

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

"We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God"

Vance Havner

Text

Acts 15:1-21

Topic

Certain men begin to insist that Gentiles must be circumcised according to the customs of Moses in order to be saved

Title

Pro-Moses Keepers

Acts 15:1 And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Acts 15:2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

Acts 15:4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15:6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us,

Acts 15:9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

Acts 15:10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Acts 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Acts 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

Acts 15:13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me:

Acts 15:14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

Acts 15:15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

Acts 15:16 'AFTER THIS I WILL RETURN AND WILL REBUILD THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID, WHICH HAS FALLEN DOWN; I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL SET IT UP;

Acts 15:17 SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, EVEN ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME, SAYS THE LORD WHO DOES ALL THESE THINGS.'

Acts 15:18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

Acts 15:19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Acts 15:20 but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

Acts 15:21 For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

Introduction

There is a growing perception among young adults that Christianity is not very Christ-like.

In a recent report¹ the Barna Research Group said perceptions among non-Christians are that present-day Christianity is judgmental (87%), hypocritical (85%), and old-fashioned (78%).

Criticism, however, was not limited to young people outside the Christian faith. Half of young churchgoers said they perceive Christianity to be judgmental and hypocritical. One-third said it was old-fashioned and out of touch with reality.

¹ September 24, 2007

Some of the criticism might be unfair. But if we simply dismiss it ***we're being judgmental, hypocritical, and old-fashioned!*** Truth is, in every generation some of what passes itself as biblical Christianity is not very Christ-like. One of the recurring problems in the professing church that contributes to this is the tendency to add things to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Hurting but hopeful people find their way to a church where they are told they can be saved by grace through faith... **As long as they add something else to it.** They're told they must be water baptized; or that they must keep the Sabbath; or that there are certain required sacraments; or that they must speak in other tongues.

Even in churches that don't have a specific addition to the Gospel there is often an impression that certain behaviors are mandatory if you are to attain or maintain your salvation. Usually it is an unwritten but very vocal list of prohibitions.

This kind of overt or covert adding to the Gospel contributes a lot to our becoming judgmental and hypocritical. It's old-fashioned in the sense that it's been around from the very beginning of the church. It was present in the early church as traveling teachers tried to insist Christians must keep the customs of Moses in order to be saved.

It's an understatement to say that this was a critical moment in the history of the church. This is one of the most important chapters in your Bible.

In the words of Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James, God gave us a clear declaration that salvation is all of grace, not of works. Good, old-fashioned grace will keep us from becoming judgmental or hypocritical. It will keep us relevant in all cultures at all times.

I'll organize my thoughts about grace around two points: #1 Be Careful You Don't Add Anything To The Grace Of God, and #2 Be Careful You Don't Take Advantage Of The Grace Of God.

#1 Be Careful You Don't Add Anything
To The Grace Of God
(v1-18)

Paul and Barnabas had recently returned from a mission during which multitudes of Gentiles had received Jesus Christ and gotten saved.

It was nothing new for a Gentile to convert to becoming a Jew. The procedures had been in place for centuries. One of the requirements was physical circumcision. These new Gentile converts, however, were accepted by Paul and Barnabas as true converts without being required to be circumcised. In fact, they weren't being required to keep any of the customs associated with conversion to Judaism.

Did a Gentile need to keep the customs of the Law of Moses in order to be truly saved? Or, as we would put it, is salvation by grace alone through faith alone, or is it by grace through faith *plus* some kind of work or works I must perform?

It's by grace alone! Let's see how the Holy Spirit guided the church to give us the 'final answer.'

Acts 15:1 And certain *men* came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Later on in the chapter we'll see that these **certain men** acted as though they were sent by the authority of James and the apostles at Jerusalem. They were not. Be careful who you listen to! Often people try to insert themselves into your life but God has not given them the authority.

Male circumcision was the physical representation of the spiritual separation God required of the nation of Israel. God intended it to symbolize the cutting away of the flesh of their hearts, leaving them spiritual and disposed towards obedience. Circumcision by itself accomplished nothing.

The **custom of Moses** indicates that these guys were suggesting more than just circumcision. They wanted the Gentiles to observe dietary rules and keep the Sabbath regulations.

Suddenly a vibrant, exciting work of evangelism came to a complete halt. That observation alone ought to reveal that something was terribly wrong with the grace-plus message.

Acts 15:2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Instead of souls being added to eternity, the church was thrown into **dissension and dispute**. Since these guys claimed to have the authority of Jerusalem, the leadership in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to have a face-to-face discussion.

Acts 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

Paul and Barnabas weren't going to Jerusalem to get an answer. They knew that salvation was by grace alone. They **caused great joy to all the brethren** as they continued to share about God's free grace in saving Jews and Gentiles. Compare their effect on the churches to that of the Judaizers.

Acts 15:4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15:6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

As they were sharing their stories of Gentile salvation at a public meeting, a group insisting upon keeping **the law of Moses** interrupted the proceedings. It seems that a private meeting then took place between the delegation from Antioch and **the apostles and elders** of the Jerusalem church.

In the meeting it was determined that first Peter, then Barnabas and Paul, finally James would address the entire church.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much dispute...

This probably means **much dispute** among the members of the church while the leaders were meeting. It's a very sad commentary. It's always a sad commentary when a church is known more for its disputes and divisions than for representing Jesus Christ.

Acts 15:7 And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe.

Acts 15:8 So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us,

Acts 15:9 and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

God had some years earlier sent Peter to preach to the Gentile household of Cornelius. The methods God used were nothing short of miraculous. There could be no mistaking that it was God's will that the Gospel be preached to Gentiles.

Neither could there be any disputing that Cornelius and his household were saved by grace alone through faith alone. The Holy Spirit saved them while Peter was still talking and without any reference to works of any kind.

Still it might be argued that Cornelius was a devout man with a great knowledge of and sympathy for the customs of Moses. These more recent Gentile converts of Paul and Barnabas were pagan through-and-through. So Peter made it clear that God intended to save **everyone** by grace alone through faith alone.

Acts 15:10 Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

Wow. No mincing words here. The efforts of the Judaizers to force Gentiles to keep the customs of the Jews is something that **tests God**. It's something that offends Him! We should bear that in mind anytime we want to add something to a person's attaining or maintaining salvation.

Peter compared the customs of Moses, like circumcision and Sabbath regulations, to a burdensome **yoke**. It was his way of reminding the church that he had personally heard Jesus invite those

burdened by works to come to Him because His yoke was easy and His burden was light.

Acts 15:11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they."

Did you catch the order? **We – Jews – shall be saved in the same manner as they** – Gentiles. *Peter put Gentiles first!* It's stunning. Not only are Gentiles saved without adopting the customs of the Jews; Jews cannot be saved by keeping them. They never could.

Barnabas and Paul took the floor:

Acts 15:12 Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles.

You can't argue with a genuine work of God. You should rather be in awe of it.

Acts 15:13 And after they had become silent...

The crowd needed to quiet down for the second time. What were they doing? I'd like to think they were *Amen-ing!* and shouting *Praise the Lord!*

Acts 15:13 And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me:

Acts 15:14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

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Acts 15:18 "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

This **James** is the half-brother of Jesus. He emerges in the Book of Acts as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He did something essential: **He gave everything that had been said its biblical basis.**

James quoted the Old Testament prophet Amos, specifically Amos 9:11-12. When you go there later you'll see that the preceding verses tell of the nation of Israel being sifted among the Gentile nations of the world. The verses immediately following Amos 9:11-12 describe the nation of Israel being permanently restored to her prominence during the future Millennial Kingdom.

What James was showing them from God's Word was that the saving of Gentiles apart from their need to convert to Judaism was all a part of God's overall plan. God *was not* and *is not* through fulfilling His promises to the Jews. But for now He is calling men from all nations in to the church and He is doing it on the basis of grace alone through faith alone.

No one is to ever add anything to the Gospel of grace. Not the customs of Moses, like circumcision and Sabbath regulations. Not dietary restrictions. Not baptism. Not any sacraments. Not speaking with other tongues. Not our own unspoken rules for behavior.

The doctrinal issue was settled. There was, however, a practical issue to be addressed.

#2 Be Careful You Don't Take Advantage Of The Grace Of God (v19-21)

Jews and Gentiles had very little social contact – until God started using Jews to preach the Gospel to Gentiles. For the first time they were together in close contact. The theology of grace alone needed an accompanying sociology.

Acts 15:19 Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Jewish believers need not **trouble Gentiles** to keep the customs of Moses to be saved. But should Gentiles expect their Jewish brothers and sisters to become like them?

No. While Jews should not stumble Gentiles by expecting them to keep the customs of Moses, neither should Gentiles stumble the Jews by flaunting their liberty.

[Acts 15:20](#) but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

After an animal was offered in sacrifice to a pagan idol its meat would be sold to the public. It offended Jews to eat meat sacrificed to [idols](#). If you were having a Jewish believer over for dinner, you shouldn't brag about getting a sweet deal on idol-meat from the marketplace!

Living by grace does not give you liberty to stumble a weaker brother or sister.

James next suggested Gentiles [abstain from... sexual immorality](#). It was a matter of fact that the surrounding Gentile world had a much lower standard of morality than the average Jew. Grace was no excuse to adopt the low standard of the world.

Neither is it today. Be careful! If our standards are only slightly better than those of the world, then we're slipping into sexual immorality. It's not adding anything to grace to adopt God's teaching about sex.

Finally, James asked Gentiles to respect Jewish dietary restrictions. That's the background of [things strangled, and from blood](#). A Gentile could be thankful he could eat whatever he wanted; but he need not criticize a Jew for his personal convictions.

This goes beyond just not stumbling others by forcing our liberties upon them. We should respect their conscience about things. My liberty isn't always a sign of maturity; their personal convictions aren't always a sign of immaturity.

[Acts 15:21](#) For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

This was a brilliant conclusion. It reminded Jews and Gentiles of the bigger picture they had been distracted from. There were opportunities in every synagogue to preach to Jews and reach them with the Gospel. Why offend them?

Conclusion

If anything other than believing on Jesus Christ was necessary for a person to be saved it would have been listed in Acts chapter fifteen.

Do you see anything there? Nope!

Those who insist on adding *anything* to grace – no matter how sincere they are – offend God.

Why does it offend Him? **Because when you add works of any kind to grace you cause those He died to save to stumble in their walk!**

