

I. Introduction

Good morning! It has been a few weeks, but it is time for us to return to our study in Acts. Last time we finished Acts 14 which marked the completion of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey. Most of the journey was within the area of modern day Turkey, but a number of cities were visited and the Good News of Jesus was preached and confirmed by God with many miracles. It was a fruitful journey and Paul and Barnabas were able to give an excellent report when they returned to the church in Antioch.



Last time we also talked about church government and especially about how elders were appointed in each local church as soon as the church was formed. In Acts 14:23 we read, **“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.”** Paul continued this pattern of naming elders throughout his work and it became standard in the early church.

Local churches were ruled by elders but, as we will see in today's Scripture, they were still accountable to the larger church and especially to the church in Jerusalem. We will also see in Acts 15 how some of the Jewish Christians challenged Paul's message of salvation by grace. These issues come together in this chapter as it describes the first church council, the Council of Jerusalem. Let's read Acts 15:1-21.

II. Scripture Reading (Acts 15:1-21, NIV, 1984)

1 Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. 3 The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. 4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." 6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question. 7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

12 The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. 13 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 15 The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: 16 "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, 17 that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' 18 that have been known for ages.

19 "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 20 Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. 21 For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every

Sabbath."

III. Teaching

Let's take a closer look at some key points. **Acts 15:1** says, **"Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'"** It is very clear from Paul's letters that he proclaimed a message of salvation by grace alone. Yet, throughout church history, from the early days of the church until today, there have always been plenty of people who want to add works to grace as a condition for salvation.

In the early days of the church this often took the form that we see here. Some of the Jews who had believed in Jesus wanted to require the gentile believers to obey the Law of Moses. And, especially, they wanted the gentiles to accept circumcision as a requirement for salvation. The thinking of these men was not irrational. For 1,500 years, the Jews had lived under the Law of Moses which required circumcision for gentiles who desired to become Jews and follow God. And, even before the time of Moses, Abraham and his family had accepted circumcision as the sign of their covenant relationship with God. It is no surprise that many Jews thought that the requirement for circumcision was permanent and unchangeable.

In the church today, very few people would argue that circumcision is a requirement for salvation. But the issue of whether salvation is by grace alone or whether some kind of works are necessary is still with us in the modern church. Some churches teach that baptism is necessary for salvation. Others say that the filling of the Holy Spirit is essential. Still others argue that a holy lifestyle or particular rituals are indispensable. But the Good News of Jesus is that when we place our faith in Jesus we are saved by grace, without any requirement for works at all.

We are not under the Law of Moses. In **Romans 3:28**, Paul declares, **"For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."** Nor are any ceremonies or good works required for salvation. In **Ephesians 2:8-9**, Paul teaches, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast."**

Some Protestants argue that the Catholic Church rejects the teaching of these verses, but the truth is more complex. In the early days of the Catholic Church, the Catholics also affirmed salvation by grace alone without works. However, in medieval times many Catholic practices and teachings seemed to require works for salvation. For this reason, there were many within the Catholic Church who sought to reform the church and correct wrong teaching. The history is complex, but in the 16th century the voices seeking reform of the Catholic Church became numerous and eventually they rallied around Martin Luther, John Calvin and other leaders. This led to the birth of the Protestant movement during which numerous churches split off from the Catholic Church and eventually formed various Protestant denominations.

The core teaching of the original Protestant movement came to be summarized by five short statements. These are often called the, "Five Solas," because of the way they were phrased in Latin, "*Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Soli Deo Gloria.*" In simple terms, the meanings are:



1. *Sola Scriptura*: The Bible alone is the only inspired and authoritative word of God and the only source for Christian doctrine.
2. *Solus Christus*: Christ alone is mediator between God and man, there is salvation in no other.
3. *Sola Gratia*: Salvation is by grace alone, given by God as a free gift.
4. *Sola Fide*: Justification, meaning to be declared just by God, is received by faith alone.
5. *Soli Deo Gloria*: Glory is due to God alone because salvation is accomplished solely through His will and action.

The issues at stake in Acts 15 involve at least three of these core Protestant teachings, the role of Christ versus Moses, the role of grace versus works, and the role of faith versus obedience to the law. These issues should have remained settled after the Council in Jerusalem; or at least after Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians which deals almost entirely with these issues. But still today there is a lot of confusion. We also need to guard our own hearts and doctrine to make sure that we do not mix works and law with grace, but instead we should rejoice and give glory to God for our salvation.

Romans 5:1-2 is a good summary of these things, **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”**

We can be encouraged that the Catholic Church has also reaffirmed its commitment to grace in recent years, so, at least in official Catholic teaching, there is considerably less distance between the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches than there was in the time of Martin Luther. In November of 1999, the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church issued a, *“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,”* which includes the following paragraph:

“Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

This statement, which is now part of official Catholic doctrine, essentially affirms Protestant teaching concerning grace. This encourages me concerning the future of the Catholic Church. I should also mention that, as is noted in the statement, the teaching of salvation by grace alone does not mean that good works are unimportant. On the contrary, we are all called to good works as a response to the Good News of salvation.

Paul, in his letter to the church in Ephesus, also taught the importance of good works. **Ephesians 2:8-10** says, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** We often quote verses 8 and 9 without verse 10, but Paul did not put any verse numbers in his letters when he wrote them, it is really one continuous thought.

Let’s get back to Acts 15. The dispute concerning law and grace began in Antioch, but the decision was soon made to send Paul and Barnabas, along with other concerned believers, to Jerusalem to present the issue to the apostles and elders there. **Acts 15:4**, **“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.”**



The initial report was given to the whole church, but after the question of whether the gentiles would be required to submit to circumcision and the Law of Moses was raised, the apostles and elders met separately to discuss the issue. Three lines of evidence in support of the doctrine of grace were presented.

Peter presented his testimony of how God had given the Holy Spirit to the gentiles through his ministry when he visited Cornelius’ household. You may remember from our study of Acts 10 how Peter was amazed when God poured out His Holy Spirit on the gentiles. In **Acts 10:47** Peter exclaimed, **“Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.”** Peter reasoned that if God had so clearly shown His acceptance of these uncircumcised gentiles just as they were, then the church could not ask them to change later.



In **Acts 15:12**, we are told that, **“The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.”** The testimony of Barnabas and Paul reinforced Peter’s line of reasoning. God had clearly chosen to bless the gentiles with the many miracles and signs that showed God’s love for and acceptance of the gentiles in their uncircumcised state.

The testimonies were powerful and convincing, but one thing was still lacking. Regardless of the amazing experiences and miracles that were reported, no teaching could be accepted unless it was supported by the Scriptures. James spoke last and he provided what was still needed by quoting from Amos 9:11-12, saying in **Acts 15:15-18**, **“The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the**

remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages.”

This prophecy showed that God intended from the beginning to accept the gentiles without requiring them to convert to the Jewish faith. As the prophecy declared, it would be in a time when the House of David had fallen, which was surely the situation in the time of Acts when the Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus the Messiah and the nation of Israel was under Roman rule.

The testimonies of God’s acceptance of the gentiles had been given by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, and now James had shown that all of these things were in accord with God’s plan as revealed by the Old Testament prophets. Everything necessary for a decision had been provided and James announces the verdict. **Acts 15:19, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”** James continued with some additional words of instruction, next week we will take a close look at those things. But here is the essential decision. The gentiles will not be burdened by any difficult requirements like circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses. The church will recognize that salvation is by grace alone. It is interesting that James is the one who gave the decision. James was apparently the chair of the Jerusalem church council and even Peter and Paul seem to have deferred to his leadership. From the early days of the church, leadership was shared. This is strong evidence against the Catholic system of appointing popes.

IV. Conclusion

The Good News of salvation by grace had been challenged. The opponents of this doctrine had spoken before the Council in Jerusalem. **Acts 15:5, “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”** But the apostles and elders had rejected this position. James declared the final decision, but Peter had already answered them clearly in **Acts 15:11, “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”**

The party of the Pharisees had argued that the gentiles must be circumcised just as the Jews were, but Peter’s answer declares the opposite. Peter declares that the Jews must be saved by grace just as the gentiles are. James’ decision spoke only of what would be required of the gentiles, but Peter’s declaration showed that the apostles were ready to declare Jewish believers released from the Law of Moses as well. Peter’s statement prepares the way for Paul’s declaration in **Romans 10:4, “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”** The law was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. all that remains for us to accept God’s free gift of salvation by grace, given to all who believe.

As believers, we are all called to holy living and good works as the appropriate response to what God has done for us. But with regard to salvation, grace is all we need. Grace, God’s unmerited favor, is sufficient for us. May the Lord pour His grace out on us, on our family and friends, and on this land! Let’s pray.



V. Prayer

ⁱ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html