



October 19, 2025

Group Study: The Council (Acts 15:1-21)

1. What does the Council's decision reveal about how the Spirit guides communities through conflict?
2. How do you understand the difference between the Council's clarity on salvation (turning to God alone) and its recommendations on social practice?
3. In what ways do compromise and humility help faith communities grow together?
4. What might it mean for us to "not trouble those who are turning to God" in our own church context?
5. How can honoring diverse traditions help build stronger Christian community today?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

October 19, 2025

"The Council"

Focal Text: Acts 15:1-21

<https://goodfaithmedia.org/bible-studies>

In this week's podcast, we're going to look at something that can make almost any church meeting tense: compromise.

Now, compromise doesn't always have a good reputation. In politics or business, it can sound like weakness. In faith, it can sound like watering down conviction. But what if, in God's community, compromise can actually be holy? What if it could be a sign that we're listening carefully to the Spirit and to each other?

Our text for this week, Acts 15 and the story of the Jerusalem Council, is a helpful case study in the art of holy compromise.

Imagine this: You're part of a growing congregation. People are coming in from all over—different backgrounds, traditions and expectations. One group wants to sing hymns; another prefers contemporary choruses. Someone thinks the pastor's robe is too formal; someone else insists it's too casual.

Now, multiply that tension by a few thousand years. That's Acts 15.

The early church was wrestling with a question that cut to the core of belonging: Do Gentile believers need to follow Jewish law (specifically circumcision) to be saved? And how should Jews and Gentiles relate to each other, when people from both groups are now following the way of Jesus?

The issue wasn't just theological; it was personal. It touched bodies, cultures and centuries of sacred tradition.

When the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem, the conversation could easily have become a power struggle. Instead, it becomes a moment of discernment.

Peter speaks up: He's seen God give the Holy Spirit to Gentiles without requiring them to follow the law. Paul and Barnabas share similar stories—you can go back just a few chapters in Acts to revisit their experiences. James listens to everyone and then anchors his conclusion in Scripture, Amos 9, where God promises that all nations will bear God's name.

And in the end, when it comes to social practice, they don't draw a hard theological line. They make recommendations that are practical in nature: The Gentiles should abstain from things polluted by idols, fornication, eating meat that was strangled, and eating blood. Because the recommendations were made, we assume that Gentiles were going to be changing some of their habits. And having Gentiles as full members within the faith community is going to be a change for the Jews.

It's not a perfect solution. It's uncomfortable for everyone. It's a compromise. But it's a holy one.

What makes it holy?

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It is a holy compromise because it honors both conviction and community. It protects the core truth, salvation by grace alone, while allowing room for difference in practice.

That's not weakness. That's wisdom.

Now, before we rush to applaud the Jerusalem Council for their unity, it's worth pausing to ask what kind of unity this really was. Because compromise isn't always holy. Sometimes it's just convenient. The Council shows us that the difference lies in how and why we choose to yield. Compromise often feels like losing. It feels like giving up ground we care about. But in Acts 15, the early church models a different kind of compromise, one that's rooted not in surrender but in solidarity.

When James and the apostles decide not to require Gentile believers to be circumcised, they aren't just choosing the path of least resistance. They're choosing the path that keeps the community together without sacrificing the heart of the gospel.

They give up something real—cultural pride, religious certainty, the comfort of sameness—all for the sake of love. And that's what makes their compromise holy. It's not transactional; it's transformational.

In a world where most arguments end with winners and losers, the Jerusalem Council invites us to imagine a different outcome: everyone leaves the negotiation table still belonging to each other.

Holy compromise happens when conviction meets compassion, when we trust that God's truth is big enough to hold multiple perspectives, and when we believe that the Spirit works through our willingness to listen as much as through our certainty.

So maybe compromise isn't the opposite of faithfulness. Maybe it's one of faithfulness's clearest fruits: a willingness to say, "I will bend—not because I'm weak, but because I love."

And finally, there's a moment in Acts 15:28 that's worth lingering on. When he's announcing the final decision, James makes this statement:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

That's the only time in the New Testament that phrase appears.

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“It seemed good ...” That’s humble language. It’s not, “Thus saith the Lord.” It’s not even, “We have reached the right conclusion and so ...”

James says, “This seems right to the Spirit and to us.”

This is a great example of what holy compromise sounds like: discernment shaped by humility. The Council trusted that the Spirit speaks not just to individuals but through community. Listening, storytelling, scripture and experience all became part of the Spirit’s work.

In our faith communities today, that’s a model worth reclaiming. Sometimes discernment looks less like thunder from heaven and more like a quiet, honest conversation that ends with, “This seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”

So what might holy compromise look like for your church and community? Maybe it means letting go of one way of doing things to make space for someone else’s way. Maybe it means learning to see disagreement not as danger, but as a sign that the Spirit is at work, widening our vision of God’s people.

Here are a few prompts to discuss, either on Sunday morning or throughout your week:

- When have you seen compromise strengthen a community instead of weaken it?
- How do you know when a decision seems “good to the Holy Spirit and to us”?
- What spiritual practices (silence, prayer, listening) might help your community discern together instead of deciding alone?
- Recall a time when you changed your mind for the sake of community. How did that feel? Was it loss? Freedom? Growth? Looking back at that experience, how might the Spirit have been teaching in that moment?

The Jerusalem Council reminds us that the Spirit’s work isn’t always dramatic. Sometimes it’s slow, communal and even a little messy.

Holy compromise is not about giving up truth. It’s about learning to trust that truth is big enough for all of us, and that the Spirit still speaks in the spaces between our certainties.

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May our churches, like that first council, learn to say with humility and hope:
“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.”