

## Acts 16:1-5 NIV

### “Who should control churches?”

“Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.<sup>2</sup> The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.<sup>3</sup> Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.<sup>4</sup> As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.

<sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.”

Today’s text prompts important questions:  
**Acts Chap. 15 tells of a Jerusalem church meeting to resolve two sharp disagreements.**

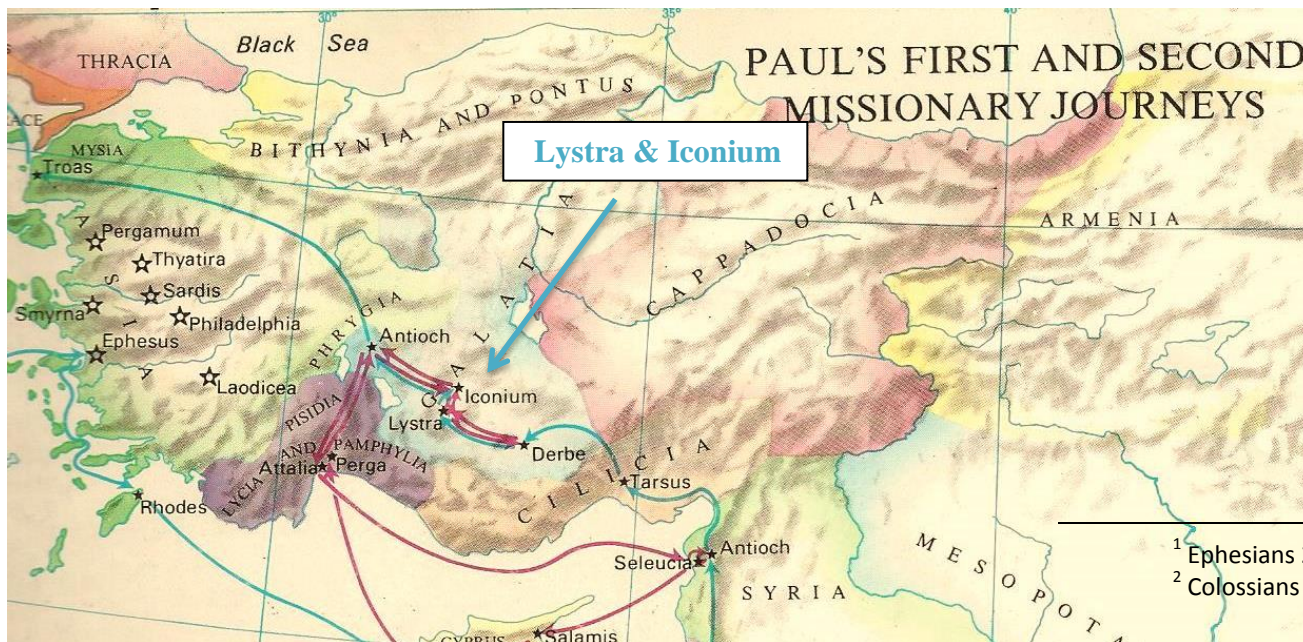
After people expressed opinions, Jesus’ Apostles and the church elders answered this question:

**A) Must believers keep the Ten Commandments and/or Moses’ Law to be saved?**

For the early church and present church, Paul, the Apostle defined the Jerusalem finding.

Jesus destroyed the barrier between Jews and Gentiles: “By abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create one new man out of two, thus making peace.”<sup>1</sup>

“He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.”<sup>2</sup>



Map adapted from one of Bob’s old Bibles showing Turkey. The Romans called it Asia. Distance from Lystra to Iconium – approx. 20 miles – about a day’s travel in Roman times. Silas accompanied Paul on his 2<sup>nd</sup> missionary journey from Antioch of Syria.

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:15

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:13, 14 NIV

**Jesus fulfilled God's requirements and paid the penalties of law-violation you, I, and all owe.**

**The Jerusalem all-church meeting resolved another troublesome question:**

**B) Do male Gentile Christians have to undergo the ancient rite of circumcision to be saved?**

**Jesus' actions made circumcision unnecessary.**

**Cutting one's flesh gains us nothing.**

**Oneness by faith in God's Son Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and his Second Coming to judge all people saves us.**

Pruning pride, axing immoral behavior, giving up greed, and depending on Jesus brings God's grace to believers.

The Jerusalem conference resolved those matters.

**You likely recognize an inconsistency here.**

**After the decision that males coming to Christ don't need to be circumcised, why did Paul circumcise Timothy?**

**It seems contradictory when you first hear about it, but Paul had good reason.**

**The Lord required circumcision of all Abraham's male descendants 400 years before Israel was a nation.**

**Circumcision was the only work that could be legally performed on the Sabbath.**

Many Jewish people still strictly practice the rite. To them, it is an acutely serious matter.

Ancient synagogue  
in Capernaum,  
likely built  
about 200 A.D.



**Acts 21 tells how some radicals falsely accused Paul of bringing uncircumcised men into the Jerusalem Temple area.**

**Fierce rioters nearly killed Paul before Roman soldiers rescued him.**

**Paul usually started preaching Jesus' Good News in a city by first attending a synagogue service.**

He'd wait for opportunities to inform worshipers that Jesus was their long-awaited Messiah.

**That chance often came when worshipers read from the prophets like Isaiah.**

If Timothy went on missionary journeys, he would not be able to attend Jewish services unless he was circumcised.

**Timothy's circumcision makes perfect sense.**

**The next crucial issue concerns elders.**

**Recall that verse 4 of our text reads:**

“As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.”

### What is an elder?

**Why were the Jerusalem church elders involved in the decision-making of other churches?**

### Acts 14 details Paul’s first missionary journey.

He and Barnabas visited the same area where Paul and Silas now were.

On that first mission trip, Paul and Barnabas introduced Jesus’ good news there.

On Pentecost, people who repented of their sins and accepted Jesus as Lord and Messiah.

**“devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers.”**

**As missionaries began preaching beyond Jerusalem, gatherings of converts to Jesus in those cities became churches.**

The Greek word translated church means “an assembly”; it never referred to a building.<sup>3</sup>



Village of Sille , near Konya (Iconium).  
Photo from [thebiblejourney.org](http://thebiblejourney.org)

**On that same second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas later revisited:**

“Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. <sup>23</sup> Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.”<sup>4</sup>

**Each assembly (church) or grouping of believers in Christ had its own elders.**

**Elder translates the word Greek *presbyter*, an older male, presumably one who has attained wisdom and godly discretion.**

Israel had long used older, godly men to oversee communities and lead in spiritual matters.<sup>5</sup>

**God’s church chose leaders looking for similar qualities—godly, experienced, older men.**

<sup>3</sup> *The Septuagint*, a second century BC translation of the Old Testament into Greek, uses the word *ecclesia* in a political sense to describe gatherings of city citizens.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 14:21b-23 NIV - The word hardships is *thlipsis*, sometimes translated as tribulation. The word translated “many” is the plural form of *poloi* often translated as “much.” Tribulation is continual for devoted followers of Jesus. As societies disintegrate, tribulation becomes increasingly intense.

<sup>5</sup> In Exodus 3: 16, the Greek word translated elder is the term from which the English word *geriatric* comes. In Ruth 4: 2, the word *presbyters* appears in the Septuagint.

**We’ve seen how Paul and Barnabas chose elders to lead churches that formed when they preached Jesus’ Good News.**

**On the second missionary trip, after visiting Lystra, Derbe, etc., Paul and Silas traveled north and west to visit Macedonia and Greece.**

**Paul later wrote to the church in Philippi (in Macedonia) addressing it to:**

**“All the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.”<sup>6</sup>**

**The word “overseer” here is *episcopos*, which means to oversee.**

**Some versions translate *episcopos* as *bishop*.**

**In *Titus 1:5-9*, Paul used the terms *overseer-bishop* and *elder-presbyter* interchangeably showing that the terms refer to the same office.**

- Elder indicates the type of person who leads the church.**
- Overseer denotes his primary responsibility.**

**Don’t overlook this detail about bishops-elders.**

**No *New Testament* church had a single bishop.**

**“What do you mean by ‘single,’ Bob?” you ask.**

**Take it either way; there were no single bishops.**



Ruins of ancient Philippi

**Elders-bishops always served in groups.**

**No bishop oversaw a church by himself.**

**Bishops-elders were always plural.**

**Addressing the other use of *single*: in New Testament times, no unmarried man ever served as a bishop-elder.**

**No woman, married or not, did either.**

**Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 make those points certain.**

**Many people don’t know the facts because Lectionary readings avoid these chapters.**

**Few churches follow the clear instructions the Lord gave us for organizing believers.**

**The Lord willing, we’ll cover more on the subject in Acts 20, where the term *pastor* also arises.**

**We need to answer one more question:**

**Why did the Jerusalem church elders oversee matters involving other churches?**

**Regarding this question I can only surmise based on Jesus’ procedures in other matters.**

**The Gospels tell how Jesus acquired numbers of followers—*disciples*.**

**He selected some for special training and chose them to be a more select group—the *Apostles*.**

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 1:1 NIV For more info on this subject See *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, edited by H.C.G. Moule, *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Cambridge University Press, 1903, p. 39.

“Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him.

“<sup>14</sup> He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach <sup>15</sup> and to have authority to drive out demons.”<sup>7</sup>

**Jesus specially trained the Twelve.**

Matthew 10 tells how he sent the twelve Apostles on a limited mission only to Israel.



Ruins at Pella, Jordan

**After his resurrection, he assigned them to make disciples for him in the entire world.**

**Converts to Christ comprised the church.**

“God placed all things under his (Jesus’) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”<sup>8</sup>

**Christ’s Church was an entirely new entity comprised of Jews and Gentiles from every tribe, language, people, and nation.**

**When they were dead in their own sins, they came alive through total submission to Christ.**

**Upon repentance, baptism and faith in Jesus, our merciful Creator gave them and us new life.**

<sup>7</sup> Mark 3:13-15 NIV

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 1:22, 23 NIV

**Jesus trained his disciples for this new reality.**

**As Jesus had tutored them, the Apostles schooled church leaders and members.**

**In my view, the Jerusalem elders served as Apostle-trained living examples for elders.<sup>9</sup>**

**Facing tremendous tribulation, they humbly, prayerfully, submitted to the Holy Spirit and to God’s Word.**

**No other church had/has the Twelve present to give them guidance.**

The Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD.<sup>10</sup>

No leader or group of leaders since can presume the authority the Lord gave the Apostles, or to the Jerusalem church elders from about 30 to 70 AD.

**The *New Testament* now supplies needed instruction for Jesus’ church.**

**God still gives His Spirit to those who obey Him.<sup>11</sup>**

**The Lord gives us examples for our benefit.**

**Do you follow the Jesus according to God’s Word and His Holy Spirit?**

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<sup>9</sup> Repeatedly in the OT, God warned servants to do things according to His pattern; Genesis 6:13-22; Exodus 24:1-3; 25:40; Leviticus 16:34; 22: 1, 2 e.g.

<sup>10</sup> Many Christians fled to the ancient city of Pella and other “safer” places.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 5:32 You might be amazed by the biblical view of pastors in Acts 20.