

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 15, Acts 13-15

6-Min. Video Overview

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Alright, today we are diving into one of the most pivotal, most explosive moments in the history of Christianity. We're getting this straight from the book of Acts chapters 13 through 15. And let me tell you, it's a wild story of culture clash, riots, and a huge, high-stakes debate that literally decided the future of an entire faith.

Let's get right into it. So this was the big question. The one that the very first followers of Jesus had to figure out.

You have this movement, right? It was born entirely within Judaism. But then all of a sudden, it starts attracting non-Jews, what they called Gentiles. And this forces its very first identity crisis.

Were they just a new sect of Judaism, or were they becoming something new entirely? Okay, so the story really kicks off with these two leaders, Paul and Barnabas, and they head out on this major missionary journey. And the challenge they faced was honestly immense. How do you communicate a message that's so deeply rooted in Jewish history and Jewish scripture to a Greco-Roman world that knows absolutely nothing about it? Now, Paul's strategy, which was pretty smart, was to start on familiar ground.

He went to the local synagogues. These were the centers of Jewish life, to make his case first. He was speaking to an audience that got the context, people who knew the scriptures he was about to unpack in a totally revolutionary way.

And what Paul does next, you know, it wasn't just a sermon. It was this masterful rereading of their entire history. He sets out to show his audience that the story they'd known their whole lives, the one they cherished, was all pointing to one specific jaw-dropping conclusion.

So Paul's argument, his whole goal, was to prove that Jesus wasn't some sudden interruption to the story of Israel. No, he was the long-awaited fulfillment. So he takes the very scriptures his audience revered, and he starts connecting the dots piece by piece to build this incredible case.

For instance, he pulls out this line from Psalm 2. And this wasn't just any old verse, you see. This came from an enthronement psalm, one used to celebrate a new king. And a lot of people already believed it was talking about the coming Messiah.

So by applying it to Jesus, Paul was making a huge, bold claim. Jesus is the true God-appointed king. And he just keeps building the case.

He pulls this quote from the prophet Isaiah, which is all about God's promise of an eternal dynasty for King David. And Paul's logic is brilliant. He says, look, David himself died, right? He's in the ground.

So that promise of an eternal dynasty couldn't just be for him. It had to be fulfilled in his descendant, Jesus, through the resurrection. And this is where it gets really clever.

Paul even used a recognized Jewish teaching method of his day to make his point. He linked the word holy in that Isaiah verse to another scripture, Psalm 16, which says God's holy one would not see decay. Since David did decay, Paul argues, the psalm must be pointing to the Messiah's resurrection.

He was literally speaking their language, using their own logic to prove his point. But okay, once the message moved outside the familiar walls of the synagogue and into the Gentile marketplace, well, that's when things got really messy. The mission, which was actually gaining a lot of traction, started to provoke these intense and sometimes pretty violent cultural clashes.

And let me tell you, their journey was anything but a peaceful tour. In one city, they get run out of town by the local leaders. In the next, they literally have to flee for their lives.

And then they get to a town called Lystra, where things go from just bizarre to life-threatening in the blink of an eye. So here's what goes down. Paul heals a man who had been unable to walk his entire life.

To Paul, this is a clear sign of God's power. But to the local crowd, well, they've got their own stories and their own gods, and they see something totally different happening. And this just perfectly illustrates the culture clash.

You see, the locals had this old legend that their chief god Zeus and his messenger Hermes had once visited their region. So when they see this miracle, they just map it onto their own story. They figure Paul, since he's the main speaker, must be Hermes.

And his quieter partner Barnabas, well, he must be Zeus himself. Can you even imagine the scene? The crowd starts bringing a bowl and garlands, and they're ready to offer a sacrifice to them. Paul and Barnabas are horrified.

They're tearing their clothes, trying to explain they're just men. But the situation was just so volatile. Soon after, some of their opponents from a previous city show up, and they turn the crowd.

The very same people who just tried to worship Paul as a god now drag him out of the city and stone him, leaving him for dead. So this mix of wild success and total chaos on their journey brings the whole movement to a breaking point. The news gets back to headquarters in Jerusalem, and it forces a crisis.

That central question could not be ignored any longer. All the leaders gathered for a debate that would define their future. And it all boiled down to this one question.

To be saved, did a non-Jew have to be saved by the 613 laws of Moses? To put it another way, did you have to become a Jew first to follow the Jewish Messiah? Everything, and I mean everything, hung on the answer. So two very clear sides emerged. On one side, you had a conservative group, which included some Christian Pharisees, and they argued yes, absolutely, to be saved you have to follow the whole Jewish law.

But on the other side, leaders like Peter, Paul, and Barnabas said, wait a minute, God has already shown he accepts the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit without them becoming Jews first. They argued salvation was by grace for everyone. I mean, the movement was right on the verge of splitting in two before it had even really gotten started.

The tension in that room must have been just immense. It fell to respected leaders like Peter and, crucially, James, who was the brother of Jesus and a real pillar in the Jerusalem church, to find some way forward. And what they came up with was, frankly, a remarkable compromise.

It was a solution that balanced theological conviction with incredible practical wisdom, and it paved the way for Christianity to become a truly global faith. We really have to understand how radical this was. In the ancient world, your religion and your ethnicity were almost always the exact same thing.

This decision was a fundamental break from that. So here's the solution they landed on, and it's known as the Jerusalem Decree. They decided that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised or keep the whole law of Moses.

Instead, they were asked to observe these four key practices. Now, why these four? Well, because these were the major cultural barriers, the big tripwires, that were preventing Jewish believers from being able to eat and have fellowship with Gentile believers. And this right here is the absolute key takeaway.

The decree wasn't a new checklist for earning salvation. Salvation was still by grace. This was about something called orthopraxy, which is really just a fancy way of saying, how do we actually live together as a community? It was a practical framework for mutual respect designed to allow two vastly different cultures to become one body, united in their faith.

So in a moment that could have shattered their movement, the very first Christians chose unity over uniformity. They built a bridge across a massive cultural divide. Their solution wasn't about making everyone the same, but about finding a way to live together with respect.

And it really forces us to ask ourselves, in our own deeply divided world, are we building walls or are we building bridges?