

Lessons From The Acts 15 Conference

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When I first came in the church back in the mid-'60s, I heard Mr. Armstrong say that one of the goals was to emulate the first century church, the original church founded by the apostles because doctrine had yet to be corrupted by Satan and he talked a lot about the corruption that occurred after the death of the apostles. And we know the history of Satan in that regard, how the doctrine was polluted over time and we see the results at this time of year especially.

With that in mind, much has been said about the account of the first recorded ministerial conference in Acts 15. Over the years, Acts 15 has been used to support everything from one man rule to democratic voting by a congregation. I've looked at arguments on both sides and heard discussions on both sides. Let's look at that account today. So if you would, turn to Acts 15 and you're going to want to place a marker there or a ribbon if you have one in your Bible because we'll be going back and forth as we go through the account.

Acts 15:1. *And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. (KJV)*

These were Christian men that came down from Judaea.

2) When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (KJV)

So we have to ask the question (I do often when I read the Bible): Why did God put this issue and the subsequent resolution of the issue in the Bible? What was the point? What was God trying to tell us? And obviously, He wants us to learn from this account. So the subject of the sermon, the title if you will, is

Lessons from the Acts 15 Conference

What we want to do is go over that conference, read what the Bible has to say about it and then in the end, see what lessons that we, as God's people, can learn from that.

1. How many elders were there in God's church at the time of Acts 15?

We know there were the original 12 and later we know that Paul and Barnabas came, and then James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ came. And by 31 AD, let's look and

see what happened. So let's go back to Acts 1 and look at verse 15. We're in Acts 1, after Pentecost, during Pentecost the holy spirit came and this picks up the account in verse 15:

Acts 1:15. *And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,) (KJV)*

So we see here in 31 AD there were 120 disciples. We can safely assume that some number of that 120 later became elders and most of them resided in the area of Jerusalem. Let's go to chapter 2, verse 41.

Acts 2:41. *Then they that gladly received (talking about Peter's word) his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls (souls means lives). (KJV)*

So we see here that you baptize 3,000, well you know that down the road, some of those 3,000 will become elders – don't know when but you can safely say that some would. Now Acts 6. We're kind of marching through Acts, getting to the conference to see how many elders there might have been.

Acts 6:1. *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. (KJV)*

So as the church grew, this is the account where the office of deacon was originated and deacons were selected but the reason they were selected and the reason there was a need was because the number of disciples was being multiplied. The church was growing very quickly. And obviously, these disciples that were being added, probably daily, some of them became elders down the road.

Now let's jump to Act 9:31. The church was being persecuted and now we're jumping into the context because now the persecution has stopped in Acts 9, verse 31.

Acts 9:31. *Then had the churches rest (from this persecution) throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied. (KJV)*

Because the persecution stopped, therefore the church could grow even faster. Now Judaea, Galilee and Samaria is an area about 150 miles north to south and about 50 miles east to west. And so most of these churches we're going to find out, probably had elders and many of these churches were within walking distance of Jerusalem. Now, when I say walking distance, it's not like two blocks down the road. Walking distance could mean many tens of miles but people were used to walking in those days, unlike us, and it was common that they would go out and walk tens of miles if they had to.

Then we see that a man named Ananias was probably an elder. Remember he was the one that laid hands on Paul and then Paul recovered his sight after he had the episode on the road to Damascus and you can check that in Acts 9:17-18. The fact that he laid hands on Paul indicates that he was probably an elder. Agabus who was called a prophet, was also probably – I would think he would be an elder, I think it's safe to assume that. Acts 11:27-28 talks about Agabus being a prophet.

Now let's go to Acts 13:1. This is about the church in Antioch.

Acts 13:1. *Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul (or Paul). (KJV)*

So these prophets and teachers almost certainly are/were elders. Now jump to the next chapter, verse 21. This tells us:

Acts 14:21. *And when they (referring to Paul and Barnabas) had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,
22) Confirming the [lives] of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. (KJV)*

Of course, all of us are learning that in our daily lives.

23) And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. (KJV)

So this tells us clearly that there were elders in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. The number of elders is starting to multiply as we march through here. Paul also told Titus, in Titus 1:5, to ordain elders in every city. As they would go through Galilee and Samaria and Judaea, they would preach in the synagogue and people would become interested, they would become converted, and churches would form, many of them in people's homes and over time, elders would be appointed.

Then we find that Paul and Barnabas took Titus to the Acts 15 conference and probably by that time, Titus was an elder. You find that in Galatians 2:1.

So closing out this first point, the number of elders was certainly in the multiple dozens. I think that is safe to say. It could have been 100, it could have been a little over 100, but there were many elders at the time coming up to the time of the Acts 15 conference.

2. Where were these elders located?

We've seen some of that already, but let's go through it. At the time of the Acts 15 conference, there were churches that were outside of Palestine, outside of that 150 miles north and south and 50 miles east and west. And we find (we won't turn there for the sake of time – I'll just give you the reference) but there were churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch and all of those are in modern day Turkey. I measured the distance and I'm not talking as the crow flies, but if you were to walk it or donkey it or however you were transported, if you went north from Jerusalem and hit the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea and then turned west to Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, that's about a 500-mile walk and you find that in Acts 14:21-23 which we just read. That's a long way away.

Then there was a church on the Island of Cyprus. That's in Acts 11:19. Cyprus is an island in the eastern end of the Mediterranean and that's only accessible by boat. So that makes travel difficult.

Then there was a church in Seleucia and if you march out the numbers, the miles, that's about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. You find that in Acts 13:14, 48. Three hundred miles on foot is a long way.

Then there was a church in Perga and Attalia. That is in modern day Turkey and that is another 500-mile walk from Jerusalem. You find that in Acts 14:25.

Prior to the Acts 15 conference, there are no other churches specifically mentioned, prior to Acts 15. Now maybe there were some more that just weren't mentioned, we don't know. But my guess is the elders in the churches that I just mentioned probably didn't attend the conference. It was just too long, too difficult, and frankly, travel in those days was very, very dangerous. There were robbers, there were all kinds of problems, you had the weather to contend with, it took a long time away from family and work and all of that.

So summarizing this second point, yes, there were potentially nine churches outside of Palestine, there could have been a few more, but we can assume that most of the elders resided within the general area of Palestine, the majority, a majority resided in the area of Palestine. And that area of Palestine being 150 miles by 50 miles, they were in possible commuting distance to Jerusalem. Again, if it's a 100 mile journey, 75 mile journey, depending on the age of the elder and depending on circumstances, yes you could say it's possible to commute to Jerusalem for the conference and it's possible that they just couldn't for various reasons.

3. Did Paul, as an apostle, unilaterally resolve the dispute.

Remember, the dispute came to the awareness of Paul and Barnabas, and Paul is an apostle, and so could Paul have just made the decision by himself? Well, let's go back to Acts 15:1 and let's read it in the context of asking this question: Did Paul feel like he had the authority and the power to resolve this issue?

Acts 15:1. And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. (KJV)

In verse 2 we see that:

2) ... Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (KJV)

So we see here that Paul and Barnabas didn't accept the teachings of these men from Judaea and they disputed with them. They had, apparently, a fairly heated argument. And these were fellow-Christians, they just believed differently than Paul and Barnabas and so the church at Antioch – Paul and Barnabas being there and these men from Judaea being visitors – the church in Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas and, it says, "certain others." Now we don't know who the certain others are. It could be some other elders there, it could be some upstanding members there. We just don't know. The Bible doesn't tell us.

The end of this third point is that it's obvious that Paul didn't step in and say, "I'm the apostle and I will make the decision and I will settle this once and for all," and just stop it when it first came up. He didn't do that. Even though he was an apostle, he did not do that.

We can see here clearly that Paul and Barnabas were subject to the conference in Jerusalem and that conference, as we just read at the end of Act 15:1 that they were subject to the conference in Jerusalem and that conference was composed of other apostles and other elders. So they felt that the whole group of elders and apostles should get together and discuss this issue and then come to a resolution.

4. Who attended the conference?

As we've seen, probably a majority of the elders that resided in a reasonable commuting distance attended. My guess is, it doesn't say, but my guess is all the elders were invited, even the ones at a great distance. Or if they weren't invited they were certainly free to come. My guess is that letters went out to those churches around

the eastern end of the Mediterranean, up in Turkey, announcing the conference and if they could make it, they were probably invited.

But it's obvious, too, that not all the elders could attend. Not all the elders, even though they were invited, could attend. It's the same thing for us today when we have a conference. We have illness, you have age, you have distance and then you have time problems, job problems, family problems that can all interfere with attending a conference.

And particularly in Acts 15, when travel was very slow, travel was very dangerous, it's obvious that not 100% of the elders attended. They just couldn't. So we see here that, my guess is that since most of the churches were in Palestine, if you add it up, all of the possible attendees of all the elders and all the apostles, that I think it's reasonable to assume that maybe a majority attended but we are not sure – we don't know.

And it's possible, in fact probably likely, that the members of the Jerusalem church that hosted the conference, that's where the conference was held, could have attended as observers. And yet even there, church members, they have time constraints, they have job constraints, they have family constraints and all of that, so even in that regard, not the whole church attended. I think that's easy for us to understand.

Acts 15:4. *And when they were come to Jerusalem (Paul and Barnabas), they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, ...(KJV)*

So we see here that the church hosted the conference and my guess is that some of the apostles – like we used to do in ministerial conferences in Worldwide in the old days, you'd go to Pasadena and you'd bunk with some church members there locally. I'm sure that's what happened here in this Acts 15 conference.

So point 4 is probably a majority of the elders attended, that's most likely but we don't know, we're not sure, and we're not sure of the exact numbers.

5. Who was responsible for resolving the problem?

Now we get into the nitty-gritty. This is crucial and this, I think, is one reason that God included this incident. Acts 15 again, let's look at verse 2 this time.

Acts 15:2. *When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (KJV)*

Well, why would they go there if the apostles and elders weren't responsible for resolving the issue?

6) And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. (KJV)

So here I think we see a few things. There was no dictatorial head, it didn't say they went to Peter or James or somebody to decide the matter. They said they went to Jerusalem so that all the apostles, all the elder could consider the matter. Therefore, I think we can safely assume that all the apostles and elders, as a group, were responsible for deciding the issue. And the members of the Jerusalem church and the outlying churches relied on the judgment of those apostles and those elders (as we're going to see in a minute) guided by the holy spirit.

Now during the conference, many elders spoke. Those from Judaea, the one that brought this teaching down that you had to be circumcised in verse 1 of Acts 15, they had to have been given the time to state their case because that's why this whole brouhaha started in the first place. It's not recorded in Acts 15 but obviously they stated their case. Look at verse 7.

7) And when there had been much disputing, ... (KJV)

Well, okay, if there's much disputing, then obviously many people spoke and could it be that some of the local Jerusalem members had their say? We don't know. But many people spoke, certainly the elders were there discussing the issue and were giving their feelings on the issue.

Now, we've got to remember that the majority in attendance, the majority of the elders were Jews because remember, the Gentiles were just coming into the church, therefore, that's why this whole circumcision question surfaced – it's because you have now uncircumcised males coming into the church and the question was: Should they be circumcised before they can be baptized? Do they need to be circumcised in order to be saved? That's the crux of the issue.

So you have – we don't know – 100, 150 people all told – I don't know, were there and the majority of them were Jews. Now I worked for a company back in the '70s that was headed by three Jews. And I know firsthand what the term "much disputing" is all about because there were heated arguments and gesturing and shouting and just going at it tooth and nail. It's like the old joke: you get ten Jews in a room to decide a question and you have fifteen different opinions. And that is true. Jews being intellectuals, they can come at it from several different angles with several different opinions and I'm sitting there rolling my eyes as a west Texan watching this and so I've seen it firsthand. So I can only imagine the discussions, and some I guess, were probably fairly heated at times.

12) Then all the multitude kept silence, ... (KJV)

Well that means if they kept silence, before that they weren't keeping silence. They were discussing, maybe even arguing shouting and yelling. You hope not, but it could have been. Then we see in verse 7 that Peter spoke and there are 111 words recorded about what Peter said. And then in verse 12 Paul and Barnabas spoke but their words are not recorded, don't know why but they just weren't recorded. But obviously there were the ones that disputed with those who came down through Judaea so they had much to say about that – Paul and Barnabas. Then in verse 13, James, the half-brother of Christ, who was the elder of the Jerusalem church, he spoke. And there are 160 words recorded out of James' mouth during this conference.

So we see here in summary of point five, who was responsible, it is obvious that the apostles and the elders were responsible to resolve this controversy and they all had their say. Then we arrive at the next point, this is the crucial one, of course.

6. How was the decision reached?

How did they come to a decision? You have dozens, if not more, people with varying views, varying backgrounds, most were Jews, maybe some were Gentiles, and they each had their own opinion. Their own viewpoint. But after all the apostles, all the elders and maybe some of the local church members there had their say, as recorded all four apostles: Paul, Barnabas, Peter and James, came to the same conclusion. Now, they said it in different words, but they came to the same conclusion.

Now how did that happen? And here's where faith comes in because they came to the same conclusion by the guidance of the holy spirit. You see, where are we if we can't count on God's holy spirit leading us and guiding us. Let's go to Romans 8:14. This we have to have absolute faith in, we have to know to the depth of our being, this verse. There are many others, by the way, but for the sake of time, we'll just quote this one.

Romans 8:14. *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. (KJV)*

Now let's understand this word "led" is very important. God's holy spirit does not kick us. God's holy spirit isn't like God has a whip and a chair and He's driving us in a certain direction. Satan does that. Satan provokes. Satan puts attitudes of anger and fear and resentment and bitterness and all of that in people's minds and gets them in a lather and gets them stirred up and they go to battle. But you see, God's spirit leads. It quietly leads us. And that's why we have to pay attention to that. When I get some emotion – I'm doing fine, everything's going okay – and then all of a sudden some spirit comes in like depression, gloominess, anger, fear, apprehension, whatever it might be, my first thought is: Where on earth did that come from? Because a minute ago everything was fine. Well, I think we all know where that comes from, the prince of the power of the air and he broadcasts, he has the power to broadcast emotions and feelings and flashbacks and memories all to get us stirred up.

While in contrast to that, you see, the holy spirit quietly leads us. And that means we have to take a deep breath, calm down and pay attention to God guiding us and you can't do that in the middle of an emotional rant or you can't do that while your heart's pounding and the veins in the neck are sticking out and the face is getting red and hands are trembling and all that. You can't listen to God's holy spirit in that state.

So we see here that after all of the falderal, that the apostles and the elders reached a conclusion because they allowed the holy spirit to lead them to that conclusion. A decision was reached by a consensus of all the elders present again by the guidance of the holy spirit among that group.

Now historically in God's church, our experience in God's church, in the early days of the Worldwide Church of God, for those of you who were around at that time, God did the same thing. Exactly the same thing. Let me read from a Good News article from January, 1957, titled "Christ Did Put Authority and Rule in His Church" on page 23. Mr. Armstrong is writing and he says:

When God's apostle (he was referring to himself even at that early 1957 as God's apostle) and ministers come together today to consider a matter in question, the procedure is the same (referring to Acts 15). First there was an appeal to God to reveal His will and guide us that the decision will be His and not ours. (How true.) Then there is a discussion. This is an earnest seeking for all the facts bearing on the question. Quite often in our own minds we feel that the decision is going to be just the opposite of what it finally turns out to be under God's guidance. When we came together to learn and decide whether to continue the policy of establishing grade and high schools or whether to close up the one then already started in Gladewater during the first hour or two of the discussion nearly all of us believed the decision was going to be to close up one school and never establish another. (They were known in those days as Imperial Schools – grade schools and high schools for church members' children.) But after adjourning to pray over it further and sleep over it, we came together the next day and it was clearly revealed to all that God has given His church responsibility to feed the flock and that this includes the children. In every instance where God's ministers in this Philadelphia era of the church have come together to make a ruling, our minds have been put in complete accord. There is no voting but if there were a secret ballot it would be found that God led us and made us unanimously of one mind. (Notice this next sentence.) In no sense do I as the senior-ranking minister impose any decision of mine on the other ministers. In every instance the decision has been as much their definite conviction as mine.

So up until that time, the Worldwide Church of God was ruled by a consensus of the elders. Obviously, Mr. Armstrong was the head and he led the discussions but by his

own words, he didn't impose his will on the other ministers. Now as we know, that later changed. But up until 1957, the church was doing their best to emulate what happened in the first century church.

So we see here summarizing this sixth point, how was this decision made in Acts 15, the decision was reached through a consensus of all the elders present. I think that's pretty obvious.

7. All abided by the council's decision.

Here is the responsibility of everybody else, those who did not attend the conference, maybe some who did. You see, once a decision was made, the news of that decision was sent out to all the churches.

Acts 15:22. Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: 23) And they wrote letters by them after this manner; (then apparently a quote or paraphrase from the letter) The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: 24) Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: (KJV)

And they're saying here that they're writing back to the church in Antioch, particularly where this brouhaha started and they're saying that "Men came from us" meaning in the area of Judaea, they went up to Antioch and they taught this but "we haven't authorized this and so we're writing to you to tell you so."

25) It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, (KJV)

So we see here that once the decision was rendered, that news of that decision, letters, visits, all of that, went out to the churches. Now look at chapter 16, verse 4.

Acts 16:4. And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, .. (KJV)

So these decrees said, "This is what has been decided and you must keep this."

4b) ... decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. (KJV)

So these letters went out all over to all the churches in the Middle East saying, "This is the problem and this is the decision and we expect you to keep, adhere to this decision."

Now, you have to stop and ask the question: Was every elder happy with the decision? Well, knowing human beings, probably not. There were some elders that probably weren't too happy about that. Now we have no record about that. It isn't recorded in the book of Acts but knowing human beings, there were some that were probably disgruntled or upset and it's not recorded.

And we have to remember that if you were a Jew and the majority of the church members were Jews, it was a huge paradigm shift for the Jews to allow Gentiles in the church in the first place. That was a gigantic shift for them because they had been taught from birth not to associate with Gentiles. In fact, the Pharisees, if their sleeve touched the sleeve of a Gentile, he would have to go home and wash because you don't come into contact with something unclean and Gentiles were viewed as something unclean.

So you have probably a majority of the church, men and women, believing that Gentiles were unclean. And now, all of a sudden they're coming into the church. And the Jews had been taught going back to Moses and Abraham that men had to be circumcised. So you have a church composed mainly of Jews that had a problem with Gentiles coming in in the first place, and have a problem with uncircumcised Gentiles coming in. Remember David said, "How can this uncircumcised Philistine (referring to Goliath) defy the armies of God?" Well, if you're a loyal, good old card-carrying Jew in the church, and all of a sudden uncircumcised Gentiles come in the church, I am certain that some people were not happy. They got upset and they mumbled and grumbled and complained and all of that and then here these fellas from Judaea come to Antioch and say, "Any Gentiles out there, you've got to be circumcised. You're not going to be saved if you're not circumcised."

Well, the decision was discussed. The elders and apostles got together, they discussed it, they were led by the holy spirit, guided by the holy spirit, they made a decision and guess what? The churches accepted the decision. Let's go to Acts 15, verse 30.

Acts 15:30. *So when they were dismissed (the conference was over), they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle (the ruling from the conference):*

31) Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation. (KJV)

Consolation in the Greek means *comfort*. They rejoiced for the comfort. Why? Because the issue was settled. It was done. It was over with. "We don't have to have any more arguments, any more fights, don't have to have people going after each other." And that was good. And you just got to believe that the male Gentiles in the

church heaved an enormous sigh of relief. Can you image some man coming into the church, 80 years old, and they want him to get circumcised? And so obviously there was great relief among the male Gentiles and probably the female Gentiles too that circumcising of adults was not in the cards, and people rejoiced.

It was just the same when the Divorce and Remarriage (D&R) question was resolved back in the '70s because the church at that time ruled that if you had been married before and then remarried and you came into the church, that first marriage was binding and so when the ministers visited people for the first time, and people were coming into the church by droves, the ministers in those days, and I've heard many, many times over, that they went into the first time visit with knots in their stomach because they might be responsible for breaking up a happy family with kids. And obviously, they didn't like that and as the male Gentiles, when the D&R thing was changed and the fact that marriages prior to conversion God did not put his stamp of approval on, there was huge relief in the church, great relief in the church. This was back in the early mid-'70s.

So we see here that all abided by the decision, even though I imagine some were not happy, and the brethren though, had faith that God guided the conclusion. And you say, "Okay, well maybe I'm not 100% behind it but I have faith that God was with the apostles and elders and maybe I don't see it right now, but this was the decision and I have faith that God guided the decision so let's move on. Let's go forward."

Another big issue of this conference centers around one word in Acts 15. That leads to point number eight.

8. What about the word "sentence" in verse 19 of Acts 15?

The word sentence is from the King James and let me read it out of the King James. James is talking. Obviously he has great credibility, great authority, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, head of the Jerusalem church which hosted the conference and he says:

***Acts 15:19.** Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: (KJV)*

This is the only translation, and I have checked dozens, and this is the only translation I am aware of that uses the word sentence. All the other translations use different words. In Mr. Armstrong's later years, he used the word sentence to support one-man rule. He said James was the head guy and he says, "My sentence is..." and that ended the discussion. It was all over with. Once James spoke, it was a done deal. He said that early on that James was the head and then later said that Peter was the head as those of us who were there at the time know. And today in God's church some do the same thing. Some head of a group says, "Look, right here, verse 19, James solved the matter, therefore that means James was the head of the church at the time, he could

make a unilateral decision – yes, he heard everybody but he made the final unilateral decision.”

Well, here’s the issue with James’ use of the word sentence. Now if you just look at the word and say, “My sentence is ...” it could be a dictatorial final decree. He could be merely stating his opinion, or he could be summarizing the existing consensus. And all of the people talked and then you had the three others, Paul, Barnabas and Peter said the same thing and then he just says, “I’m just summarizing what’s been said up to this point and my sentence is ...”

The Greek word for sentence in the King James is Strong’s 2919 and it’s the Greek word *krino* and it means *to conclude, to decree, to determine, to judge or to think*. Any of those are possible: conclude, decree, determine, judge, think. The Young’s Concordance says *to judge*. If you check other translations, here is what you find: in the New King James, Revised Standard Version, New International Version, New English Bible, Twentieth Century New Testament and the Living Bible all say basically that James said *In my judgment* or *I judge*. In other words they use the word judge rather than sentence.

The Cassirer, Today’s English Version, Jewish New Testament, Philipps Goodspeed, Moffatt, Amplified, Good News for Modern Man say *It is my opinion* or *I am firmly of the opinion*. So they use the word opinion rather than sentence.

Then the Rieu Translation translates it as James saying *so I propose*. That’s the only one that I found that uses that term.

Then the New Revised Standard, the New Testament in Basic English says *my decision is* or *I have reached the decision*. Doesn’t say whether it’s the final decision. He could say “I’ve reached the decision for myself,” or you could say, “I’ve reached the decision for all of you.”

The only one to definitively say that something supporting a one-man rule was the Jerusalem Bible. It was the only one to say *I rule*. The only translation to use that term.

So if we summarize all the translations and the Greek and all of that, most translations say it was James’ personal opinion or his judgment. And from the above translations, there is absolutely no way we can be sure. We just don’t know. Most of the translations indicate that it was a judgment or an opinion, but remember translations are by human beings and translations are made by human beings without God’s spirit and so we obviously have to keep that in consideration.

Mr. Armstrong, remember, admonished us many times that we can’t establish doctrine on one scripture. Can’t do that. So with that in mind, talking about sentence and one-man rule verses all that we’ve discussed so far, let’s look at some related scriptures that

might enlighten us as to what the bible means when it says this Greek word krino. How should we take that.

Let's go to John 21 and we'll begin in verse 15. Christ was having dinner with the apostles and he asks Peter a question, a very important question.

John 21:15. *So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? (The other disciples at the time.) He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee.... (KJV)*

Christ didn't stop there.

15b) ...He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. (KJV)

So Peter says, "I understand that; I love you and because I love you I'm going to listen to what you tell me and you said feed your lambs." But Christ didn't let it go.

16) *He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? ... (KJV)*

Now if I was on Peter's end getting this, I would start worrying a little bit and I would be feeling very embarrassed because I'm being singled out in front of all the other guys and he asks a second time.

16b) *...He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. (KJV)*

He says lambs the first time, sheep the second time. And that's a whole sermon in itself.

17) *He saith unto him the third time, ... (KJV)*

If I was Peter....you want to start crawling into a hole. You want to disappear into the woodwork.

17b) *...Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. (KJV)*

Basically, he said it three times, getting across the point that "If you love me, you will feed my sheep." Very clear. And this tells us for those following as elders, I'm not talking apostles but elders, disciples of God and Christ that our focus should be feeding

the brethren. Just as that conference in Acts 15, the goal of the conference was to do God's will in taking care and feeding the brethren.

Now let's go to 1 Peter 5:5. Now Peter having received this and a number of years had transpired, let's see what Peter has to say and did he learn the lesson. He's talking to all of us.

1 Peter 5:5. *Likewise, ye younger (you could interpret that younger in age or experience in the church), submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, ... (KJV)*

That is true in the church, it's true in a marriage, it's true in any kind of relationship. If there are two people involved and you're subject to each other, that means you put the other first. You esteem others better than yourself. You're always looking for the best interest of the other person.

5b) ... Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: ... (KJV)

You can't subjugate yourself to another person, whether it's your mate or anybody else, if you're haughty and arrogant and are strutting around like a drill sergeant. Can't do it and that's why you have to be clothed in humility.

5 continued) ... for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. (KJV)

So during this conference, Peter knowing this and having Christ say three times to him, "feed my sheep," part of the conference then was for everybody to listen to the other person's opinion. Not just to hear it, but to listen to it. Find out where they're coming from; find out why they're saying what they're saying, take it into consideration before a decision is reached.

Now let's go to Matthew 20:25. We're talking about related scriptures about this word sentence. Christ is drawing a contrast with the Gentile rulers and at that time it was the Romans.

Matthew 20:25. *But Jesus called them unto him (he said, "Come here, I want to talk to you), and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion ... (KJV)*

The Greek word for dominion means *to control or to subjugate* and certainly the Roman Empire did that to the whole area of Palestine.

25b) ... the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, ... (KJV)

So His audience knew exactly what He was talking about.

25 continued) ...and they that are great exercise authority upon them. (KJV)

You defy a magistrate, you defy a Roman centurion, you do so at your own peril.

26) But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; (KJV)

One of the meanings of minister is a *servant*.

27) And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: (KJV)

What he is saying is all elders should try to be servants. Servants of the brethren, taking care of the sheep, and actually being servants to each other.

Now let's go to 1 Thessalonians 2:5. Paul is talking to the church at Thessalonica about how he behaved among them. How he conducted himself among them.

1 Thessalonians 2:5. *For neither at any time used we flattering words, as ye know, nor a cloke of covetousness; God is witness: (KJV)*

God knows. He said he didn't do that.

6) Nor of men sought we glory, ... (KJV)

Not sucking up to other people.

6b) ... neither of you, nor yet of others,... (KJV)

Paul is saying, "I didn't suck up to anybody."

6 continued) ... when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ.

7) But (rather than that – seeking glory) we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: (KJV)

What Paul is saying, the lesson we learn from the scriptures is elders and deacons too, and frankly, all of us, we can't seek personal aggrandizement, but rather we have to be gentle and gentleness is the fruit of God's spirit. And by implication Paul is saying, "Don't seek glory, don't seek aggrandizement, but show forth the fruits of my spirit."

Then finally under this last point here, 1 Peter 5, first three verses. I'll read this out of the NIV because it's just more clear. We're closing out this point on the word sentence, one-man rule, what does it mean.

1 Peter 5:1. *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder ... (NIV)*

Well he was an apostle too but he's saying, "I am a fellow elder."

1b) ... and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: (NIV)

Then he's encouraging them.

2) Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve;

3) not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (NIV)

Examples to the flock.

So when you put all these scriptures together, and there are many others, one man dictatorial rule doesn't seem to me to fit Acts 15. I'm speaking for all the elders too, that it doesn't fit. That's not the way God wants us, the church, to be administered or run and the Acts 15 conference makes it abundantly clear that that's what happened back then. And so if we want to emulate the first century church, then we should do the same thing.

Now let's end up in the remaining time we have, let's just summarize what conclusions we can draw from this account. What lessons can we learn from this account? And I'm going to summarize basically, what we've been through and maybe add some other points to that.

1. At the time of Acts 15, there were only a few churches that existed outside of Palestine.

There may have been more, but maybe not. And it's safe to say that the majority of the members and the elders that were extant at that time resided in the general area of Palestine.

2. The number of elders, without doubt, was at least in the dozens and maybe close to a hundred.

The Bible is silent, but I think we're safe to say that's it's somewhere between dozens and a hundred or so.

3. Paul and the brethren in Antioch did not automatically accept the teachings of those that came down from Judaea.

Certain men, which came down from Judaea. We don't know if those were elders or who they were or how they got there. The Bible is silent. They just brought a teaching that said you have to be circumcised before you can be saved.

4. Paul, even though he was an apostle, highly regarded apostle, Christ struck him down and he talked to Christ face to face, he didn't make a unilateral decision on the matter.

Now that tells us something. He didn't feel that it was his place to make a unilateral decision. Rather, he came to the multitude of elders to resolve the matter.

5. The apostles and the elders were responsible for the decision.

They were responsible. God held them accountable.

6. All the elders and probably lay members there in the Jerusalem church could give input.

There was not a gag order, so to speak, and the elders felt free to talk. There was a day at a ministerial conference in a number of years in the Worldwide Church of God that if you were sitting out in the audience, you didn't dare ask a question. If you want to get your head handed to you, well okay. But that's not what you read in Acts 15.

7. I think it's safe to conclude that there was no one-man rule.

It's not there.

8. The decision came from a consensus of all the apostles and all the elders led by the holy spirit, guided by God.

People with different backgrounds, different educational levels, different experiences, going back into Judaism or to them the modern day Christian church, everybody has a different perspective, they come from a different place. But God guided their thinking to reach a consensus to do not what they wanted to do, but what He wanted them to do.

9. The church abided by that consensus.

The lay members, they relied on the judgment guided by the holy spirit of the elders who were assembled there. They had faith in that and they relied on it. As I said, undoubtedly not everybody agreed, but they accepted it as God's will.

10. If it is from God, you can't fight it.

This is something we all have to learn. Humans can't fight what God wants done. Christ said to Paul "You kick against pricks" when he was persecuting the church. You can't fight God. None of us can fight God. Let's go to Acts 5:27 and this was when the apostles were out preaching and Peter was taking the lead, he was kind of the spokesman and they were preaching Christ and the powers that be, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the high priest didn't like it one bit.

*Acts 5:27. And when they had brought them (referring to the apostles), they set them before the council: and the high priest asked them,
28) Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.
29) Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.
30) The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.
(KJV)*

You're surrounded by your enemies and they had the guts to say this, guided again by the holy spirit.

*31) Him (referring to Christ) hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
32) And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him. (KJV)*

And this is following where he said we have to obey God rather than men and if we want more of God's holy spirit, we better obey God and we can have more of God's holy spirit.

*33) When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them.
34) Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people (quite prestigious, well respected), ... (KJV)*

We know that in Acts 22:3 we are told that Paul was taught at the feet of this same Gamaliel. So Gamaliel stood up,

34b) and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space; (KJV)

He wanted to get the council together and talk to them out of earshot of the apostles.

38) And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought:

39) But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. (KJV)

The point is, you see, none of us wants to be in a position of fighting against God or being at cross-purposes with God or putting our will ahead of God's will and therefore clashing with God. None of us wants to be in that position.

So God recorded the example of Acts 15 so we could follow it and we strive to do so.

Now with this in mind, we are having our annual planning conference on February 18 and 19, coming up in a bit. And all the elders are going to be attending. So if you have any subjects you wish to be addressed or doctrinal subjects or other subjects, please submit them as soon as possible so they can be circulated to the elders well before the conference. And I'm not twisting anybody's arm. Please send them to either John Pollock or me and John and I assemble the subject matter of the conference so we would take all that into consideration.

We also ask that you would pray between now and the conference that whatever is discussed, and we do budgeting, planning for the next year and they say you put your money where your mouth is and we want to do that and so please ask God that as He did in Acts 15 that He would guide our thoughts, our minds to do His will at this conference because we're nothing without God. And if any of us in our personal lives, what I'm talking about here, conferences or whatever, if we don't do God's will, we will come to nothing.

If something is proposed that is not according to God's will, it will come to nothing. So we want to do God's will and we want to please God. We're doing our best to emulate the first century church in this process. That's all we're trying to do is emulate the first century church, make an appeal for God to guide us, not just at the conference, but in our lives, in the lives of the church and all the lives of the brethren. And if we do that, guess what? We will have learned the lessons from the conference in Acts 15.