive towards them?

After chatting this through with the young people, split them into groups of four or five, and give them ten minutes or so to think about some of the groups of people who may, for one reason or another, feel excluded from church (they might like to think about the Church generally, or specifically The Salvation Army). Encourage the group to think about both contentious issues (such as LGBT-identifying people) but also those for whom church is tricky, such as those with additional needs. Remind them this isn't about theological conclusions, but making a church that is welcome and accessible to all.

Once they've come up with the list, invite the groups back together to share their lists. Once the lists have been shared, pick out the ones which have been mentioned by the most groups, choosing as many of them as there are groups. Then give each group one of these groups of people, and another ten minutes to come up with some really practical ways that we could make church more accessible and welcoming for this group of people. Once they've done this, invite each group to share these ideas. Remind the group that inclusion is central to the gospel; throughout his ministry Jesus spent time with and welcomed those that society treated as outsiders – it's our job to do the same.

You may want to invite some wider church leadership to this session or present the group's feedback to them in some way. It would certainly be helpful for this activity to move beyond just an exercise into a real force for change in the way we do church. You could even ask the young people how we should move forward with these ideas.

WORSHIP AND WITNESS!

Give the group a sheet of A4 paper and say: While it's great to think about the ways we can be inclusive as a church, there are also ways we can do this ourselves. There are times when all of us protect ourselves and our social groups, to the exclusion of others. Play some music* and invite the group to reflect on times they have been guilty of this, making a fold in their piece of paper each time one comes to mind. After a few minutes, they should unfold the paper and write down the names of three people they want to intentionally include at school, college, work or some place else this week. Close by praying for one another as we attempt to be more inclusive and show the love of Jesus in this way.

* music suggestion: 'Come as you are' by Karl and Alvin Allison on *Songs That No One Taught Us* (SPS 290, available on the SP&S website)

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE: GUIDANCE

WELCOME

What did they say again?

This month's spiritual discipline is guidance. At first glance guidance might not feel like a discipline, but rather a gift that God gives us. But as we'll discover in this session, it's a discipline that we have to keep going back to, submitting ourselves to, in order to get the best out of it. To illustrate this, set your group a treasure hunt in two teams around your building or meeting space. Explain that there is one correct, complicated route, with items to collect on the way. Prepare well beforehand, making the instructions and route for this as complicated and intricate as possible. These should be read out to the group once at the start. After they've been read out, explain that the team who wins won't just be the first ones to finish, but the ones who need to come back and ask for the instructions again as few times as possible. (If they come back the same amount of times, the quickest team obviously wins!)

Once you've done this, ask the group how they found this activity. What was it like not to have the instructions in front of you? Did it feel odd not being able to ask for repeats? Explain that in this session we're looking at the discipline of guidance, and how God guides us. Ask the group to share any times they know they've been guided by God – what direction were they pointed in? How did God guide them? It might be good to have a couple of leaders prepped to share a story at this point.

WORD – ABRAHAM

Say: When we think about guidance as a discipline, we're not talking about desperate prayers when we don't know where to go, or the odd bit of fasting when we need to make decisions about jobs or future plans. When we talk about guidance as a discipline, we talk about an ongoing relationship, regularly submitting ourselves to God's will, no matter what that costs.

Today we're going to spend some time in the story of Abraham, a man who sought regular guidance from God, guidance that led him in directions he wasn't planning on, but a journey that led to him becoming a hero of the Jewish faith.

Abraham's story is massive, so before digging into it, show the first four and a half minutes of this video to give you an overview: <https://youtu.be/F4isSyennFo>. Once you've watched the video, split the young people into groups, giving each group one of these passages either printed out or in Bibles:

-  Genesis 12:1-9
-  Genesis 13
-  Genesis 15
-  Genesis 17
-  Genesis 18:1-15
-  Genesis 22:1-19

Encourage each group to read their passage and then discuss these questions:

- * How is Abraham guided in this passage?
- * What does Abraham do to be guided in this way?
- * What impact does it make?

Tell the groups they've got 10-15 minutes to read through their passage and discuss the questions, before the groups all come back together to feed back about their passage to the other groups. As they're feeding back, make a note of the different ways that God guides Abraham in the story. Once they've finished, ask the group if there are other ways

SESSION
THREE

that they have been guided by God, or that they've seen other people be guided by God, that aren't on the list they've created (this could include through friends, by reading the Bible etc).

Say: We see how clearly God guides Abraham in this story, and this can be done in a variety of ways. But we also see how open Abraham was to that guidance; he doesn't know the full story from the start, but continually goes back to God to seek further guidance. Sometimes we might want the full story at the start, but this doesn't seem to be how God operates. Instead, guidance is about ongoing submission to the will of God in our lives.

Ask the group to discuss some practical ways we can submit ourselves to God's will on an ongoing basis – how do we get better at figuring out what God might be saying? (Answers might include regular quiet time, praying with others, reading the Bible, listening to what God might say through you to other people, trusting your feelings and knowing when they're from God.) Encourage the group to find one of these practices which works for them and to commit to doing this each day in the next week.

WORSHIP

Let's do it

It's one thing to talk about submitting to God's guidance, but let's get stuck in and do it. As we've seen in the story of Abraham, God guides us in many ways, but in this session we're going to end by praying for and with one another. Tell the group that we're going to spend some time seeking God's guidance for each other, and that they're welcome to engage with this as much or as little as they'd like. Explain that the way we'll do it is by taking it in turns to step into the middle of a circle of the rest of the group while everyone else prays (out loud or in their head) that God would continue to guide that person. The person being prayed for might share something specific they're looking for guidance in, or just generally to be aware of God's leading on their lives. Allow each person to be prayed for, for a couple of minutes. The rest of the group may feel God has something to say to that person, but remind them that they should be sharing things which are encouraging, and that we shouldn't necessarily expect a direct answer. After each person has been prayed for, close by praying that we would all continue to submit to God's guidance.

¹¹Adapted from www.energize.uk.net/meeting-plans/1680

ACTS INTO ACTION: GOING TO THOSE WHO FEEL EXCLUDED FROM GOD'S LOVE

Our Bible passages this month have focused on the Council of Jerusalem, and the Early Church making themselves more welcoming to those outside their doors. We've discussed what that meant then, and what it might mean for us today. But now it's time to put it into action.

William Temple famously said: *'The Church is the only society that exists primarily for the benefit of those that are not members.'* And yet so often the way we do things seems aimed at the people already here, rather than those outside of our group. Perhaps this is less of a problem within youth work, but if the average person off the street came into our churches on a Sunday morning, do you ever imagine what they'd think?

Tell the group that while trying to do this is a good start, sometimes we don't know what people would want, so we end up guessing! This month's Acts into action will move beyond the youth group and outside the doors of our churches. It should involve the adults just as much as the young people, so invite a group of adults passionate about inclusion to get involved in scheming and come along to the planning session.

There are three elements to this:

- 1. Who?** There are tons of people outside of our churches who wouldn't think about sticking their heads in. Rather than aiming to do something for all of them, we're going to target a specific group and put something on for them. Spend some time when you're together deciding on a group to target – it could be friends from school, homeless people, those who used to come to church but don't any more... whichever group you feel most equipped to reach out to. You may want to start this conversation by reminding the group of the Council of Jerusalem, and what we learnt from it.
- 2. Talk to them!** So often our plans are massively disconnected from the people we're planning for. Before we get on with planning what we do, intentionally talk to some of the people you'd invite – what kind of thing would they want to come to? What would make church more welcoming to them? What would they invite friends to? Sending the group off to do this during the week will make decisions and planning much more informed.
- 3. Do it!** The rest is up to you! Once you've had these conversations, get back together to share what we've heard, and to dream, scheme and plan a way forward – off you go!