Why did the Jerusalem Council give Gentile Christians four commands?

Apologetics · https://thebiblicalroots.org/answers/why-did-the-jerusalem-council-give-gentile-christians-four-commands/

The Jerusalem Council gave Gentile believers four specific requirements: to abstain from things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, what had been strangled, and blood (Acts 15:19–20, 28–29). The text does not explicitly tell us why these particular four were chosen, and Christians and scholars have proposed several explanations. What is clear is that the Council did **not** present them as a summary of the Law of Moses or as the beginning of a program of Torah observance; rather, the apostles specifically declined to require Gentile believers to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5–29).

The Setting of the Four Commands

Acts 15 records a major controversy in the early church. Some Jewish believers maintained that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and commanded "to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5; cf. 15:1). The apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to consider the matter (Acts 15:6).

Peter reminded the assembly that God had already accepted uncircumcised Gentiles, giving them the Holy Spirit and cleansing their hearts "by faith" (Acts 15:7–9). He therefore opposed placing upon the Gentile disciples a "yoke" that neither their ancestors nor they had been able to bear (Acts 15:10), concluding that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved "through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11).

James then gave his judgment:

> "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:19).

He proposed instead that they be instructed:

> "to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20).

These four requirements were subsequently included in the Council's official letter to Gentile believers (Acts 15:23–29).

Why These Four?

This is where we need to distinguish what Scripture **clearly states** from what we can reasonably **infer**.

James does not explicitly explain why he selected these particular requirements. Several interpretations have therefore been proposed.

One longstanding view is that the requirements were intended, at least partly, to make fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish believers had been raised with deep biblical convictions concerning idolatry, sexual immorality, blood, and the proper slaughter of animals. Gentile converts, by contrast, came from a Greco-Roman culture in which pagan temples, idolatrous meals, sexual immorality, and practices involving blood were commonplace (1 Cor. 6:9–11; 8:1–13; 10:14–22).

As Jews and Gentiles were brought together into one body in Christ (Eph. 2:13–16), these differences had enormous potential to divide the church. Requiring Gentile believers to abstain from practices that were either sinful in themselves or especially offensive to their Jewish brothers and sisters would have helped preserve fellowship between the two groups.

This fits Paul's later teaching that Christians should sometimes voluntarily restrict their freedom for the sake of another believer's conscience. “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble” (Rom. 14:21; cf. 1 Cor. 8:9–13; 10:23–33).

Are the Four Commands Based on Leviticus 17–18?

Another influential interpretation observes that the four requirements appear to have parallels in Leviticus 17–18. Those chapters contain commands concerning sacrifices offered to other gods (Lev. 17:7–9), consuming blood (Lev. 17:10–14), animals that had not been properly drained of blood (Lev. 17:13–16), and unlawful sexual relations (Lev. 18:6–23).

Significantly, several of these commands explicitly apply not only to Israelites but also to the *ger* —the foreigner or sojourner living among Israel (Lev. 17:8, 10, 12–13, 15; 18:26).

For this reason, some scholars believe James deliberately drew upon the requirements placed upon resident foreigners in Leviticus. On this reading, Acts 15 establishes a limited set of requirements for Gentiles living in fellowship with Jewish believers without requiring those Gentiles

to become Jews or assume Israel's full covenantal obligations.

There is genuine scholarly debate about how directly Acts 15 depends upon Leviticus 17–18, so we should avoid claiming more certainty than the evidence permits. But even if the Levitical connection is accepted, it does not follow that Gentile Christians were therefore required to keep the entire Torah. Quite the opposite: the significance of the parallel would be that **these particular requirements were singled out** rather than the Law of Moses as a whole.

What About 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).

This verse probably provides at least part of the rationale for James's decision, although precisely how it does so is debated.

Some within the Hebrew Roots movement argue that James means Gentile believers would attend synagogue every Sabbath, hear Moses read, and gradually learn the rest of the Torah. But the text never says this. James does not instruct the Gentiles to attend synagogue, nor does he say that the four requirements were merely introductory.

A more natural possibility is that James is explaining why these particular sensitivities mattered. Moses had been proclaimed throughout the Jewish diaspora “from ancient generations” (Acts 15:21). Jewish communities throughout the Roman world therefore had deeply established convictions concerning the practices James had just mentioned. Gentile believers abstaining from them would remove significant barriers to fellowship and to the church's witness among Jewish communities.

Whatever precise interpretation one adopts, Acts 15:21 should not be made to say more than James actually says.

Were All Four Requirements Merely Ceremonial?

No. At least one of the four—sexual immorality (*porneia*, πορνεία)—is repeatedly condemned as sinful for Christians throughout the New Testament (1 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; 1 Thess. 4:3). Likewise, participation in idolatry is consistently forbidden (1 Cor. 10:14; 1 John 5:21).

This is important because the four requirements need not all function in precisely the same way. Some address conduct that is intrinsically incompatible with Christian discipleship, while others may have had particular significance for Jewish-Gentile fellowship in the first-century church.

That distinction also explains why Christians have historically disagreed about whether the prohibitions concerning blood and strangled meat remain directly binding today. Some Christian traditions have understood all four as permanent moral requirements. Others have understood the food-related prohibitions primarily in relation to the historical circumstances of Jewish-Gentile fellowship. Paul's later treatment of meat and food offered to idols demonstrates that these issues sometimes required careful distinctions based on context (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:19–33).

What mainstream Christianity has generally **not** concluded is that Acts 15 places Gentile Christians under the entire Mosaic Law.

“No Greater Burden”

The Council's letter provides an important boundary for interpreting the four commands:

> “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 statement matters because the original proposal was that Gentiles should be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). If the Council intended the four requirements merely as the first installment of a much larger Torah obligation, “no greater burden” would be a remarkably misleading way to communicate its decision.

Instead, the Council rejected the proposal to place Gentile believers under the Mosaic Law and imposed a limited set of requirements addressing the circumstances facing the early Jewish-Gentile church (Acts 15:19–29).

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Acts 15:1–6** — The Council convenes over the claim that Gentiles must be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses.
- **Acts 15:7–11** — Peter argues that Gentiles are cleansed by faith and saved by the grace of Jesus.
- **Acts 15:19–21** — James proposes four specific requirements for Gentile converts.

- **Acts 15:22–29** — The apostolic letter imposes the four requirements while specifying “no greater burden.”
- **Leviticus 17:7–16** — Contains laws concerning idolatrous sacrifice, blood, and slaughter that also applied to foreigners living among Israel.
- **Leviticus 18:6–26** — Prohibits unlawful sexual relations and includes the foreigner living among Israel.
- **Romans 14:13–21** — Christians are instructed to limit their freedom when necessary for the sake of fellow believers.
- **1 Corinthians 8:7–13** — Paul applies the principle of Christian freedom governed by love in the context of food associated with idols.
- **1 Corinthians 10:14–33** — Paul distinguishes participation in idolatry from morally neutral food while emphasizing concern for others' consciences.

Objections & Misconceptions

“If these commands come from Leviticus, doesn't that prove Gentile Christians are under the Torah?”

No. The question before the Council was precisely whether Gentile believers should be commanded “to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), and the Council did not impose that requirement. Even if James deliberately drew all four commands from Leviticus 17–18, selecting particular requirements from the Torah is not equivalent to placing Gentile believers under the Mosaic covenant as a whole. The Council explicitly limited the burden it imposed (Acts 15:28–29).

“If Gentiles weren't under the Law of Moses, why give them any commands at all?”

Freedom from the Mosaic covenant does not mean freedom from Christian obedience. Jesus and the apostles repeatedly command believers to live holy lives (John 14:15; Gal. 5:13–26). The New Testament can reaffirm moral truths revealed in the Torah without placing Christians under the Sinai covenant itself (Rom. 7:4–6; 1 Cor. 9:20–21).

“Does Acts 15:21 mean the Gentiles were supposed to learn the rest of the Torah every Sabbath?”

The text never says that. Acts 15:21 states that Moses had long been proclaimed in synagogues throughout the cities; it does not command Gentile Christians to attend those synagogues or say that they would eventually learn and obey the remaining Mosaic commandments. Such a reading must supply several ideas that James himself never states.

“Are Christians today forbidden from eating blood or meat from a strangled animal?” Christians have answered this question differently. Some understand Acts 15:29 as establishing permanent prohibitions, while others understand the food restrictions primarily within the first-century context of Jewish-Gentile fellowship, particularly in light of Paul's later teaching about food and conscience (Rom. 14:14–21; 1 Cor. 10:25–33). Either interpretation is compatible with the central decision of Acts 15: Gentile Christians were not being placed under the Law of Moses.

Why This Matters

The four commands of Acts 15 should be interpreted within the question the Council was actually answering. Gentiles were coming to faith in Israel's Messiah in large numbers, and the early church had to determine whether these believers needed to assume Israel's Mosaic covenant obligations in order to belong fully to God's people (Acts 15:1, 5).

The apostles answered no. God had already demonstrated His acceptance of Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit and cleansing their hearts by faith (Acts 15:8–9). The Council therefore sought not to “trouble” Gentiles who were turning to God (Acts 15:19), while giving them specific instructions necessary for faithful Christian life and fellowship within a church composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

The four commands should therefore not be expanded into something the Council expressly declined to impose. Acts 15 safeguards both **Christian holiness** and **Christian freedom**: Gentile believers are called to obedience, but they do not need to come under the Mosaic covenant in order to belong fully to the people of God.

Recommended Resources

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