

**Preaching Christ....  
...by the power of the Holy Spirit  
...and the authority of the Word of God**

**Date:** 14 May 2023  
**Services:** *Across the diocese*  
**Series:** Saved by grace (Acts 10-28)  
**Passage:** Acts 15:1-35  
**Title:** Grappling with the freedom grace brings # 2  
**Outline:**

1. The issue
2. The arguments
3. The outcome
4. The implications

- We have been seeing in our studies in Acts, that historically / **Jews** and **Gentiles**, had **nothing** to do with each other... the Jews even regarding **Gentiles** as ‘**unclean**’.
- You’ll recall from a couple of weeks back, that Peter had an amazing **vision** and is told that he should not call ‘**unclean**’ anything that God has **made**... and he ends up going into Gentile **Cornelius’ home** and **eats** with **Gentiles**...! //
- **Gentiles** became **Christians** at an **astonishing rate**... and they **received** the **Holy Spirit!** //
- the church leaders in Jerusalem – **cautious** at first // in the end // **rejoice** that God has granted **even** to **Gentiles** // **repentance** that leads to **life**... ///
- But how should those **Jews** who have turned to Jesus and trusted him as their **Messiah** and **Saviour**, now **view** those **Gentiles** who have turned to Jesus and trusted him as their **Saviour**?
- What should be **required** of them?
- Should **they** now be **circumcised**?
- Did they have to become **Jews**? //
- Well, this led to something of a **crisis** in the early church and the leaders were **divided**....
- So this chapter we look at today, lays out for us very clearly
  1. The **issue**
  2. The **arguments**
  3. The **outcome**
- And then we’ll need to explore some
  4. **implications**
- First then

**1. THE ISSUE**

- Have a look with me at ch 15 and v1: *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.**”*
- So... let’s get this straight.... the **Gentiles** had **repented** and **believed**; **received** the **Spirit**, been **baptised**, **received eternal life**...// but wouldn’t be considered ‘**saved**’ by *some* of the Jewish believers – mostly **Pharisees** - until they were **circumcised**...? // and in v5 it was added, **and required to obey the law of Moses !!**

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- Well – you can see the **tension** that has been set up...?? //
- As far as Paul and Barnabas were concerned – the Gentiles had been **fully accepted** by **GOD**... why should anything **more** be required of them? //
- Well, it's no great surprise that Paul and Barnabas end up in **sharp dispute and debate** with them – 15:2.
- So you'll see in **v3** that the church in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas off to **Jerusalem** to see the apostles and elders about the question....
- At **first** // the **reception** they receive at **Jerusalem** is very **positive** – do you see there in v4 *When they came to Jerusalem they were **welcomed** by the church and the apostles and the elders, to whom they reported what? – once **again** – **everything God had done through them.***
- But it doesn't take long before things come to a **head**
- v5 – *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.***
- Well that starts the ball **rolling** on what has been called the first **council** of the **church** – v6 *the apostles and the elders met to consider this question.*
- So let's see then the **arguments** that were presented...

## 2. THE ARGUMENTS

- Peter speaks first - v7 - *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.*
- So his **opening argument** is **clear** – this was **God's** idea... don't think it's **our** innovation.
- Furthermore v8 - God demonstrated his **acceptance** of them by giving the **Holy Spirit** to them. What **greater** sign can you have that they **are fully acceptable** **God** – then **receiving** the gift of His **Spirit**!? And by **giving** them his **Spirit**, he made it clear that there is no **distinction** between **them** and **us**! //
- Then v9 – God himself **demonstrated** that he makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles because he **purified their hearts by faith.**
- **Peter** is **claiming** – look – God has already **done** that **circumcision** which really matters... of which the Old Testament had spoken - he has **purified** their **hearts** by **faith**! //
- So what a **great / clear / strong opening**! – this was **God's idea** – **God accepts them** – as shown both by the **gift** of His **Spirit** – and by **purifying** their hearts... ///
- You can see where he's **going**... v10 if **that's** where the Gentiles are at now... why would you **load them down** with the **requirements** of **circumcision** and observing the **law**...?
- and he adds the sobering **admission** – that – neither **we** nor our **forefathers** have been able to **bear**! – that is – **we've** never been able to keep the law – so why put that on the **Gentiles**!?? //
- So Peter finishes strongly – have a look with me – v11 *No!! We believe it is through the **grace** of our Lord Jesus that **we** are saved, just as **they** are. ///*
- Well the next presentation is a **joint** effort and we read in v12 that the whole assembly falls **silent** as **Paul and Barnabas** tell of the *miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.*
- Their emphasis is clearly on the work of **God** from start to finish.

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- And the argument is along the lines of – if God has chosen to do miraculous **signs and wonders** among the **Gentiles** – doesn't that show that he accepts **them** on the **same** basis as we **Jews**?//
- Finally – the **third** speaker; **James** – **brother** of the **Lord Jesus** and a key **leader** in the church at **Jerusalem**.
- He **wraps up** the **debate** by opening the **Scriptures**.
- He says that it was God's purpose to call out from among the nations a **people** for **himself** – the **nation** of **Israel** – **BUT** that it was **always** God's purposes that the **Gentiles** would be drawn **back** to him...
- The fact that Gentiles are coming to know God was **God's plan all along!** //
- SO: **powerful arguments** have been put **forward**... God **started** this, God has **blessed** the Gentiles with his **Spirit**, he has **purified** their hearts, **we** (Jews) have never been able to keep the law, **we** are saved through grace, **they** are saved through grace, the Lord has done **great** signs and wonders among the Gentiles, and God was **always** going to bring the Gentiles in.
- In other words – they're **IN** – they're **already saved** // **By grace!** //
- Do you see then how the request to **circumcise** them and have them **keep the law**... will actually **undermine** the significance of what **God** has **done**...?
- It will shift the emphasis from **God** has **done**, to what **people** do! – with the result that the **cross** of **Christ** was unnecessary and **grace** is **irrelevant!**
- Any move to require **Gentiles** to be **circumcised** and observe the **law** // **must be rejected.** //
- So what was the **outcome** once these arguments had been put forward?

### **3. THE OUTCOME**

- well James tries his hand at a **motion** – bit like **synod** or an **annual meeting** isn't it...? the motion is (v19), that *we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. 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.*
- All in favour please say 'aye', against 'no', the ayes have it!
- But **hang on** – what was this request **about**? Sexual immorality and blood etc...
- All four requests were related to **pagan** (i.e. Gentile) **temple worship**.
- **Idol** worship, offering of **food** to the **gods**, **temple prostitution** with its **fertility rites**, the taking of **blood**... all went on **at the local pagan temples**...!
- **Corinth** for example, was a city **filled** with shrines and temples, but the most **prominent** was the temple of **Aphrodite**. **Worshippers** of the "**goddess of love**" made **free** use of the 1,000 **prostitutes**.
- But as **followers** now of the **Lord Jesus**, and **recipients** of the **Holy Spirit**, it would no longer be **appropriate** to **engage** in such **worship**. And it would certainly be of great offence to the **Jews** if these **Gentile converts** thought they could continue in their **pagan** worship and yet be in **synagogue** on **Saturday morning!**
- No – for **all** Gentile converts, there must be a realisation that their new **trust** in the Lord **Jesus** **is** an entirely **new** thing, and that what they **used** to honour and worship in their **former** life... they now had to leave **behind**...
- For (v21) this distinctive nature of God's people has always been **preached**... and still was preached in

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the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There was to be no **mixing** of religions, no other **gods** before **God**, no **bowing** to **idols**... etc ///

- Well we take it James' motion was **passed**... and they send some men with Paul and Barnabas off with a letter to the believers in Antioch explaining the outcome of this **crisis meeting**!
- A way forward had been found through this major issue in the early church – which both upholds the **grace** of the **Lord Jesus**, and yet calls **Gentiles** out from their **former pagan worship**. ////
- This is a **significant moment** as the story of Acts unfolds... for now the **Gentile mission continues** and blossoms / **unhindered**...//
- ...so **finally**, we must wrestle with some **implications**.

#### 4. THE IMPLICATIONS

- There are four:
- **FIRST** - It may be stating the obvious, but we do need to recall again and be absolutely clear – that you and I are saved **only through the grace of the Lord Jesus**.
- God has blessed **US** by the gift of his **Spirit**; he has purified **OUR** hearts through faith, and we are saved only through the **GRACE** of the **Lord Jesus!** //
- Like the Gentiles of 1<sup>st</sup> century, *God has granted to **US repentance unto life** 11:18*
- *all who are appointed for eternal life have believed 13:48*
- ***God... has opened the door of faith to us** 14:27.*
- Don't fall for the mistake of the Pharisees who thought it was something **they** did that won their salvation...
- **Nothing** you have done can save you!
- It's all **his** work. **His** grace. **His** gift. **His** mercy. **His** plan.
- **SECOND implication**... do you remember **James' motion**? *it is my judgement therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God...*
- I wonder in what ways **we** make it **difficult** for **today's** unbelievers who are turning to God...?
- Whether it might be through **unrealistic requirements** we put on them (**dress, form of service, type of music**), whether in some ways we don't actually **want** new people among us... whether we think some of them actually don't **deserve** to be saved (as if we did!!)...
- We should not make it difficult for **anyone** to come – instead - by our **welcome**, our **love**, our practical **help**, we need to show the door is well and truly **open!!**
- **THIRD implication** – many Christians struggle today with how to relate to the law of the Old Testament... how does it apply to Christians today...? Although a lot more could be said about this... can I simply point out, that most of us here are **Gentiles** – and we see from this passage that the burden of keeping the law was **never** laid on Gentiles! Not that the OT is now **irrelevant** to us – not at **all**... but the burden of **keeping its law**, was **never** ours to **bear**!
- **FINALLY - FOURTH** – we note that the only requirement placed on the Gentiles was to withdraw from **non-Christian worship!**
- All that they once engaged in at the **pagan temples**, all **idol** worship, meat of **strangled animals**, **sexual immorality**, everything associated with worshipping anyone **else** but the God and Father of the

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Lord Jesus, **was to go... //**

- And I just wonder how good **we** are at withdrawing from everything **WE** once adored and worshipped? – or from everything **unbelievers around us** adore and worship?
- No – we don't have pagan temples with **fertility rites** and animal **sacrifices**... that's clear... but what **was** it we once worshipped – or what is it unbelievers **around** us worship... that **we** haven't quite stopped **toying** with? – I actually mentioned them last week a couple of times... sport, career, family, success, influence... power... what do **you** think people **worship** today? What **idols** do people fill their **lives** with?
- I don't know – you can work it out for **you**... but anything that ends up coming **before** God, or anything that **distracts** you from living in his service, or anything that suggests your **priorities** lie elsewhere... or would be an **offence** or **stumbling block** to someone else... perhaps these... are **things you have to deal with**...
- I just have a hunch that Christians today are too ready to **compromise** ... we're little inclined to **mix** our religions... and **not** to **withdraw** from the **worship** of the **idols** that those **around** us adore and live for... **could that be right? ///**
- Let me **close**
- Praise God for his **grace** to us in Jesus and the gift of repentance and the gift of his Spirit!
- Let's not make anything more difficult than it needs to be for today's **new believers** to find a home with us...
- And let's call both **new believers** – and **one another** – to **decisively** leave behind any modern-day **idol** that would keep us from **unswerving devotion** to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus **Christ**.