Does Acts 15 teach that Gentiles must keep the Law of Moses?

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No. Acts 15 teaches essentially the opposite. The Jerusalem Council was convened to address whether Gentile believers in Jesus needed to be circumcised and required to keep the Law of Moses, and the apostles explicitly declined to place those obligations on them (Acts 15:1–29). Instead, the Council welcomed Gentiles as full members of God's people through faith in Christ and gave them only four specific restrictions, laying on them “no greater burden” (Acts 15:28–29).

The Question Before the Jerusalem Council

Acts 15 records one of the most important theological controversies in the early church. As increasing numbers of Gentiles came to faith in Jesus, some Jewish believers began teaching:

> “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this teaching, and the dispute was taken to Jerusalem to be considered by the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2). When they arrived, believers from among the Pharisees stated the issue this way:

> “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).

Some interpreters attempt to separate these statements into two unrelated questions: salvation by circumcision in verse 1 and Torah observance in verse 5. But Luke presents them as parts of the same controversy. Paul and Barnabas travel to Jerusalem concerning “this question” (Acts 15:2), singular, and the apostles and elders gather to consider “this matter” (Acts 15:6), singular. Circumcision and Torah observance were closely related covenantal issues.

Paul makes this connection explicit elsewhere. He tells the Galatians, “Every man who accepts circumcision…is obligated to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). Circumcision was not merely an isolated command. It was the covenant sign given to Abraham's household (Gen. 17:9–14) and

later incorporated into Israel's life under the Sinai covenant (Lev. 12:3; cf. Exod. 12:48). Thus, requiring Gentile converts to receive circumcision carried much larger covenantal implications.

What Did the Apostles Decide?

After “much debate” (Acts 15:7), Peter reminded the Council that God had already given the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised Gentiles through faith (Acts 15:7–9; cf. Acts 10:44–48). He then asked:

> “Why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).

Peter's conclusion was not that Gentiles should gradually take this yoke upon themselves. Rather, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

James then announced the Council's judgment:

> “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19).

Rather than requiring circumcision or observance of the Law of Moses, the Council gave Gentile believers four specific restrictions: abstaining from things associated with idols, sexual immorality, what had been strangled, and blood (Acts 15:19–20). The Council's written letter repeats those same requirements and makes an especially important statement:

> “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you **no greater burden than these requirements**” (Acts 15:28).

That language is difficult to reconcile with the claim that Gentile Christians were nevertheless expected to keep the Law of Moses. The Council does not say, “Begin with these commands and gradually learn the rest.” It says **no greater burden**.

Were the Four Commands a “Starter Pack” for Torah Observance?

A common interpretation within the Hebrew Roots movement is that the four requirements of Acts 15:20 were merely a starting point. On this reading, Gentile believers would begin with those four commands and then gradually learn the rest of the Torah.

But Acts 15 never says this. Nor does any other New Testament passage describe such a program of progressive Torah observance.

If these four requirements were merely the beginning of a larger curriculum, the Council's statement that it would impose “no greater burden” becomes very difficult to explain (Acts 15:28). We would also expect the apostles eventually to teach Gentile churches about keeping the Sabbath, biblical feast days, dietary restrictions, circumcision, ritual purity, sacrifices, and other Mosaic requirements. Yet the apostolic writings never prescribe such a progression.

Instead, Paul teaches Gentile-majority churches that believers serve God “in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code” (Rom. 7:6), that they should not allow anyone to judge them regarding food, drink, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths (Col. 2:16–17), and that those who are “led by the Spirit” are “not under the law” (Gal. 5:18).

What About Acts 15:21?

Immediately after listing the four restrictions, James says:

> “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21).

Some interpret this to mean that Gentile Christians were expected to attend synagogue every Sabbath, where they would gradually learn the Law of Moses. But James never actually says that. The verse describes the longstanding proclamation of Moses in the synagogues; it does not command Gentile believers to attend them or state that they will learn the rest of the Torah there.

The precise reason James mentions the synagogue is debated among Christian scholars. A longstanding interpretation is that the four restrictions were intended, at least in part, to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. Practices involving idolatry, sexual immorality, blood, and strangled animals would have been especially offensive within Jewish communities where the Torah had been proclaimed for generations. This reading fits the New Testament's broader concern that believers voluntarily limit their freedom out of love for one another (Rom. 14:13–21; 1 Cor. 8:7–13; 10:23–33).

Whatever interpretation one takes of the precise function of verse 21, we should be careful not to make it say more than it does. Nothing in the verse says that Gentile Christians were expected to attend synagogue or gradually become Torah-observant.

In fact, Acts portrays Paul's synagogue attendance quite differently. Paul entered synagogues primarily to **evangelize**—reasoning from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 17:1–4; 18:4–5). When his message was rejected, he repeatedly took his ministry elsewhere (Acts 13:45–48; 18:5–7; 19:8–10). The synagogue functions primarily as Paul's mission field, not as the Christian church's school for Torah observance.

The Larger New Testament Picture

Acts 15 does not stand alone. Its decision fits naturally within the broader apostolic teaching concerning the Law of Moses.

Paul teaches that believers have “died to the law through the body of Christ” so that they might belong to Christ (Rom. 7:4). He warns Gentile Christians that accepting circumcision as a covenant obligation would obligate them to keep “the whole law” (Gal. 5:2–3). He teaches that food, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths were shadows whose substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16–17). And Hebrews describes the old covenant as obsolete in light of the new covenant established through Christ (Heb. 8:6–13).

None of this means that God's moral will has disappeared or that Christians are free to live however they please. The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to holiness, obedience, love, sexual purity, generosity, justice, and good works (John 14:15; Rom. 12:1–2; Gal. 5:13–26; Eph. 2:10). The question in Acts 15 is not whether Christians should obey God. The question is whether Gentile believers must come under the Mosaic covenant and its Law in order to belong to God's people. The apostolic answer is no.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Acts 15:1–29** — The Jerusalem Council considers and rejects the requirement that Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses.
- **Acts 10:44–48** — God gives the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised Gentiles through faith, an event Peter later cites at the Council.
- **Galatians 5:2–6** — Paul connects receiving circumcision with obligation to keep the whole Law.
- **Romans 7:4–6** — Believers have died to the Law and now serve God in the new way of the Spirit.
- **Galatians 5:18** — Those led by the Spirit are “not under the law.”

- **Colossians 2:16–17** — Christians are not to be judged regarding food, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths.
- **Hebrews 8:6–13** — Christ mediates a better covenant, and the former covenant is described as obsolete.

Objections & Misconceptions

Acts 15 only rejected circumcision as necessary for salvation. It did not reject Torah observance.

Acts 15:5 explicitly includes both circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses in the controversy. Luke then describes the Council as considering "this matter" (Acts 15:6), and the resulting letter imposes "no greater burden" than the four listed requirements (Acts 15:28–29). Moreover, Paul explicitly connects circumcision with obligation to keep "the whole law" (Gal. 5:3)

The four commands were only the beginning. Gentiles would learn the rest of the Torah later.

Scripture never says this. Acts 15:28 says precisely the opposite: the apostles and the Holy Spirit determined to impose "no greater burden" than the requirements listed. No New Testament book subsequently presents a program by which Gentile believers gradually become Torah-observant.

Acts 15:21 says Gentiles would attend synagogue every Sabbath and learn Moses.

The verse says that Moses "is read every Sabbath in the synagogues"; it never says Gentile Christians were expected to attend those synagogues or learn the Torah there. Acts instead portrays Paul entering synagogues to proclaim Jesus as Messiah (Acts 17:2–4; 18:4–6), often leaving after his message was rejected (Acts 13:46; 18:6–7; 19:8–10).

If Christians aren't under the Law of Moses, why did the Council give them commands that come from the Torah?

Because rejecting covenantal obligation to the Mosaic Law does not mean rejecting everything God ever commanded within that Law. The New Testament repeatedly reaffirms God's moral will while teaching that believers are not under the Sinai covenant as a legal system (Rom. 7:4–6; Gal. 5:18). The Council could therefore give particular requirements to Gentile believers without placing them under the Mosaic covenant as a whole.

Why This Matters

Acts 15 answers a foundational question about the Gospel: **What must a Gentile do to become a full member of God's people?** The apostolic answer is not "become Jewish," "receive

circumcision," or "begin keeping the Law of Moses." Peter's answer is that God cleanses hearts "by faith" and that both Jews and Gentiles are saved "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:9, 11).

This distinction protects both Christian obedience and Christian freedom. Followers of Jesus are called to lives of holiness and good works, but those works flow from our new life in Christ; they are not entrance requirements into the Mosaic covenant. Adding obligations that the apostles deliberately declined to impose risks placing burdens on believers that God Himself has not required (Acts 15:10, 19, 28).

Recommended Resources

- Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*
- Douglas J. Moo, *The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses*
- F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*
- David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*
- R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?*