



JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Volume 2, Number 1 (March 2026)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-060X (print)

Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/jpci> Email: jppssuniuyo@gmail.com

Received: March 20, 2026 Accepted: March 30, 2026 Published: March 31, 2026

Citation: Okoh, Blessing U. (2026). "Exegetical Analysis of Acts 15:1-35 as a Paradigm for Conflict Resolution in Nigeria's Contemporary Context." *Journal of Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 2 (1): 135-148.

Article

Open Access

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 15:1-35 AS A PARADIGM FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA'S CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Blessing Uenoson Okoh

Department of Religion and Human Relations
University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

Email: blessing.okoh@unidel.edu.ng

Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive exegetical and theological analysis of Acts 15:1-35, the account of the Jerusalem Council, as a paradigmatic model of conflict resolution. Drawing on Greek textual analysis, historical-critical, theological, and narrative approaches, the paper situates the council within the wider context of disputes over Gentile inclusion, circumcision, and adherence to the Mosaic law. The analysis highlights the roles of key participants — such as Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James — in framing arguments, appealing to Scripture, and employing deliberative dialogue. By comparing patristic, exegetical, and contemporary interpretations, the work demonstrates how the council's resolution reflects both continuity with Jewish tradition and openness to the Gentile mission. Special attention is given to conflict management strategies evident in the text, including listening, testimony, theological reasoning, and communal consensus. The study also engages with modern theories of negotiation, mediation, and interreligious conflict resolution to show the enduring relevance of Acts 15 for addressing divisions in contemporary religious and socio-political contexts, with particular reference to Nigeria's multi-ethnic and multi-religious landscape. Ultimately, the paper argues that the Jerusalem Council exemplifies a balanced model of principled decision-making — anchored in Scripture, guided by the Spirit, and oriented toward unity without uniformity — offering transferable lessons for managing ecclesial and interfaith conflicts in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: Acts 15:1-35, Jerusalem Council, Biblical Exegesis, Conflict Resolution, Nigerian Context, Paradigm.

Copyright © 2026 By JPCI. Publishers: Omega Books

This is an open access article which permits unrestricted use provided the work is properly cited.

Introduction

The Jerusalem Council, as narrated in Acts 15, is positioned as a crucial event in the history of the early Christian church. The theologian Ben Witherington described it as "the most pivotal chapter in the whole book" of Acts, as it marks a decisive theological and narrative turning point (1998). From this point forward, the narrative's focus shifts definitively to the mission to the Gentiles, led by the Apostle Paul (Seo 2024). The story of the Council at Jerusalem is not just a historical record but a literary "hinge," linking the first half of Acts, which focuses on the Jerusalem-centric mission and the prominence of Peter, with the second half, which follows Paul's missionary journeys and the gospel's spread throughout the broader Roman world (Story 2010). The relevance of this ancient conciliar model extends into modern contexts. In Nigeria, a nation of over two hundred ethnic groups, three major religions and a long history of communal, religious, and political conflict, the need for principled, inclusive and spiritually-grounded conflict resolution frameworks is urgent. From the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East to farmer-herder clashes in the Middle Belt, and from intra-denominational disputes within the Nigerian church to broader Muslim-Christian tensions, Nigeria presents a complex arena in which the Jerusalem Council's paradigm finds direct and compelling application. This paper therefore examines Acts 15:1-35 both as a biblical text and as a living model for the Nigerian context.

The Genesis of the Dispute: Antioch and the Judaizers

"Certain men which came down from Judaea" began teaching the Gentile believers in Antioch that salvation was contingent upon circumcision "according to the custom taught by Moses" (Seo 2024). This teaching was not a minor doctrinal point but a direct challenge to the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, who had been successfully evangelising Gentiles without imposing the Law of Moses ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The dispute escalated into a "sharp dispute and debate" with these Pharisee Christians, prompting the Antioch church to make the wise decision to send delegates, including Paul and Barnabas, to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders on this matter (Seo 2024). The conflict was more than a simple doctrinal disagreement; it was an immense socio-theological crisis. The core issue of circumcision was not only a theological marker of the Abrahamic covenant but also a primary cultural and social barrier ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The theological debate — "Can Gentiles be saved without becoming Jews?" — was a proxy for a practical, underlying problem: "How can law-observing Jewish Christians and law-ignoring Gentile Christians coexist?" (Mahan 2013). The "implied theology" of the Judaizers was that one must first assimilate into Jewish culture and adhere to its laws to be a Christian, which posed a serious threat to the unity of the church and the universal spread of the gospel (Seo 2024). The Jerusalem Council featured a number of key leaders, each representing a distinct perspective on the issue of salvation and the Law. The "Pharisee Christians" held the legalistic view that Gentiles must be circumcised and follow the Law to be saved (Seo 2024). This position was seen as a dangerous teaching that attacked the integrity of the gospel and the principle of *sola fide* (salvation by faith alone) (Precept Austin 2025). Opposing them were Paul and Barnabas, who testified to God's work among the Gentiles and defended their freedom from the Mosaic Law ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025).

The most significant contributions to the resolution came from two other leaders. Peter delivered a pivotal speech in which he drew on his personal, divinely-initiated experience with the Gentile centurion Cornelius (Acts 10). Peter reminded the assembly that God had already shown acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, making no distinction between them and the Jews. He powerfully argued that imposing the

Law on the Gentiles was a burden "that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear" and that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. Peter's testimony was crucial because it shifted the discussion from an abstract theological debate to a matter of discerning God's direct, observable action (Seo 2024). James the Just, as the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, provided the authoritative final judgement (Story 2010). James affirmed Peter's testimony and provided a scriptural justification by quoting from the prophet Amos, thereby aligning God's present work with His promised redemptive plan for the Gentiles. His ruling proposed a collaborative solution that affirmed Paul's mission while requesting a minimal set of prohibitions from Gentile converts for the sake of fellowship and harmony with Jewish believers ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). At its heart, the Jerusalem Council resolved the most "momentous doctrinal question" of the early church: "What must a person do to be saved?" The debate was a direct confrontation between the principle of salvation by grace alone through faith alone (*sola fide*) and the requirement of works of the Mosaic Law (Precept Austin 2025). If the argument of the Pharisee Christians had been accepted, Christianity would have risked being reduced to a mere sect of Judaism, forever shackled by a complex system of laws that no one could fully obey (Seo 2024). The Council's decision to forbid the inclusion of works as a part of salvation "affirmed for all time the truth that salvation is wholly by God's grace through faith alone, apart from any human efforts" (Precept Austin 2025). This theological clarification was foundational to Christian identity as a distinct faith, liberated from the ritual and legal requirements of Judaism.

The Resolution Process and the Apostolic Decree

The resolution process was a structured, multi-stage deliberation. The narrative suggests it involved at least three separate meetings over several days. The process began with Paul and Barnabas giving a report of "all that God had done" among the Gentiles (Seo 2024). This mission report, which led to both "great joy" and protests, set the stage for the definitive debate. Following a period of "much discussion," Peter and then James spoke, providing their respective testimonies and scriptural justifications (Mahan 2013). The final outcome was the Apostolic Decree, a formal letter that communicated the Council's decision to the Gentile churches ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The decree freed Gentile converts from the obligation of circumcision and most of the Mosaic Law but retained four prohibitions: "to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood" (Seo 2024). The successful resolution of this internal conflict legitimised the Gentile mission and propelled the gospel forward into new geographical and ethnic territories, demonstrating how the church could find a divine solution to its internal disputes and thereby strengthen its mission (Story 2010).

Exegetical Analysis of Acts 15:1-35

This section provides a systematic exegetical treatment of Acts 15:1-35, analysing its literary structure, key Greek terms, and the theological significance of each pericope. The exegetical method employed is grammatical-historical, supplemented by narrative and canonical approaches. The goal is to identify, from the text itself, the specific conflict-resolution mechanisms that can later be compared with modern theoretical frameworks. Acts 15:1-35 is a carefully structured literary unit that functions as the theological and narrative centre of the book of Acts. Luke structures the passage in a broadly chiasmic or concentric pattern that emphasises the community's deliberative process and the role of divine initiative:

- A The conflict introduced: Antioch (vv. 1-3)
- B The conflict brought to Jerusalem (vv. 4-5)
- C Assembly, debate, and Peter's speech (vv. 6-11)
- C' Paul and Barnabas's testimony (v. 12)
- B' James's speech and the scriptural citation (vv. 13-21)
- A' The resolution enacted: letter sent to Antioch (vv. 22-35)

This structure reveals Luke's literary intentionality: the crisis originates in Antioch (A) and is resolved by returning to Antioch (A'). The central deliberation (C/C') anchors the passage theologically, while the scriptural grounding (B') provides the authoritative resolution to the dispute introduced in B. This is not a haphazard historical record but a purposefully crafted theological argument about how Spirit-guided communal discernment operates.

Acts 15:1-3: "And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (v. 1 KJV). The opening verse introduces the conflict with precision. The phrase *τινες κατελθόντες ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας* (*tines katelthontes apo tēs loudaias*, "certain men who came down from Judaea") is deliberately vague regarding the identity of these teachers, yet the phrasing implies they had some standing in the Jerusalem community. The verb *κατελθόντες* (*having come down*) reflects the geographical and theological primacy accorded to Jerusalem in early Christianity. Crucially, they are never said to have been authorised by the Jerusalem church (cf. 15:24: "to whom we gave no commandment"), a textual detail Luke uses to undermine their legitimacy retroactively. The term *περιτμηθῆτε* (*peritmethēte*, "be circumcised") is an aorist passive subjunctive, indicating a completed, decisive act. This grammatical form, combined with the declarative *οὐ δύνασθε σωθῆναι* ("you cannot be saved"), reveals the Judaizers' non-negotiable theological stance: circumcision is presented as a *sine qua non* for salvation. The word *σώζεσθαι* (*sōzesthai*, "to be saved") is the same soteriological term used throughout Luke-Acts for full, eschatological deliverance. The conflict is therefore not merely ritualistic but reaches to the heart of soteriology.

Luke records in verse 3 that as Paul and Barnabas passed through Phoenicia and Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, they reported "the conversion of the Gentiles" and caused "great joy unto all the brethren." The word *ἐπιστροφήν* (*epistrophēn*, "conversion" or "turning") echoes the Septuagintal language of Israel's return to God, now applied to Gentile inclusion. This detail is narratively significant: the joy of the wider church contrasts sharply with the anxiety of the Judaizers, framing their position as a minority concern. *"And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter" (v. 6 KJV).* Verse 6 is exegetically significant for its depiction of ecclesial governance. The verb *συνήχθησαν* (*sunēchthēsan*, "came together/assembled") is from the same root as *συναγωγή* (*synagōgē*, synagogue), connoting a formal, deliberative gathering. The reference to both *ἀπόστολοι* (*apostoloi*, apostles) and *πρεσβύτεροι* (*presbyteroi*, elders) indicates a pluralistic leadership structure that validates consensus-based decision-making. No single individual or office alone renders the verdict.

The Greek *πολλῆς δὲ ζητήσεως γενομένης* (v. 7, "and after much discussion/debate had taken place") is important. The noun *ζήτησις* (*zētēsis*) denotes a thorough investigation or inquiry, implying that the deliberation was substantive and not ceremonial. The Council did not rush to a conclusion; it engaged deeply with the question. This is a critical exegetical observation for the conflict-resolution paradigm: the process was characterised by open, structured debate before any resolution was sought. Peter's speech (vv. 7-11) is built on three argumentative pillars: (1) divine election — "God made choice among us" (*ἐξελέξατο*,

exelexato, aorist middle, emphasising divine initiative); (2) empirical evidence — the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles as observed fact (μαρτυρήσας, *marturēsas*, "bearing witness"); and (3) the theological implication — God "made no distinction" (οὐδὲν διέκρινεν, *ouden diekrinen*) between Jews and Gentiles, "purifying their hearts by faith" (καθαρίσας τῇ πίστει, v. 9). The word πίστις (*pistis*, faith) is foregrounded as the sole instrument of purification, directly countering the Judaizers' insistence on the rite of circumcision.

Peter's climactic declaration in verse 10 is rhetorically forceful: "why do you put God to the test by placing a yoke (ζυγόν, *zugon*) upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" The metaphor of the ζυγός (*zugon*, yoke) is charged with connotations of slavery and oppression. In Jewish literature, the phrase "yoke of the Torah" could be used positively, but Peter deploys it here critically, arguing that imposing it as a condition of salvation is an act of testing God (πειράζετε τὸν θεόν), a serious charge given the Exodus traditions. The argument moves from grace to experience to logic: God himself accepted them; we could not bear this yoke; therefore, to impose it is to contradict God. *"Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul"* (v. 12 KJV). The Greek ἐσίγησεν (*esigēsen*, "kept silence") from σιγάω (*sigāō*) is significant. Silence in this context is not passive; it is an active, respectful attentiveness that follows conviction. Peter's argument has landed. Luke uses this literary device to signal the turning of the rhetorical tide. The assembly listens to Paul and Barnabas's testimony of σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα (*sēmeia kai terata*, "signs and wonders"), which are Lukan hallmarks of divine legitimation throughout Acts (cf. Acts 2:43; 5:12; 14:3).

James's speech (vv. 13-21) provides the formal judicial summation. His opening "ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἀκούσατέ μου" ("Men and brethren, hearken unto me," v. 13) employs the language of a formal address, characteristic of the Jewish assembly context. The phrase Συμεὼν ἐξηγήσατο (v. 14, "Simeon has narrated/related") uses the verb ἐξηγέομαι (*exēgeomai*), meaning to lead out or expound, the same root from which "exegesis" derives. James thus presents Peter's account as a form of inspired narration that requires interpretation in light of the prophetic text. James's citation from Amos 9:11-12 (vv. 16-18) is drawn from the Septuagint (LXX) rather than the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and this textual choice is exegetically deliberate. The LXX renders the Hebrew דִּימְרָא דְעֵדוֹם ("the remnant of Edom") as πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ("all the Gentiles/nations"), a reading that explicitly includes the Gentiles in the eschatological restoration of the Davidic kingdom. James's hermeneutical move is sophisticated: God's acceptance of the Gentiles is not a novelty but the fulfilment of ancient prophetic promise. This provides theological continuity for what might otherwise appear to be a radical departure from Jewish tradition. The διὸ ἐγὼ κρίνω (v. 19, "wherefore my judgement is") signals James's authoritative conclusion. The verb κρίνω (*krinō*, "I judge/decide") is the language of judicial pronouncement. However, James does not present his ruling as a personal preference; it is grounded in Peter's testimony, empirical evidence, and scriptural warrant. His decision is that Gentiles "should not be troubled" (μὴ παρενοχλεῖν, *mē parenochlen*, literally "not be harassed/caused difficulty"), and that they observe four prohibitions for the sake of fellowship.

The four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree (v. 29) are: (1) εἰδωλοθύτων (*eidōlothutōn*, things sacrificed to idols); (2) αἵματος (*haimatos*, blood); (3) πνικτοῦ (*pniktos*, things strangled); and (4) πορνείας (*porneias*, sexual immorality). The term πορνεία, while broadly covering sexual immorality, may also carry the specific connotation of marriage within prohibited degrees of kinship (as in Leviticus 18), which would be a particular concern for Gentile converts from pagan backgrounds. The other three prohibitions are directly

traceable to the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17-18, specifically to the laws governing resident aliens (גֵר, ger) living among Israel — an exegetical connection that suggests James is framing the Gentile believers' status analogously to that of the ger, the honoured stranger who lives within the covenant community without full legal assimilation. The decree is introduced with the remarkable phrase ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν (v. 28, "for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"). This formulation is without precise parallel in ancient deliberative literature and represents a theologically audacious claim: the community's decision and the Spirit's guidance are presented as a single, unified will. The Spirit is not an external ratifier of a human conclusion but a co-participant in the deliberative process itself. This is the theological apex of the passage and the cornerstone of its paradigmatic value.

Implementation and Restoration

The final pericope narrates the decree's reception in Antioch. The verb παρεκάλεσαν (v. 32, "they exhorted/encouraged"), from παρακαλέω (parakaleō), conveys both comfort and moral instruction. The community is not merely informed of a decision; it is built up through the ongoing ministry of Judas and Silas. Luke records that the believers "rejoiced for the consolation" (ἔχάρησαν ἐπὶ τῇ παρακλήσει, v. 31), and this joy — the same word χαρά (chara) used in verse 3 for the joy caused by the news of Gentile conversions — forms an inclusio, bringing the narrative full circle. The conflict that began with disruption of the Antiochene community ends with the restoration of that community's joy and peace.

Key Exegetical Findings

Several exegetical findings emerge from the foregoing analysis that are of direct relevance to the conflict-resolution paradigm. First, the process is predicated on the pre-existing shared authority of Scripture and the Spirit; without this common ground, the deliberation would lack an objective standard. Second, the use of narrative testimony (vv. 7-12) prior to the formal scriptural citation (vv. 15-18) reflects a pedagogically sophisticated approach: the human experience of God's action prepares the assembly to receive and recognise the prophetic word. Third, the solution is integrative rather than distributive: neither side "wins" at the other's expense. The Gentiles are freed from the Law; the Jewish believers are given sufficient assurance that core matters of fellowship and purity are respected. Fourth, the decision is formalised, written, and personally delivered, ensuring clarity, accountability, and relational investment in the outcome. While the narrative of the Jerusalem Council appears straightforward, it has been the subject of extensive scholarly debate and critical inquiry. These discussions highlight the complexity of the text, its relationship to other New Testament writings, and its historicity. A central point of contention among scholars is whether the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is the same event as the visit to Jerusalem described by Paul in Galatians 2. The events share many similarities: both involve Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James; both address the core issue of Gentile converts and circumcision; and both result in the apostles' recognition of Paul's mission to the Gentiles (Keener 2025).

However, some scholars argue that the two accounts are contradictory. The narrative in Acts presents a harmonious and unanimous decision, whereas Galatians describes a more confrontational relationship, particularly concerning Paul's later rebuke of Peter in Antioch. This has led some to question the historicity of Luke's account ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). It is important to recognise that Acts and Galatians are different literary genres with different purposes. Galatians is a polemical letter from Paul, written to defend his authority and the gospel of grace against his opponents. Its focus is personal and confrontational

(Keener 2025). In contrast, Acts is a historical narrative written by Luke to portray the unified, divinely guided expansion of the early church (Story 2010). Luke's narrative style appears to have a bias toward demonstrating harmony and consensus, as evidenced by his inclusion of arguments against circumcision but none in favour of it (Grace Communion International n.d.). Therefore, the apparent discrepancies may not represent a historical fabrication but a reflection of the different authors' literary and theological agendas.

The Historicity of the Council

The historicity of Acts has been questioned due to the absence of explicit references to the Council in non-biblical historical sources. However, this historical silence is not considered sufficient to undermine the credibility of the event. The early Christian community was a small religious movement in the mid-first century, and its internal doctrinal debates would likely have been viewed as minor by secular Roman historians (Bible Hub n.d.). Furthermore, several points of evidence corroborate the plausibility of the Council's historicity. The consistent theological stance on Gentile inclusion found in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers (Ignatius of Antioch 1912) implies that such a definitive, unifying decision must have occurred. The presence of the passage in early and consistent manuscript traditions (such as Papyrus P45 and Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) confirms that the account was historically accepted from the earliest centuries and was not a later textual addition (Bible Hub n.d.). The purpose and origin of the four prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree are a key area of scholarly debate ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). Three main interpretations have been advanced:

- i. **A Food Law Interpretation:** This view holds that the decree was a food regulation aimed at ensuring table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (Moehlmann 1912). The prohibitions on eating blood and strangled animals are directly related to Jewish dietary laws. However, this interpretation is complicated by its apparent tension with Paul's advice in other letters, where he appears to grant Gentiles freedom regarding food ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025).
- ii. **A Moral Law Interpretation:** Some manuscripts, particularly the "Western" text tradition, omit or modify the prohibitions related to food, suggesting the decree was primarily a summary of fundamental moral precepts for new converts (Moehlmann 1912). The inclusion of sexual immorality alongside the other prohibitions supports this reading.
- iii. **A Fellowship Compromise:** This interpretation, which reconciles the others, posits that the decree served a dual purpose. The prohibitions were a practical, socio-theological compromise designed to enable co-existential unity and diversity between Jewish and Gentile believers. The prohibitions on blood and strangled meat, while not required for salvation, were essential to avoid violating the deep-seated cultural and religious sensibilities of Jewish Christians, thereby allowing them to share meals and community life with their Gentile counterparts (Mahan 2013).

The debate over the decree's purpose demonstrates the importance of textual criticism and the nuanced reading of the narrative. A holistic analysis suggests that the final decision was a creative and collaborative solution that affirmed the central theological truth of salvation by grace while making practical concessions for the sake of unity and shared community life.

Foundational Principles of Contemporary Conflict Resolution

In order to effectively compare the Jerusalem Council's process with modern models, it is necessary to first establish the foundational principles of contemporary conflict resolution.

These principles provide a theoretical framework for analysing and understanding disputes across various contexts. Modern theories of conflict management often distinguish between two primary approaches. Kuhn and Poole's model identifies a distributive approach, which is a zero-sum, win-lose scenario where one party's gain is another's loss (2000). In contrast, the integrative approach seeks to address the underlying needs and concerns of both parties to achieve a mutually beneficial, win-win solution. The integrative model is generally considered superior because it leads to more sustainable and positive outcomes (Communication Theory 2025). Rahim's Meta Model further refines these approaches by identifying five major styles for handling conflict: obliging, integrating, avoiding, dominating, and compromising (2001). While each style has its use, the most effective long-term solutions are typically found through collaborative and integrative methods (Communication Theory 2025).

Five Core Styles

The five styles of conflict resolution represent a spectrum of responses (Communication Theory 2025):

- i. **Accommodating:** This style involves putting the other party's needs first, often for the sake of maintaining peace on a minor issue.
- ii. **Avoiding:** This involves ignoring the conflict or taking a break from it, which can be useful for cooling tempers or gathering more information before engaging.
- iii. **Compromising:** In this style, both parties relinquish something to reach a quick solution — a middle ground where both sides give up some of their initial aspirations.
- iv. **Competing:** This is a win-lose approach focused solely on one's own goals, often at the expense of the relationship.
- v. **Collaborating:** This is the ideal style, where parties work together to find a novel solution that addresses the core concerns of all involved, creating a new, mutually beneficial outcome.

Acts 15 as a Paradigm for Conflict Resolution: A Comparative Analysis

The Jerusalem Council's process and outcome provide a compelling ancient paradigm for modern conflict resolution. Its success lay in its ability to navigate deeply held religious and cultural differences through a principled and collaborative approach. The Council's process was not a simple political negotiation but a structured deliberation guided by a shared commitment to a "higher calling" and the pursuit of a common goal. All parties, despite their disagreements, shared an identity "in Christ" and sought to find the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Story 2010). This shared, non-negotiable authority provided an objective standard for the discussion that transcended individual or factional interests ("Question about Acts 15: Council of Jerusalem" 2025). The leaders, particularly Peter and James, acted as impartial facilitators. They did not simply impose a solution but instead guided the assembly through a process that allowed for open discussion and the presentation of evidence. Their final decision was not a personal judgement but was presented as the collective conclusion of the leaders and the Holy Spirit, which gave it moral and theological weight ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). This approach aligns with the modern concept of principled negotiation, which seeks to focus on underlying interests rather than rigid positions and to use objective criteria to guide the outcome. The Judaizers' position was "circumcision is necessary," while Paul's was "it is not." The council's resolution moved past these rigid positions by addressing the deeper interests of both groups: the Gentiles' need

for salvation by grace, and the Jewish Christians' need for fellowship and adherence to core religious sensibilities.

A critical element of the Council's success was the use of narrative and personal testimony to build empathy and shift perspective (Mahan 2013). Paul and Barnabas recounted "all that God had done with them" among the Gentiles (Calvin n.d.). Peter's account of God's saving of Cornelius was even more impactful, as it demonstrated God's direct involvement in the matter (Seo 2024). The use of these stories humanised the conflict, moving it from a theoretical debate about the Law to an empirical observation of God's work. This aligns with modern conflict resolution strategies that use shared narratives and personal stories to bridge divides, foster understanding, and transform the opposing party from an abstract opponent into a fellow human being (Mason 2011). The final decree was not a victory for one side but a collaborative, integrative solution. It affirmed the core of Paul's gospel of grace by removing the "heavy yoke" of the Mosaic Law from the Gentiles, while also requesting four concessions from the Gentiles for the sake of harmony and fellowship with Jewish believers ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025). This solution allowed for the co-existential unity and diversity of the church, recognising that different cultures could maintain their unique identities while being bound by a higher, shared identity in Christ (Welch 2022). The resolution was not a simple compromise where each side lost something, but a creative, integrative outcome that satisfied the fundamental needs of all parties.

Table 1 below provides a comparative analysis of the principles employed at the Jerusalem Council with contemporary conflict resolution theories.

Table 1: Jerusalem Council Principles and Contemporary Conflict Resolution Theory

Jerusalem Council Principle	Contemporary Theory/Principle	Description
Conflict instigated by unauthorised outsiders (Edling 2017)	Root Cause Analysis	The conflict's origin was identified and addressed at the source in Antioch before a full-scale division could take root in the broader church.
Paul and Barnabas reporting God's work (Seo 2024)	The Power of Narrative/Testimony	Shared stories of God's action built empathy and a common purpose, moving the discussion from abstract doctrine to lived experience.
Peter's appeal to the Holy Spirit (Seo 2024)	Appeal to Objective Criteria	The group used a shared, non-partisan authority (God's actions and the Holy Spirit's guidance) to inform and legitimate their decision.
James's scriptural justification ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025)	Shared Principles/Values	Finding common ground in a revered text (the prophets) provided a biblical basis for the new direction, fostering consensus among the leaders.
Apostolic Decree ("Council of Jerusalem" 2025)	Integrative Solution	The solution was not a win-lose outcome but a new, creative result that upheld the core gospel message while addressing the practical needs of both sides.
Delegates sent with the letter (Seo 2024)	Clear Communication/Follow-Through	The decision was formalised, written down, and personally delivered to ensure understanding, build trust, and prevent future disputes.

The Jerusalem Council's Principles Applied to Nigeria's Contemporary Context

The principles derived from the Jerusalem Council have immediate and specific application in Nigeria's contemporary context. Nigeria is one of the world's most religiously diverse nations, home to approximately 100 million Christians and 90 million Muslims, as well as a significant proportion of adherents to indigenous religious traditions. Ethnic diversity, with over 250 distinct groups, intersects with religious identity in ways that make conflict a persistent structural feature of Nigerian public life. The Jerusalem Council offers a paradigm that is theologically grounded, practically structured, and historically tested for navigating precisely this kind of complex, multi-party, identity-based dispute. Nigeria's most persistent conflicts — the farmer-herder clashes across the Middle Belt, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East, and communal violence in Plateau, Kaduna, and Benue States — share structural features with the Jerusalem crisis: they involve competing claims over identity, resources, and belonging, and they are exacerbated by the failure of formal institutions to provide credible, inclusive processes for resolution. The Jerusalem Council provides a framework for resolving intra-religious and inter-communal disputes by first identifying and addressing the theological or ideological core of a conflict separately from its political or ethnic dimensions. In Nigeria, religious leaders of both Christian and Muslim communities have, in several instances, demonstrated the capacity to act as credible mediators in ways that state institutions cannot. The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) founded by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa in Kaduna exemplifies this principle: two former combatants who became co-mediators, appealing to shared religious values to build trust across the Christian-Muslim divide. Their model resonates directly with the Jerusalem Council's approach — former adversaries, in shared space, appealing to a common higher authority.

The Council's emphasis on direct personal testimony (vv. 7-12) as a tool for humanising the opposing party is equally relevant in the Nigerian context. In many communal conflicts, dehumanisation of the "other" is a primary driver of escalation. Creating structured spaces for shared narrative, as the Council did, has been demonstrated by organisations such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and various civil society peace building bodies operating in Nigeria to be among the most effective means of de-escalating entrenched disputes. Within the Nigerian Church itself, the Jerusalem Council paradigm addresses a recurring challenge: doctrinal and leadership disputes that fracture denominations, weaken Christian witness, and sometimes spill over into civil society. The Council's model of pluralistic leadership (apostles and elders together), structured deliberation, appeal to Scripture as a shared authority, and the formalisation of decisions in writing offers a template for intra-church conflict resolution that Nigerian ecclesiastical bodies and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) could formally adopt. The absence of such structured processes has historically allowed personal ambition, ethnic loyalties, and financial disputes to fracture church communities, particularly in the Pentecostal and African Indigenous Church contexts. The Council's guiding principle — ἔδοξεν τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν ("it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us") — offers an important corrective to the cult of individual prophetic authority that characterises some sectors of Nigerian Christianity. The Jerusalem model asserts that even Spirit-led decisions require communal verification, deliberate process, and accountable implementation. This is a prophylactic against the abuse of charismatic authority and the suppression of legitimate dissent.

A critical evaluation must acknowledge the significant challenges and limitations of applying an ancient, religiously rooted model to modern, diverse and often secular contexts.

The most profound limitation is the Council's reliance on a shared belief in divine initiative and a final decision attributed to "the Holy Spirit and we ourselves" ("Religious war" 2025). This religious framework, which provides an ultimate, non-negotiable authority, is not available in most multi-faith or secular conflicts (Mason 2011). In Nigeria's plural religious landscape, while both Christianity and Islam affirm divine authority, they do so through different sources of revelation and different hermeneutical traditions. The epistemological gap between a framework based on Christian scripture and one based on Quranic revelation is significant. Furthermore, applying a religious conflict-resolution model can be problematic if it oversimplifies the conflict's origins. Focusing on the religious dimension can "obscure more deeply rooted causes" such as political, economic, and ethnic grievances (Silvestri and Mayall 2015). The Jerusalem Council was a conflict over salvation and fellowship within a single religious tradition, not over territory, political power, or resource distribution. Therefore, while its principles are valuable, they must be used as part of a broader, comprehensive strategy that addresses the full range of a conflict's root causes, including the structural inequalities and political failures that fuel many of Nigeria's most entrenched disputes.

Conclusion

The success of the Jerusalem Council hinged on the wisdom and humility of its leaders (Bengtson 2025). Leaders like Peter and James demonstrated humility by listening to opposing views and seeking a biblically and divinely guided solution rather than imposing a personal one (Calvin n.d.). This stands in stark contrast to the "competing" style of conflict resolution and aligns with the need for impartiality, respect, and a focus on reconciliation rather than winning the argument (Communication Theory 2025). The exegetical analysis conducted in this study reveals that Acts 15:1-35 is not merely a narrative of a historical council but a carefully constructed theological argument about the nature of Spirit-guided communal discernment. The Greek text discloses a sophisticated deliberative process grounded in testimony, Scripture, silence, and structured leadership — a process whose constituent elements are remarkably consonant with contemporary integrative conflict resolution theory. Applied to Nigeria's contemporary context, the Jerusalem Council paradigm offers a model that is both theologically grounded and practically structured. Its emphasis on shared authority, inclusive deliberation, integrative solutions, and formalised communication speaks directly to the needs of a nation whose religious, ethnic, and political diversity generates persistent conflict at multiple levels of society. The model is most effectively applied when religious leaders are willing to serve not as partisan advocates but as principled facilitators, committed to a higher authority than tribal, denominational, or political loyalty. While the model's direct translatability to multi-faith and secular contexts has inherent limitations, its process — structured, inclusive, testimony-based, scripturally grounded, and communally accountable — offers a transferable framework whose wisdom transcends its ancient setting. Acts 15 remains not merely a historical precedent but a living paradigm for the peaceable resolution of division in the contemporary Nigerian church and society.

References

Bengtson, Michelle. 2025. "7 Biblical Principles for Healthy Conflict Resolution." *Hope Prevails* (Dr. Michelle Bengtson). Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://drmichellebengtson.com/>.

- Bible Hub. n.d. "Acts 15:1 - How can we verify the historicity of this Jerusalem Council?" BibleHub.com. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://biblehub.com/acts/15-1.htm>.
- Calvin, John. n.d. "Commentary on Acts 15." In Calvin's Commentaries. Bible Hub. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/acts/15.htm>.
- Communication Theory. 2025. "Conflict Management — Skills, Styles and Models." CommunicationTheory.org. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://www.communicationtheory.org/conflict-management-skills-styles-and-models/>
- "Council of Jerusalem." 2025. Wikipedia. Accessed August 21, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Jerusalem.
- Edling, David V. 2017. "The Acts 15 Model for Redeeming Church Conflict as a Model of Progressive Continuity Consistent with All of Scripture." Redeeming Church Conflicts (blog). February 25, 2017. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://redeemingchurchconflicts.wordpress.com/2017/02/25/>.
- Grace Communion International. n.d. "Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council." Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://www.gci.org/>.
- Ignatius of Antioch. 1912. "The Epistles of St. Ignatius." *In The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Kirsopp Lake. London: William Heinemann.
- Keener, Craig S. 2025. "Acts, Session 16: Acts 15-16 Resources." Biblical eLearning. Accessed August 21, 2025. https://biblicalelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Keener_Acts_Session16.pdf
- Kuhn, Timothy, and Marshall Scott Poole. 2000. "Do Conflict Management Styles Affect Group Decision Making? Evidence from a Longitudinal Field Study." *Human Communication Research* 26 (4): 558–90.
- Mahan, Michael. 2013. "A Narrative Analysis of the Jerusalem Council Discourses: Table Fellowship and the Implicit Theology of Salvation." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 5, no. 1 (2013). Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://www.regent.edu/journal/journal-of-biblical-perspectives-in-leadership/>.
- Mason, Simon, and Sabina Stein. 2011. "Mediating Conflicts with Religious Dimensions." *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 105. Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, December 2011. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSS-Analysis-105-EN.pdf>.
- Moehlmann, Conrad H. 1912. "The Historicity of the Apostolic Decree." *The Biblical World* 40, no. 5 (1912): 318-329. <https://doi.org/10.1086/474657>.
- Precept Austin (Andrews, Jack, et al.). 2025. "Acts 15 Commentary." PreceptAustin.org. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-15-commentary>.
- "Question about Acts 15: Council of Jerusalem." 2025. r/AskAPriest, Reddit. Accessed August 21, 2025. https://www.reddit.com/r/AskAPriest/comments/1alq0xd/question_about_acts_15_council_of_jerusalem/.
- Rahim, M. Afzalur. 2001. *Managing Conflict in Organizations*. 3rd ed. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- "Religious war." 2025. Wikipedia. Accessed August 21, 2025. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_war.
- Seo, P. Juan. 2024. "The Jerusalem Council." University Bible Fellowship, August 11, 2024. Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://ubf.org/resources/show/the-jerusalem-council>.
- Silvestri, Sara, and James Mayall. 2015. *The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding*. London: The British Academy, September 2015. https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/325/Role-of-religion-in-conflict-peacebuilding_0_0.pdf.

- Story, J. Lyle. 2010. "The Jerusalem Council: A Pivotal and Instructive Paradigm." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 3, no. 1 (2010). Accessed August 21, 2025. <https://www.regent.edu/journal/journal-of-biblical-perspectives-in-leadership/the-jerusalem-council-a-pivotal-and-instructive-paradigm/>.
- Welch, Deborah L. 2022. "Acts 15: The Jerusalem Council as a Model for Unity, Diversity, and Discipleship." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 12, no. 1 (2022): 43-54. Accessed August 21, 2025. https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/jbpl/vol12no1/Vol12Iss1_JBPL_3_Welch.pdf.
- Witherington, Ben, III. 1998. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.