Were the four commands in Acts 15 a “starter pack” for keeping the Torah?

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No. Acts 15 never says that the four requirements given to Gentile believers were merely a starting point from which they were expected to learn and eventually keep the rest of the Law of Moses. In fact, the Council says the opposite: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you **no greater burden than these requirements**” (Acts 15:28). The “starter pack” interpretation adds a program of progressive Torah observance that is nowhere stated in the text.

The Four Requirements

At the Jerusalem Council, some Jewish believers argued that Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised and commanded “to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). After hearing the matter, James concluded:

> “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:19–20).

The apostles and elders then sent a letter to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia repeating these four requirements (Acts 15:23–29).

The question is what these requirements represented. Were they four initial Torah commands that Gentile believers were expected to obey immediately, with the remaining commandments to follow later? Or were they the specific requirements the Council actually intended to impose?

The Council's own letter strongly favors the latter:

> “For 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 is remarkably explicit language. If the apostles intended Gentile believers eventually to observe the larger body of Mosaic legislation, “no greater burden” would be an unusual way to communicate that expectation.

Where Does the “Starter Pack” Idea Come From?

The argument is usually built around Acts 15:21. Immediately after listing the four requirements, 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 within the Hebrew Roots movement understand James to be saying something like this: *We don't need to give Gentile converts the entire Torah immediately. Give them these four commands for now. They can attend synagogue every Sabbath, hear Moses read, and gradually learn the rest.*

There is an understandable logic to that reconstruction. The problem is that **none of those steps actually appear in the text**.

James does not say that the Gentile believers should attend synagogue. He does not say they should study Moses there. He does not say that the four requirements are temporary or introductory. And he does not say that additional Torah commandments will become obligatory as the Gentiles learn them.

Those ideas have to be supplied by the interpreter.

This is an important hermeneutical distinction. Biblical interpretation often requires legitimate inferences from what a text says. But the more theological weight an interpretation places on an inference, the stronger the textual evidence for that inference needs to be. Acts 15:21 simply does not state the progressive Torah-observance program attributed to it.

What Does Acts 15:21 Mean?

The precise reason James mentions the public reading of Moses has been debated among Christian scholars. One longstanding interpretation connects verse 21 with relations between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The four practices James identifies—idolatrous pollution, sexual immorality, strangled meat, and blood (Acts 15:20)—were particularly objectionable from a Jewish perspective. Because the Law of Moses had been proclaimed throughout the cities of the Roman world "from ancient generations" (Acts 15:21), these practices were well known as offensive to Jewish communities.

On this reading, James's concern is practical fellowship within a church bringing Jews and Gentiles together. Gentile Christians were not being required to become Jews or come under the Mosaic Law. Rather, they were being asked to abstain from certain practices that would create serious moral and fellowship problems in mixed Jewish-Gentile Christian communities.

Other scholarly explanations of the four requirements exist, particularly regarding their relationship to Leviticus 17–18 and the laws concerning resident aliens. So some caution is appropriate when identifying precisely why James selected these four. What is considerably clearer is what the Council **did not** say: it never tells Gentiles that these four commandments are the first stage of learning to keep the entire Torah.

What About Gentiles Attending Synagogue?

The book of Acts does mention Gentiles associated with synagogues. But Acts does not present synagogue attendance as the means by which Christian converts were expected to become Torah-observant.

Instead, Acts repeatedly tells us why Paul went to synagogues: he went there to proclaim the Gospel.

In Thessalonica, Paul entered the synagogue and "reasoned with them from the Scriptures," explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead (Acts 17:2–3). In Corinth, he "reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks" that "the Christ was Jesus" (Acts 18:4–5).

And what happened when the synagogue rejected his message? Paul left.

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas declared that because their Jewish audience rejected the Gospel, "we are turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). In Corinth, Paul left the synagogue and continued his ministry in the house of Titius Justus (Acts 18:6–7). In Ephesus, after opposition arose in the synagogue, Paul withdrew the disciples and taught them in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8–10).

This makes it difficult to interpret Acts 15:21 as establishing synagogue attendance as the ongoing Torah school for Gentile Christians. The synagogues function prominently in Acts as **mission fields where Paul proclaimed Christ**, not as institutions where Christian converts were sent to learn how to observe the Mosaic Law.

The Rest of the New Testament

If Acts 15 established a program in which Gentile converts began with four commandments and then gradually learned the rest of the Torah, we would expect to see evidence of that program elsewhere in the New Testament. But we don't.

Paul wrote extensively to Gentile Christians about how they should live. His letters contain instructions concerning sexual morality (1 Cor. 6:18–20), marriage (1 Cor. 7:1–40), worship (1 Cor. 11:2–34), spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12–14), generosity (2 Cor. 8–9), relationships (Eph. 4:25–32), family life (Eph. 5:22–6:4), work (Eph. 6:5–9), and countless other aspects of Christian discipleship.

Yet he never lays out a program for progressively bringing Gentile Christians into Mosaic observance.

More strikingly, when issues such as circumcision, food, festivals, and Sabbaths arise, Paul does not tell Gentiles that these are obligations they should eventually learn to observe. He warns Gentile believers that accepting circumcision would obligate them to keep “the whole law” (Gal. 5:3), tells Christians not to judge one another over food and the observance of particular days (Rom. 14:3–6), and says, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16–17).

That is the opposite trajectory from what we would expect if Acts 15 had established the four requirements as the first stage of Torah observance.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Acts 15:1–6** — The controversy explicitly concerns circumcision and requiring Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses.
- **Acts 15:19–21** — James gives Gentile converts four requirements and mentions the longstanding reading of Moses in the synagogues.
- **Acts 15:22–29** — The Council's official letter imposes the four requirements and explicitly says “no greater burden.”

- **Acts 17:1–4** — Paul attends synagogue to reason from Scripture and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.
- **Acts 18:4–7** — Paul evangelizes in the synagogue and then leaves when his message is rejected.
- **Acts 19:8–10** — Paul withdraws Christian disciples from the synagogue and continues teaching elsewhere.
- **Galatians 5:2–6** — Paul warns Gentiles that receiving circumcision would obligate them to keep the whole Law.
- **Romans 14:3–6** — Paul allows Christian freedom concerning food and the observance of particular days.
- **Colossians 2:16–17** — Christians are not to be judged regarding food, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths.

Objections & Misconceptions

Acts 15:21 explains how Gentiles would learn the rest of the Torah: Moses was taught every Sabbath.

Acts 15:21 says that Moses was read in the synagogues; it never says Gentile Christians were expected to attend those synagogues or progressively learn Torah observance there. That conclusion must be added to the text. Moreover, Acts repeatedly portrays Paul's synagogue activity as evangelistic and records him moving Christian disciples elsewhere when synagogues rejected the Gospel (Acts 13:46; 18:6–7; 19:8–10).

The apostles couldn't expect new Gentile converts to learn hundreds of commandments immediately, so naturally they started them with four.

That is a possible hypothetical strategy, but Acts never says it was the apostles' strategy. More importantly, their actual letter says that the Holy Spirit and the apostles determined to place “no greater burden” upon the Gentiles than the listed requirements (Acts 15:28–29). We should allow the Council to describe its own decision rather than supply an unstated second phase.

But the four commands come from the Torah, so the Torah must still be binding.

The fact that a command appears in the Law of Moses does not establish that Christians remain covenantally under the Law of Moses as a whole. The New Testament repeatedly reaffirms commands and moral principles found in the Old Testament while simultaneously teaching that believers have died to the Law and now serve God in the new way of the Spirit (Rom. 7:4–6). The question is not whether God's earlier revelation remains true and instructive, but whether

Christians are under the Mosaic covenant as their governing covenant.

Without the Torah, how would Gentile Christians know how God wanted them to live? The alternative to being under the Mosaic Law is not lawlessness. Jesus and His apostles give extensive moral instruction to the church (Matt. 5–7; Rom. 12–15; 1 Cor. 5–7; Gal. 5–6; Eph. 4–6). Christians are called to obey Christ and walk by the Spirit (John 14:15; Gal. 5:16–25), not to live without moral boundaries.

Why This Matters

The “starter pack” interpretation changes the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council in a significant way. The question before the Council was whether Gentile believers should be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). If the four requirements were merely the first step toward eventually doing exactly that, then the Council did not really reject the proposal—it merely postponed its implementation.

But that is not how Luke presents the decision. James says, “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19), and the apostolic letter says that the Holy Spirit and the apostles would impose “no greater burden” than the requirements they listed (Acts 15:28–29).

This protects an important New Testament truth: Gentiles do not need to come under the Mosaic covenant in order to become full members of God's people. They are received through faith in Christ and saved through His grace (Acts 15:7–11). Christian obedience flows from that new-covenant relationship with Christ rather than from progressively assuming Israel's old-covenant obligations.

Recommended Resources

- David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*
- F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*
- 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*
- R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?*