

Acts

Part 38 – “Through Faith Alone”

Acts 15:1-11

Acts chapter 15 may well be the key turning point in Luke's record. The abundance of God's grace poured out upon the Gentiles as they hear and receive the gospel has caused a theological crisis for many of the Jewish Christians which made up the core of the Jerusalem church. The crisis and resulting conflict was around the question of whether non-Jewish converts to Christ needed to be circumcised (the sign of the Old Covenant) and observe other ceremonies connected to the Law of Moses. The apostles Peter, Paul, and James testified that to require Gentile converts to go through Moses on their way to Jesus was ultimately a denial of the gospel of grace.



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Along the way we learn about the importance of thoughtful and well-ordered church governance. The solution to the conflict over Gentile converts (which at its heart was a conflict over the nature of salvation) was to trust the collective wisdom of those whom God had appointed to lead the church: the elders and apostles in Jerusalem. In this instance there were no divine visions or direct revelations provided. Rather God used the careful deliberation of the church leaders as they heard the reports of the Gentile conversions and reflected on the meaning of the Scriptures. It is as though God was preparing his church to be led not by the miraculous but by the ordinary means that God had given to His people.

Main Idea: God shows no favoritism toward any nation or ethnicity but saves his people on the basis of grace through faith alone.

Exegetical Outline:

I. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-33)

- A. The Dispute in Antioch about the circumcision and the role of the Mosaic Law (15:1-3)
 1. The demand of Jewish Christians that Gentile Christians adhere to Mosaic regulations (15:1)
 2. Debate between these Jewish Christians and Paul and Barnabas (15:2a-b)
 3. Preparations for a meeting with the apostles and elders of the church (15:2c-j)
 4. Travel through Phoenicia and Syria contacting churches (15:3)
- B. Reception of the Antioch delegation in Jerusalem (15:4-5)
 1. Arrival and welcome (15:4a-d)
 2. Report of Paul and Barnabas (15:4e-f)
 3. Protest and demands of the Jewish Christians belonging to the Pharisees (15:5)
- C. Council of the Apostles and Elders (15:6-7a)
 1. Convocation (15:6)
 2. Debate concerning the status of Gentile converts (15:7a)
- D. Peter's Speech (15:7b-12a)
 1. Address (15:7b-c)
 2. Argument from God's gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius (15:7d-9)
 3. Inference: God's grace through faith alone is the basis of salvation (15:10-11)
 4. Audience reaction (15:12a)

1. The Controversy Addressed

Vv. 1-7

- The great success of the gospel among Gentiles sparked a robust controversy within the church. Many Jewish Christians believed that it was necessary for Gentile converts to Christianity to submit to circumcision (the sign of God's covenant with Abraham) to be genuinely saved (vs. 1). Thus they were arguing that circumcision was a work to be performed in order to be made right with God (Gal. 2:15-21). This argument threatened to distort the gospel and split the church.
- Recognizing the need for wisdom "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question" (vs. 2). In contrast to those stirring up trouble, the elders in Antioch address the controversy in an orderly way. It is important to note that in this instance God provides no miraculous visions or direct revelations through the apostles as He had done in the past. Rather God works through the ordinary means of the church's collective wisdom as they are guided by their appointed leaders.

2. The Evidence Presented

Luke does not present an exhaustive account of all that was said but he does summarize what was presented by Paul and Barnabas (vs. 4, 12), Peter (vv. 7-11), and James (vv. 13-21).

- Vs. 4 – Paul and Barnabas report to the council all that God had been doing in converting Gentiles in places like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.
- Vv. 7-11 – Peter reminds the council that it was God's sovereign choice to send him to evangelize Gentiles. Three times he references "faith" as that which constitutes the only means of being made right with God.
- Vv. 13-21 – James defends the apostle's position by preaching from the Book of Amos.

3. The Moment of Truth

Vs. 10

- Peter presses the antithesis between the demands of God's law and the people's dismal history in keeping it. This was to uncover the truth that if we are justified in whole or in part by observing the law of Moses then none of us will be saved.
- Peter charges the Judaizers with the sin of their ancestors in the wilderness: "Why do you test the Lord?" (Ex 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; Deut 6:16; Psa 78:18, 41, 56). He charges them with this sin because they were distorting the gospel by adding to it human merit. But fallen humanity cannot bear up under the heavy yoke of God's law.

4. The Glorious Conclusion

Vv. 9, 11

- The good news at the heart of the gospel is that God justifies us by grace alone through faith alone. That is, what makes us right with God is God himself apart from any observance of the law on our part. God's way of salvation for his people is by grace through the means of faith alone.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What was the false teaching that the Jerusalem Council sought to address?
2. Why did some of the Jewish Christians want to add works to the equation of justification?
3. Why does adding works to justification distort the good news?
4. How can a God who is perfect in holiness and justice save sinners through faith alone?
5. What are some ways that we tend to justify ourselves before God by our works?
6. What role does obedience play in the life of a Christian?