

Teaching Plan
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: December 17, 2017
Lesson Title: "Available to All"
Lesson Passage: Acts 15:6-11,24-31

ABOUT THIS LESSON

The "Jerusalem Conference" described in this lesson was a pivotal event in the history of early Christianity, for it resolved a crucial question that was at the heart of a serious threat to the developing Christian movement: Could Gentiles be saved without submitting to the legalistic requirements of Judaism? The answer to that question would determine whether Christianity would become a worldwide religion or remain just another sect of Judaism.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

- (1) Describe the circumstances leading to the Jerusalem Conference.
- (2) Explain how the outcome of this conference had an important bearing on the Christian mission.

BEGINNING THE LESSON

Begin with this statement: "Christian unity has always been an elusive ideal. From the beginning, Christianity has been torn by controversy." *Ask class members to think of some issues that have created dissension among Christians from time to time.* EXAMPLES: Church-state relations. Politics. Birth control. Baptismal practices. Charismatic practices. Different Bible versions. Attitudes toward war and peace. *Tie this in with the Jerusalem Conference:* A major dispute among first-century Christians had to do with the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. This week's lesson passage tells us what happened when this controversy led to a showdown in Jerusalem.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. *Use this outline to guide discussion of the Jerusalem Conference:*

- I. Historical Background
- II. Immediate Cause
- III. The Issues
- IV. Peter's Bold Stand
- V. The Results

2. Explain the **Historical Background** of the Jerusalem Conference as follows: (1) Christianity was born in a Jewish environment. The first great influx of converts into the church took place in Jerusalem, the center of Judaism (Acts 2:41). Early converts included even priests (Acts 6:7), Pharisees (Acts 15:5), and synagogue officials (Acts 18:8). (2) Christian teaching was often based on the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures (*for example, refer to Luke 24:27 and Acts 8:35*). Some Jewish believers assumed, therefore, that Christianity was an extension of Jewish religion, and they concluded that no one could be a Christian without also observing the law of Moses. (3) Jews typically believed that

they alone were God's chosen people and that Gentiles had no part in the kingdom of God. (4) Some Jewish Christians could not rid themselves of their society's traditional contempt for Gentiles (*refer to Galatians 2:11-12 as an illustration of this*).

3. Describe the **Immediate Cause** of the Jerusalem Conference: Having heard about the great number of Gentile conversions in Antioch, some of the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem went to Antioch to persuade the Gentile believers there that they could not truly be saved without submitting to circumcision and the law of Moses (*refer to Acts 15:1*). Paul and Barnabas, who had already seen numerous Gentiles come to the Lord, challenged this point of view; so it was decided that they would go to Jerusalem to present their case to the leaders of the church there (15:2).

4. Explain the **Issues** involved in the Jerusalem Conference: First, there was the question concerning salvation. Basically, the question was, "Can a person be a Christian without becoming a practicing Jew?" The Judaizers were perfectly willing for Gentiles to be converted, as long as they also met the requirements of the Mosaic law. Had this view prevailed, Paul and Silas would have had to say to the jailer at Philippi (Acts 16:31), "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be circumcised, and you will be saved." Second, there was a question concerning fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Strict Jews believed that they could not have any dealings with Gentiles without being defiled by them (*refer to Jn. 4:9b; Acts 10:28a; Acts 11:2-3*). If Jewish Christians contaminated themselves by associating with Gentile Christians, they would be rejected by other Jews. The Judaizers apparently valued their relations with non-Christian Jews more than their fellowship with Gentile Christians.

5. Call attention to **Peter's Bold Stand**. Ask someone to read Acts 15:7-11 aloud, then make these points: (1) Peter's bold insistence that God "has put no difference" between Jew and Gentile (Acts 15:9) echoes the words he had uttered earlier in the house of Cornelius (*refer to Acts 10:34-35*). (2) He affirms the position held by Barnabas and Paul, that the hearts of the Gentiles were purified by faith (Acts 15:9), and that the Jews had been saved in the same way, "through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:11).

6. Comment on the **Results** of the conference: (1) The importance of the Jerusalem Conference lies in the fact that, for the first time, church leaders officially disavowed the claims of the Judaizers (Acts 15:23-28) although they did request that the Gentiles respect certain Jewish customs (15:29). (2) Most importantly, they affirmed beyond any question the doctrine of salvation by grace.

CLOSING THE LESSON

Observe that there are some Christians in our day who want to impose additional requirements, beyond simple faith in Christ, as conditions of salvation. These include cultural biases, membership in certain churches or even approved political preferences. Note that these modern-day "Judaizers" are just as wrong as their 1st-century forerunners were.