

# The Question of Acts 15

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Greetings everybody! We're going to have a little different sermon today, because it's going to be a bit more like a bible study. The topic is this illusive subject of church government.

It has been a source of, frankly, irritation and confusion over the years to God's people – over the decades actually. As we know, those of us that came out of the Worldwide Church of God, that that government evolved over the decades into a one-man rule. Since the break-up of the Worldwide Church of God, many groups have followed in that tradition of a one-man rule. Other groups believe in total anarchy, and we see that.

So the question comes, what is the truth? What is the kind of government that God wants His people to have in the New Testament? I separate the New Testament from the Old because we're talking about a spiritual group today and not a physical group and a physical nation that existed millennia ago.

In the last 15-20 years, I have come to believe that we have had a wrong concept of church government. I began to see that, at least question it, during the end of Mr. Armstrong's life, and then certainly through the era of the Tkach's, and then on into the groups that followed. Dorothy and I have been through two administrations since the break-up of Worldwide, both of which promised a consensus form of government when they were founded, but then quickly became a one-man rule in one case, and took a bit longer to evolve into a one-man rule in the other case.

The issue of church government in the New Testament is centered around Acts 15, claiming, certainly in the case of Worldwide, that Acts 15 taught a one-man rule. So we are going to spend the rest of this sermon, as I said, more of a bible study, investigating the question of Acts 15: What does Acts 15 really say? We are going to spend some time looking at the background of the New Testament church at that time, looking at the brethren and the eldership at that time, and then we will get into Acts 15 and dissect that.

The first question that we want to look at and address:

## **1. How many elders and brethren were there at the time of Acts 15?**

Interesting question – I've never heard it addressed. How many elders were present in the church, and how many brethren were present in the church at the time of Acts 15?

Now the Acts 15 conference most likely occurred in the fall of 49 AD. Others say as early as 47, or as late as 50. But based on my research, I would favor the date of the fall of 49 AD, or within a 2-3 year period at least. Not that that's critical.

Now the New Testament church, we need to understand, was only 18 or 19 years old at that time. That would be the equivalent, in Worldwide Church of God terms, of Mr. Armstrong being ordained as a minister in 1931, which would bring us to the late 1940's as far as length. That was the time, if you remember, that Mr. Armstrong was just starting the college in Pasadena. Church was not all that big at that time, but certainly was starting its dynamic growth. It was entering in that period of an exponential growth. So it would be like Worldwide in 1949.

Now there are some real differences though, because Mr. Armstrong started with a handful of people in Oregon, and grew very slowly at the beginning. With the New Testament church that was not the case, as we're going to see. We know that the New Testament church began with the 12 and then very shortly thereafter, Barnabas, Silas, the half-brother of Christ, James, and Paul were all added within a very few years – possibly even a year or two, or maybe three years after Christ's resurrection. So there was a leadership there.

Let's turn to Acts 1 and verse 15 and see the number of church brethren that existed shortly after Christ's death and resurrection. Obviously, we are going to be spending a lot of time in Acts, so if you have a ribbon, you'll probably want to put it on Acts 15, but we are going to look at Acts 1 and verse 15 right now. This is before the first Pentecost.

**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 a hundred and twenty.*

Now we know that Christ traveled with that 120. So prior to Pentecost, there were at least 120 disciples. My guess is that many of those 120 became elders, because they saw Christ personally. They heard his words, they travelled with him, and they saw his example. And the vast majority of them, if not all of them resided in the area of Palestine. They were not residents of some other part of the Roman Empire because they travelled with Christ over the extent of his ministry.

Now let's look at the first Pentecost. Let's go to Acts 2 and notice verse 41. Now all of a sudden, the church began an explosive growth period.

**Acts 2:41** - *Then they that gladly received his word were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand members.*

3,000 members in one day! Think about just the logistics of baptizing 3,000 people in one day. It was an assembly line like we've never seen before! And the fact is that there had to be those of the 120 that were elders who obviously helped. So they had to have elders to help the baptismal process take place. Some of these 3,000 undoubtedly became elders over a period of time. Remember, the conference is 18-19 years after this date, so some of these 3,000 and some of the 120 became elders. It's only logical.

Now let's jump to Acts 6 and the beginning of verse 1. Notice it didn't stop with the 3,000. The church began to exponentially grow.

**Acts 6:1** - *And in those days when the number of the disciples was multiplied...*

And that's exactly what the Greek word means. The NLT says "rapidly multiplied". We understand the difference between addition and multiplication. Multiplication is an order of magnitude greater than addition. So the church was growing exponentially. Now, here in Acts 6, it says the numbers were multiplied. Obviously some of those that were brought into the church by God at that time also became elders – a certain percentage of them.

Let's now jump to Acts 9 and verse 31. This is talking about a period of time that wasn't going to last too long, but the church had a time of rest.

**Acts 9:31** - *Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria...*

The three great areas of Palestine – we'll get into that in just a minute.

**Acts 9:31** - *...they were edified and they walked in the fear of the Eternal and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit were multiplied.*

The membership was multiplied again. It says that the churches "had rest". So now churches were being formed in and around Palestine, in and around Jerusalem. And we see here, as the churches grew, obviously the eldership grew to serve the brethren. We'll jump now to Titus 1 and verse 5. It was the policy, the tradition, that when the disciples and the apostles went into an area, they would ordain elders in that area. Notice what Paul is saying in Titus 1 and verse 5:

**Titus 1:5** - *For this cause, left I you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that were wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed you.*

So we see now, that as the church began to be multiply throughout Palestine, the tradition was that once a church was formed in a certain city, an elder was appointed to be a shepherd to that group in the city or the town. So we see now that the church is growing and multiplying, and undoubtedly the eldership is growing and multiplying.

Let's look at a couple of examples of potential elders. We're here in Acts 9 verse 31, but let's go to Acts 9 and verse 17. We see here that a man put his hands on Paul, and Paul received his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit. That would indicate that this man was an elder.

**Acts 9:17** - *And Ananias went his way and entered into the house, and putting his hands on him [referring to Paul], said Brother Saul, the Eternal even Jesus that appeared unto you in the way as you came has sent me that you might receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*

And I believe undoubtedly that Ananias was an elder. Look at Acts chapter 11 and we'll read verses 27 and 28. This is talking about a prophet named Agabus. Yes, he was a prophet, but my suspicion is that he was also an elder.

**Acts 11:27-28** - *And in those days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch, and there stood up one of them named Agabus and signified by the Spirit that there should be a great drought throughout all of the world, and it came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.*

So my guess is that he was probably an elder. Can we prove that? No, but it is logical to assume. Prophets and teachers were also in Antioch, and they were probably elders. Let's go to Acts 13 and verse 1. There were prominent leaders in the church in Antioch. My strong suspicion is that they were also elders.

**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 Paul.*

My guess is all of those were elders. Then there were elders in outlying churches. Let's look at Acts 14, and we're going to read verses 21 and 23.

**Acts 14:21** - *And when they had preached the gospel to that city [Derbe], and had taught many, they returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch*

Now jump to verse 23:

**Acts 14:23** - *And when they had ordained them elders in every church, they prayed with fasting and commended them to the Eternal on whom they believed.*

So point number 1, we're asking the question, as to how many elders and brethren were in existence at the time of the Acts 14 conference. We've looked at Acts up to chapter 15, and we have seen that the number of elders certainly, without question, was in the dozens and probably was in the hundreds by that time. Remember, we're talking now, almost 20 years down the road, so certainly in the multiple dozens, if not in the hundreds. And the number of brethren, starting off with 3,000, and 20 years later, what do you think there might be? Well it would certainly be many thousands, if not tens of thousands. We can't be for sure, but we know that elders in the multiple dozens and maybe the hundreds, and brethren in the many thousands, if not tens of thousands. I think that is a safe assumption to make given what we know of the history prior to Acts 15. This is going to bear on the conference – that's why we're establishing this fact.

## 2. **Where were these elders and the brethren located at the time of Acts 15?**

That is important – how far away were they, or were they local? That is going to relate to how many could have possibly attended the Acts 15 conference. The fact is that

Palestine is roughly 120 miles north to south. You have the Mediterranean Sea on the west, and north to south it is roughly 120 miles in length. East to west is approximately 50 miles. It consisted of 3 provinces. North to south, in the north was Galilee, in the middle was Samaria, and in the middle south to south was what we know as Judea. Now, as I've just told you, we could have had multiple thousands if not tens of thousands of brethren in that area of Palestine. A question that we might ask is how many churches outside of Palestine? Were most of the brethren in Palestine or were most outside of Palestine? Because if they were inside Palestine, they were within 100 miles of Jerusalem where the conference took place. If the majority of them were outside of Palestine, then that is a different story.

At the time of Acts 15, there were only 6 or 7 churches mentioned outside of Palestine. Let's look at them. We won't go there for the sake of time, but I will give you the reference. Acts 11 and verse 26 talks about Antioch, and if you remember your geography, if you have the Mediterranean Sea on the west, as the land turns up into Turkey, right at that corner is where Antioch is. So that was outside of Palestine, but not very much. And so Antioch in Acts 11:26 is mentioned, and that is where the brethren were first referred to as Christians.

Then in Acts 13 and verse 14, there is another Antioch in the province of Pasidia in Turkey, so that's two churches now. Then in Acts 14, we just read them a minute ago, you have Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, and you have Perga. Now this is all in the area of Turkey. So that makes 6 so far.

In Acts 13, a church named Salamis is located on the Island of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.

So we see here that there were only 7 churches mentioned prior to Acts 15 outside of Palestine. That tells us that the vast majority of the brethren and the elders lived in Palestine at that time. Again, 17, 18, 19 years after the founding of the New Testament church. So we see that only 7 potential churches outside of Palestine are mentioned, and there could have been more, but my guess is there probably weren't a whole lot more. Therefore, it is likely that the majority of the elders and the majority of the brethren resided IN Palestine, with a maximum distance of 100 miles from Jerusalem.

If you understand anything about the history of the Roman Empire, you understand that one of the great legacies of the Roman Empire was what? Road building! They built roads that are still used today – bridges that are still used today! So in the Roman Empire at that time, travel was relatively easy. It wasn't like northern Europe. And also, because the Roman army occupied that whole area they frowned upon robbers and vagabonds and people like that. You wanted to get crucified, then you rob some traveler in the Roman Empire who is a Roman citizen, and they are going to strong you up really fast. So travel at that time was very safe. Now granted, it was on foot, on horseback or donkey, or on cart, but if you think about it, if the majority of the church lived within 100 miles of Jerusalem, if enough notice was given of a conference, most of the elders would be able to attend.

So it is probable that a high percentage of the elders attended the Acts 15 conference, even the ones up in Turkey. Those churches in Derbe and Lystra, etc, were 400-600 miles away. But if enough notice was given, they could have made it. They could have come by ship or they could have come over land.

So the point is, at the end of the second point here, that it is probable that a high percentage of the elders attended. We're talking now hundreds of elders attended, and as we're going to see, members too.

### **3. The reason that the conference started was a dust up in Antioch.**

We need to ask the question – did the church at Antioch blindly accept the teachings of men who came down from Judaea? We would say today, “came down from headquarters”, in Worldwide terms. Did the church at Antioch blindly accept their teaching? Let's go to Acts 15 now and look at the first verse, and the beginning of the second verse. This is what precipitated the conference in Acts 15.

*Acts 15:1 - And certain men which came down from Judaea where Jerusalem is, taught the brethren and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.*

They were saying that in order to be a Christian, you had to be a Jew first. And you had to follow all the rituals of Judaism, including circumcision, and so if you were an uncircumcised male you might think twice. This would be a very important consideration for you. Now verse 2:

*Acts 15:2 - When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them...*

So that means that just because they came down from “headquarters”, it didn't mean that Paul, Barnabas and the brethren there in Antioch just said “well whatever headquarters says, that's what we're going to do!” – they didn't do that. Paul and Barnabas had a totally different opinion.

So point number 3, it is very clear the church at Antioch did not accept the teaching of the men from Judaea just because they came from Judaea. It wasn't just “well whatever headquarters says, that's what we're going to do” – they disputed it. That leads us to the fourth point:

### **4. Did Paul resolve the problem, the dispute, unilaterally because he was an apostle?**

Did he just say “Look, I'm an apostle, Christ trained me personally, this is the way I view it and this is the way it's going to be fellas!” – did he do that? Let's go to Acts 15:2 again and reread it.

**Acts 15:2** - *When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they...*

Now who is “they”? We’ll get into that in a moment.

**Acts 15:2** - *... they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.*

It says to go “up” to Jerusalem because it is about 3,000 feet, and the Dead Sea is about 1,000 feet below, and Antioch is down at sea level, so you literally went up to Jerusalem.

But notice, and I will read from the Expositors Bible Commentary, volume 9, page 443. It says: “We should understand they [referring to “they determined”, Paul and Barnabas] as signifying the involvement of the entire congregation at Antioch, and its leaders in the appointment.” Meaning, the appointment of Paul and Barnabas and certain others.

So we see here, that “they” refers to the brethren in the church. Let’s go over it again, Acts 15 and verse 2.

**Acts 15:2** - *When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them [referring to the people from Jerusalem], they [the brethren of the Antioch church] determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them [the brethren of the Antioch church] should go up to Jerusalem...*

That’s the only way that sentence fits – that’s the only way that verse works. That when it says “they” and “them”, it refers to the brethren in Antioch.

So let’s understand, Paul did not decide for himself, even though he was an apostle. He did not feel that he had the authority to just unilaterally solve the question on the spot. And so he understood that not having that authority, they needed a conference – they needed to work this out as a group. So a consensus occurred within the brethren at Antioch as to what to do. The church, it says, not Paul making a unilateral decision – the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas and a few others. The church decided – they were involved. They had a consensus among the brethren at Antioch that the best way to solve this problem is to send Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them up to Jerusalem to discuss the matter and come to a Godly resolution of this problem.

That leads us to the 5<sup>th</sup> point:

#### **5. Was there any restriction as to who could attend this conference?**

Is there any evidence that the conference was limited in scope to a certain fraction of the elders, or to an inner circle, or to some exclusive group? Let’s go to Acts 15 and verse 6 – it tells us very plainly.

**Acts 15:6** - *And the apostles and the elders came together for to consider this matter.*

It didn't say some of the apostles and elders, it just says THE apostles and elders. There is no restriction mentioned anywhere, in any of the scriptures in the New Testament that there was some kind of limitation on who could attend. It didn't say which elders should come and which elders should stay behind.

We've already established the fact in the first two points that the majority of the elders and the brethren probably resided within a reasonable travelling distance of Jerusalem. It is safe I think to assume that all the elders were invited. They certainly were probably invited. And they certainly were free to come. Let's understand that.

Now, as with any conference, and I've been attending conferences since 1974 – at any conference, not all the elders show up. You have health problems and family problems and job problems, travel problems, handicaps and all of that. So it is like conferences today, illness and distance and time and job and family constraints probably prevented a 100% attendance. But the fact is, I think it is reasonable to assume that the majority of the elders attended the conference.

Why I that so?

Let's understand, this is the first major contention within the New Testament church. They'd been in existence for almost 20 years, and this is the first major flap that they've had. So do you think, if you were an elder and you were facing this whole "becoming a Jew before becoming Christian", and this was going to affect the entire direction of the church and it was the first chance that the church might blow up over this issue – do you think you might want to be there? Of course you would want to be there! And because of that, I believe that the vast majority of the elders attended that conference. We're talking now hundreds, maybe a thousand or two elders attended the conference. It would be like a WWCG conference in the hay day. It is my understanding, and I don't know for sure, that in the United Annual Conference, they have 900-950 elders attending. It would be something like that, maybe more.

It is also interesting to note, that it is probable, and I believe did happen, that many lay members attended that conference as well. Is it as high a percentage as the elders? Probably not. But look at Acts 15 and the beginning of verse 4. They certainly could have attended.

**Acts 15:4** - *And when they were come to Jerusalem...*

These were all the people invited to the conference, Paul, Barnabas, people from Antioch, etc.

**Acts 15:4** - *...they were received of the church...*



That word *church* is the Greek word “ekklesia”, the brethren – they were received of the brethren and of the apostles and the elders.

So we see here that the church was involved – certainly the local Jerusalem church, and undoubtedly the local Jerusalem church, or churches, as they met in homes in many cases – it probably wasn’t one giant place where they all met. But certainly the entire church, wherever they met in Jerusalem, were there and welcomed all of these visiting elders as they came trudging in from various parts of Palestine, and brethren who might want to attend, as we saw in Antioch – certain others of those attended. So my guess is that lay members travelled, and members within easy travelling distance of Jerusalem were there, plus the local church in Jerusalem. We won’t go back to Acts 15 and verse 2, but remember, it determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain of them, of the brethren in verse 1 should go to Jerusalem.

So, it is obvious that certain lay members were invited, or sent, by local churches, because of the importance of this conference. Let me read again from the Expositors Bible Commentary, volume 9, this time page 444:

*“While Luke says only that the apostles and elders met to consider the questions, his mention of the whole assembly in verse 12, and the whole church in verse 22, shows that other members of the congregation were also present.”*

So you have the vast majority of the elders and the apostles descending on Jerusalem, and you have a good number of the Jerusalem church ascending up to Jerusalem for this conference, and then other members like Antioch and other churches that we’ve read about send brethren to attend this conference, because of its importance. There is no evidence that there was any restriction on who could attend and my guess is that the majority of the elders did attend, plus many of the local Jerusalem brethren, and some brethren who could get away and travel from outlying churches came also. So this was not a small conference – this was not a couple of dozen people getting together in a room and making a decision. This was a large number of people, into the hundreds, and maybe even a thousand or two. We don’t know, but it is not just a little inner circle of a half a dozen people or a dozen people, or two dozen people – it was far, far bigger in scope than that. That leads us to the 6<sup>th</sup> point – now we’ve established the background and we’ve established who might have been there, kind of a ballpark figure of the numbers that might have been there.

## **6. Who was responsible for resolving the problem?**

Who did God give the authority to resolve this problem? Acts 15 and verse 6 again.

**Acts 15:6** - *And the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.*

So we see here very clearly, there was no dictatorial head, there was no inner circle, there was no small exclusive executive committee that met and excluded everybody else. The whole eldership, plus the apostles, and we have already seen that there were

some other members there, were there to consider the problem. But the fact is, that God gave the authority to resolve the problem, to the apostles and the elders.

Now it is obvious that many elders spoke, and lay members spoke. Look at Acts 15 and verse 1 again.

**Acts 15:1** - *Certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses you cannot be saved.*

Well obviously these men started the flap in the first place, so at the conference they would have gotten up and stated their case “This is why we believe you need to be a Jew before you can become a Christian.” – they would have had to state their case before the whole group. So they spoke – we don’t know if they were elders or teachers or members – we have no idea. Then look at the beginning of verse 7.

**Acts 15:7** - *And when there had been much disputing Peter rose up and said to them...*

Much disputing! The Greek word for disputing comes from a root that means “to seek, or to examine together”, and in the New Testament it means “to discuss, or dispute or to call into question”. So since the majority of those are of the Jewish ethnicity – I’ve worked for Jews – they can be quite vocal in what they say, and they can be quite animated in what they say, and I appreciate that! And they can be quite passionate in what they say. So when it says “much disputing”, it was probably an understatement! They were going after this question!

So the point is, in verse 7, it is obvious that many people spoke. There was no restriction on people keeping quiet. It says after much disputing, they all had their say! And they would argue a point back and forth, and debate a point back and forth. Now remember, they have God’s Holy Spirit – they wouldn’t be there if they didn’t have God’s Holy Spirit. So there was courtesy and there was understanding, but obviously it became heated, because they were very passionate about their views. Let’s look at the beginning of verse 12.

**Acts 15:12** - *And then all the multitude kept silence and gave audience to Paul and Barnabas.*

Now if it says all the multitude kept silence, then the implication is that the multitude was not keeping silent before! It means the multitude was really getting after it – they were discussing and talking and debating and questioning. They would ask the men from Judaea, “why do you feel this way? Why do you say this?” and then they would reply, and then somebody would come in with a different view point. So the multitude had not been silent before, but when somebody like Paul and Barnabas began to speak, everybody calmed down and became quiet and listened to them out of Christian courtesy.

Verse 7 through 11, Peter got up and spoke, and we have 111 words quoted by Peter. Then in verse 12, Paul and Barnabas spoke – their specific comments were not recorded. We don't know how long they spoke or to what extent they got into detail. Then in verse 13-21, the apostle James, who was a stepbrother of Jesus Christ, who is the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, got up to speak. And we have 160 words that are recorded that he said. And so we see here in point #6, that the apostles and the elders were given the responsibility to consider the problem and to make a decision, but that they considered input from everybody. There were no second-class elders, there were no people that could just shut other people up – it was a give and take among all of the elders, and my strong suspicion is that they lay members of the Jerusalem church and others who could have travelled were perfectly free to give their opinion, and their opinion was listened to. Because undoubtedly there were some very smart, very bright people who maybe weren't elders but gave their opinions. There were deacons there, and others.

So it is clear that input was considered from all, and there was no inner circle, and there was no dictatorial control from the top down, in the sense of a one-man rule.

## 7. How was the decision reached?

We won't go into detail about the specific issue of the question involved – we're here to understand how the government worked at the time of Acts 15. We saw in verses 13-21 that James spoke, and then after he and Peter and Paul and Barnabas had spoken, and obviously since they were apostles, great weight was given to what they had to say. But everyone else was free to give their opinion and free to talk. Then in verse 22, after James had had his say, notice:

**Acts 15:22** - *then pleased it the apostles and the elders with the whole church to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch [where the problem started], with Paul and Barnabas; namely Judas surnamed Barnabas and Silas chief men among the brethren, and they wrote letters by them after this manner...*

This is the letter now...

**Acts 15:23** - *The apostles and the elders and brethren [everyone is included] send greetings unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia for as much as we have heard that certain which went out from us...*

“Us” means in the area of Jerusalem where the conference was held.

**Acts 15:24** - *...have troubled you with words, subverting your lives, saying you must be circumcised and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment. It seemed good unto us...*

Referring to the apostles and the elders and the brethren that we read about – the whole church.

**Acts 15:25-27** - *It seemed good unto us being assembled with one accord [one agreement], to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas who shall also tell you of the same things by mouth.*

They would go give a report of what happened at the conference in much more detail.

**Acts 15:28** - *For it seemed good unto the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.*

Now they are concluding by saying that the Holy Spirit had a say in this. Why? Because the Holy Spirit led the brethren and the apostles and the elders to reach a consensus about this question. That is something that is incredibly important, that I believe has been neglected for decades in God's church. It has been a one-man rule from the top down, and we see very clearly here that yes, the apostles and elders had the responsibility for making the decision, but they heard from everybody, and there was no discrimination against any of the apostles and elders. And a consensus was reached how? By the Holy Spirit inspiring the minds and the hearts of those people who were there.

I have said this before, but I have Good News and Plain Truth magazines going back to the 1940's, and in a Good News article in 1956, about a ministerial conference that was held in Pasadena, the calling of the conference was to decide whether or not it was the church's goal or responsibility to have high schools and grade schools in the area where they have headquarters – in Big Sandy, Bricketwood and in Pasadena. So all of the elders were invited to a conference in 1956, because this was a big deal! Remember, the church at that time was only 5 years older than what we're reading about here in Acts 15, and finances were tight. Do we hire teachers and rent schools and all of that, and have schools for the kids of those at headquarters? So there was a 2 day conference, and Mr. Armstrong obviously led the conference but everyone was free to speak, and he said in his report "I will not impose my will upon the elders.". That is a direct quote from Mr. Armstrong. He said "we all went to bed that night, we had discussed it all day, and the decision was that the church should not be involved in schools." And he told the men to go home and pray about it through the night, and to beseech God and to give them a consensus about what should be done. He said they came back the next morning, and to a man looking on, they had done a 180-flip flop. They came back all convinced that we should have what later became known as Imperial Schools. He made the point that this was guided by God's Holy Spirit. He did not impose his will, and in fact his mind changed also, but it was guided by God's Spirit.

Now, let me read from a book that was written by Roderick C. Meredith when he first started the Global Church of God. Many of us went through that. The name of the book is Church Government and Church Unity – it was published in 1993, and I'm going to read from page 8, and the emphasis is his emphasis and not mine:

*“Mr. Armstrong **knew**, and many of us who have studied church history **know** that in fact, VERY SELDOM, in its 2,000 year history, has God’s church ever had one administration with one-man in charge.”*

That’s Rod Meredith’s own words. Let me read from that same book on page 29:

*“The right church government should be collegial. That is, it should include a broad representation of **all** the elders and ministers of the church as the account we read from Acts 15 makes clear. And the correct church government should always be based on **multitude** of counsel (Proverbs 15:22)”*

This is from a man who is head of a church. This is from a man who started attending college I believe in the early 1950’s, and experienced those years with Mr. Armstrong. And that was one of the reasons, the reason, why I went to Global. I went down to wherever he was at the time where Global first started, and spent a day with them down there, and that was my main concern. Because this had been bugging me for years, and I was told what I wanted to hear by Carl McNair, Raymond McNair and Mr. Meredith. They told me and repeated what Mr. Meredith said in this book. I thought, “At last! We may be getting this thing right!”

And he says the right church government should be collegial. Well what do we mean by collegial? If you look up the word collegial, and as a typical teenager I griped about this all the time, the term collegial says “of or relating to a collegium”. Okay, well now, what does that mean? It used to drive me crazy! So you look up collegiums and it says, “An executive body with each member having approximately equal power”.

Now that is exactly what happened in Acts 15 – the apostles and elders got together, they all had equal vote, equal say, equal opinion. They also listened to the church brethren who had things to say, and then a consensus was developed through God’s Holy Spirit and a decision was reached in Acts 15, just like it was reached in this conference in 1956.

Let’s understand – how was the decision reached? It was reached by the elders and by the apostles in Acts 15, in a consensus guided by the Holy Spirit. We cannot overemphasize that statement. It **must** be guided by God’s Spirit. Consensus government only works if converted people use God’s Spirit. Otherwise, there will be chaos and confusion.

Now, let’s go to the 8<sup>th</sup> point, and this is a big question regarding the word that James uttered when he said “My sentence is....” in Acts 15:19, in the King James.

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

Now that “my sentence is...” has been used to defend a one-man government, a one-man rule. Because we were told, I was told at ministerial conferences, James got up, he

listened to everybody and then he says “this is the way it’s going to be! My sentence is...this is the way it’s going to be.” And we were told that this is an example of one-man rule.

## 8. What does “my sentence is...” really mean?

The Greek word *sentence* is Strong’s 2919. Thayer tells us that it is translated “judge” 88 times out of the 114 times that it appears in the New Testament. It can also mean “determine” (7 times), “condemn” (5 times), “go it a law” (twice), “call into question” (twice), “esteem” (twice), and then eight others that are miscellaneous. But the vast majority of the times that this word is used and translated, it is translated as “judge”.

If we look at it objectively and honestly, there are three possible conclusions that we can draw regarding this passage, “my sentence is...”.

- A. We could say, as the Worldwide Church of God took it, that James’s judgment was the final judgment. And it was a one-man rule, and that’s the way it’s going to be.
- B. James’s judgment was merely his individual opinion. “This is my judgment...”, “My sentence is...” Mine, not the church’s, but mine.
- C. James was merely summarizing the existing consensus. He is the apostle of the headquarters church, and they’ve been sitting for who knows, hours, days? And finally, everybody had had their say, and then he says, “My judgment is, based on everything I’ve heard, this is what the Holy Spirit is guiding us to conclude...” It could have been in that manner.

Let me just read you the various translations. I went to every bible that I could conceivably come up with. Some are a little out there, but the fact is, when you read how it is translated, you are going to find out that you can’t draw an affirmative conclusion for any one of those three. The RSV, the NIV, the New English Bible and Coulter say “my judgment...”. 20<sup>th</sup> Century New Testament says “In my judgment...”, the NKJV says “I judge...”, the Living bible says “My judgment is...”, Today’s English Version and the Good News for Modern Man say “It’s my opinion...”, The Jewish New Testament says “My opinion is...”, Phillips says “I am firmly of the opinion...”, Good Speed, Moffatt, and Amplified Bible say “In my opinion...”, The NRSV says “I have reached the decision...”, The New Testament in Basic English says “My decision is...”, and The Jerusalem Bible is the only one that would imply a one-man rule, says “I rule...”. That is the only translation of 20 or 30 translations where it says that.

Mr. Armstrong, by his own words, admonished us, certainly at ministerial conferences over the years, that we cannot establish a doctrine based on one scripture. You have heard that before. We cannot do that. So it would be very unwise to take verse 19, where it says “my sentence is...” and wrap a whole doctrine around that one verse. It would be very unwise. So we need to understand, that from the above translations that I’ve already read to you, there is no way that we can be absolutely sure of which of the

three conclusions is true. We can't be absolutely sure just looking at that one verse. But when we take into the context of Acts 15, we can.

That leads us to the 9<sup>th</sup> point. Let's look at some related scriptures. We will look at three, and then we will wrap this up.

**9. Related scriptures regarding how church government should work and how God's people should come to conclusions and decisions.**

Let's look at Matthew 20 and we're going to read verses 25 through 27. Read these scriptures in relation to the conference in Acts 15. Read these in relation to elders and apostles coming together from many miles away, to this conference that could blow the church apart if they don't come together guided by God's Holy Spirit for a solution.

**Matthew 20:25** - *Jesus called them unto Him and said, You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them...*

So this is the worldly example, this is the Gentile example.

**Matthew 20:25** - *...and they that are great exercise authority upon them.*

We've all worked for people who just have to prove that they're the boss. Have to make you jump through hoops to get things done because they are exercising authority. But notice what Christ says...

**Matthew 20:26** - *But it shall not be so among you...*

Now think about that, He is telling His disciples that it should not be so among you. **You** should not exercise the whip and the chair over each other, or over the brethren.

**Matthew 20:26-27** - *...but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [servant] and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.*

That should have been the overriding attitude of all these elders coming together at this conference.

What does Peter have to say? Peter was there, the 111 words that he spoke! Let's go to I Peter 5 and we're going to read the first four verses. I am sure that Peter came with this attitude, because in I Peter 5 he is addressing fellow elders. Notice his attitude and notice his approach. I am going to read it out of the NIV – it makes it a little clearer.

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

Now he could say, “I appeal as an apostle, I appeal as the #1 guy, I appeal because I’ve spent more time with Christ than anybody!”, and we’ve had people today saying “Well I spent more time with Mr. Armstrong than anybody!”. Well he didn’t say that.

**I Peter 5:1** - *...I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s suffering, and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed.*

Verse 2 – notice what his admonition is...

**I Peter 5:2** - *Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care.*

Remember Christ told Peter three times, “feed my flock, feed my sheep” – he got the message, and he is telling the other elders “I got the message, I am presenting the message now to you.”

**I Peter 5:2** - *Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers, not because you must, but because you are willing as God wants you to be, not greedy for money but eager to serve.*

This ties in with Matthew 20 that we just read – if you want to be great be a servant. Now verse 3...

**I Peter 5:3** - *Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.*

Just what Matthew 20 said! Examples of what? Of service, of foot washing, of being able to kneel down and washing someone’s feet. Verse 4...

**I Peter 5:4** - *And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

If you do this, is the implication. If you don’t exalt yourself, is the implication. Verse 5...

**I Peter 5:5** - *Young men...*

He is talking to elders, so he is talking to the ones that are not as physically old as some of the others.

**I Peter 5:5** - *Young men, in the same way, be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another...*

That is what happened at the Acts 15 conference – that’s the way it should be in the church. That should be the way it should be among all the elders, if we get the elders together, or if we have a meeting after services – it should be that way.



**I Peter 5:5** - *...clothe yourselves with humility towards one another because God opposed the proud and gives grace to the humble.*

The message is clear. This should have been, and I am certainly sure, was the attitude of them coming together in Jerusalem.

Let's go to a third scripture in I Thessalonians 2, and we're going to read verses 5 through 7. Notice what Paul portrays as his attitude toward the brethren – his approach. Remember, Paul is an apostle! Christ appeared to him, he studied at the feet of Gamaliel, he probably had a higher IQ and a better education and was called separately apart from the 12. If anybody could toot his own horn, it would be Paul! But notice his attitude...

**I Thessalonians 2:5** - *For neither, at any time, used we flattering words...*

We weren't suck-ups to you.

**I Thessalonians 2:5** - *...as you know, nor a cloak of covetousness...*

And you know he went and worked as a tent maker rather than collect tithes. He wasn't coveting money.

**I Thessalonians 2:5-6** - *...God is witness. Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome as the apostles of Christ.*

We didn't lord it over you, we didn't take your tithe money, we didn't want to be a burden to any of you. Now verse 7 – notice this, this is very important.

**I Thessalonians 2:7** - *But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherishes her children.*

That should be the approach of all of the elders – gentle with each other as elders, and gentles elders to brethren. Not exalting the self, not lording it over people. Taking the lowest seat. We keep hearing the word “shepherd” over and over in the New Testament. Back in the Worldwide days, the shepherd's staff has a hook at one end and a pointed stick at the other, and in many cases that staff was used to beat up the brethren, and beat up the sheep. But the fact is, that staff was not used to beat up the sheep in a shepherd in Christ's time. The hook was used to grab a sheep that was maybe down in a ditch or in the mud or something like that, and gently pull it up. Hook it around the neck and pull it out. It was to help the sheep, to minister to the sheep. If a sheep was cut or sick, they would minister to the sheep. They had ointments and medicines. They would take care of the flock.

The pointed end, on the other hand, was a different story. If a bear came around, or a coyote, or a wolf, that pointed end, they banged on that enemy. The pointed end was for

the enemy! It was sometimes 180 degrees opposite in Worldwide – the pointed end was aimed at the brethren many times, and that **should not** be! We got it confused, as a church. And I am sad to say, it only took me 20 or 25 years to figure that out. Hopefully we can figure it out before then.

So let's understand these related scriptures, and we could give a whole sermon on these related scriptures.

Let's draw some conclusions now about Acts 15.

1. At the time of Acts 15, the number of elders was without a doubt in the many, many dozens, if not hundreds. And the number of brethren was certainly in the thousands, if not the tens of thousands. That relates to the conference and how big the conference was, and how widespread the draw was to the conference.
2. At the time of Acts 15, the bible only mentions a few churches that existed outside of Palestine. Maybe there were more, maybe not. But it is obvious at the time of Acts 15 that the vast majority of the membership of the church existed in Palestine. That means within 100 miles of Jerusalem. The vast majority of the elders were in Palestine – again, within easy travelling distance of Jerusalem.
3. Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, and the brethren in Antioch, did not automatically accept the teachings of this group that came down from Judaea, meaning the area of headquarters. They had their own minds and their own study of the bible, and if the teaching was different than what they understood, they were not afraid to say “hey, this is wrong, we don't agree with this!”
4. Paul, even though he was an apostle, even though he spent time with Jesus Christ directly, did not feel that he had the authority to make a unilateral decision about this controversy. He got a multitude of the brethren there together, and it was decided that they would go to Jerusalem and have a conference about this.
5. The counsel at Acts 15, the ministerial conference, was an open one. There is no evidence of any restrictions, either to ministers or lay members. It was an open conference. If people wanted to be there, they could be there. We read nothing about a restriction, an inner circle, an executive committee, or anything like that.
6. All the elders could give their input, with no restrictions. And I believe lay members who were there were free to give their input.
7. The apostles and elders were responsible for the decision. God placed that upon the ministry. It was their decision, **but** they listened to all present.
8. There was no one-man rule. You cannot read Acts 15 and conclude that there was a one-man rule. It is just not there. It was read into Acts 15, but it's not there. I think we deceive ourselves, and we do injustice to the scriptures, if we say that you can read a one-man rule out of Acts 15.
9. There was no small exclusive group in control. There is no evidence of that either. No executive committee, no inner circle, all the elders had equal input, lay members could give input.
10. The apostles and the elders came together and made a decision.
11. The church abided by the consensus. Once the decision was made, the church came together and supported that decision. Was everybody happy? Probably

not. Maybe those men from Judaea, their mind wasn't changed – I don't know, the bible doesn't tell us. Maybe their mind **was** changed, and the Holy Spirit guided their mind. We hope that was the case, but we just don't know.

Look at Acts 16 and verse 4. I'll read it out of the NIV version. This is delivering the message from the conference.

**Acts 16:4** - *As they travelled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.*

So the attitude obviously was that God inspired a conference to be called, all of the elders and the apostles attended, it was an open conference with no restrictions, God's Spirit was obviously there, and a decision was reached by consensus of all the apostles and elders, and this was all obviously guided by God's Holy Spirit – therefore I am going to obey that, because it was from God and not from men.

So let's understand the meaning of Acts 15. Next time I will be giving another sermon about church government, but the point is that this foundational chapter that has been used to, by some, to lead us off into a wrong direction on church government, is something that is very important for God's people to understand, particularly at this end time. We have to get government right. And we see very clearly that it was a collegial form of government by consensus, guided by God's Holy Spirit.

So let's learn the lesson of Acts 15, as it relates to God's government.