

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 7th February 2010 - 11:00am
Acts 15:1-35 – ‘The Gospel is at Stake!’

Introduction

Acts ch.15 details the events surrounding the First Church Council in Jerusalem. As such it is a VIP – a Very Important Passage of Scripture! Why do I say that? Because it is dealing with one of the most important foundational truths of Christianity: The Gospel itself is at stake in this passage.

**Is Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, OR...
Is Salvation by faith PLUS the works of the Law?**

The context for this chapter and for the Church Council in Jerusalem is the end of the First Missionary Journey of Paul & Barnabas. This came to an end in v.28 of Acts ch.14, which we looked at last Sunday.

At this point in the history of the Christian Church, as well as the mother church in Jerusalem, there are now new churches scattered throughout Judea and Samaria right up to Caesarea. There's one in Damascus in Syria, and a very missionary minded church in Antioch of Syria. Then as a result of their missionary enterprise there are now churches on the island of Cyprus, as well as in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

But the crucial point at this moment in history is that there are probably for the first time, more believers from a Gentile background in the New Testament Church, than there are from a Jewish background. The balance has shifted! So what's really going on behind the scenes in Acts ch.15 is a power-struggle between those who see themselves as 'the Fathers of the Church' down in Jerusalem and Judea (those from a Jewish background) and those like Paul & Barnabas (the missionaries to the Gentiles) who now represent the newer churches which are beginning to spring up right across the Eastern part of the Roman Empire.

But you know it's not just a case of who will win the day – it's actually a case of - Will the Gospel survive to face another day?
The Gospel itself is at stake at this point in the Church's history.

It is quite likely that Paul wrote his Letter to the Galatians in or around the Jerusalem Council. Just listen to what he said to them about the danger of adopting 'another Gospel' – (See Galatians 1:6-9).

Either Salvation is by God's grace through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ, - what we call 'the Gospel' - otherwise you have no Gospel at all! As soon as you add any human effort or merit to it you have destroyed the Gospel.

Either salvation is by Grace, or it's by works, but it can't be both. This chapter deals with the most serious matter to face the church in its 20 year history. It threatened to divide and destroy the church. So it needed to be sorted out.

1. Telling the Good News (vs.1-4)

Look what was happening in v.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.**"'*

This is the core issue that in v.2:

*'...brought Paul and Barnabas into **sharp dispute and debate** with them.'*

So let me point out before we go any further, that there is nothing wrong with having a debate within the church. It is good to discuss matters that we hold to strongly, especially points of doctrine. We do not live in a dictatorship or totalitarian regime as far as the local church is concerned. It is sad however when such debates become sharp disputes, but it did happen even here in the New Testament. So what did they do about it?

Well in v.2 Paul & Barnabas were appointed by their church in Antioch, along with a number of other believers, and they were sent up to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders there about this question:

Is Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, or
Is Salvation by faith PLUS the works of the Law – in this case circumcision?
Is circumcision necessary too, if someone is to be truly saved?
In short, does a Gentile have to become a Jew, in order to be a Christian?

It's the Antioch Church who sends Paul & Barnabas on their way in v.3. Just as they sent them out on Mission to Asia, so now they send them up to Jerusalem to deal with this important, indeed essential, matter of doctrine.

This had the added bonus of allowing Paul & Barnabas the opportunity to give their deputation talk along the way in the churches of Phoenicia and Samaria. Just as they had done in Antioch (14:27) they told how *'God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles'*, so now in these churches they tell *'how the Gentiles had been converted'* (Acts 15:3). So this was the hot topic of conversation as Paul, Barnabas and the others made their way to Jerusalem. And notice the effect it had on all who heard this news:

'This news made all the brothers very glad!' (v.3)

Likewise when they actually got to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, by the apostles and by the elders and again *'they reported everything God had done through them'* (v.4).

So the whole church was getting to hear about what God was doing in Asia as far as the conversion of many Gentiles was concerned.

2. Undermining the Good News (v.5)

But obviously some people in the churches in Judea weren't happy. Emotions were beginning to run high; some of them felt their blood boiling within them, and now it erupts to the surface in v.5.

Notice these people were *'believers'* but their pedigree was the party of the Pharisees. So their background was legalism. They stood up and said:

***'The Gentiles must be circumcised
and required to obey the law of Moses!'***

Let me say before we go any further that this will always be the case in the Christian Church. There will always be those who claim to be believers in the Gospel of God's grace (that we are saved freely by God's grace and not by good works) and yet because their pedigree is legalism (or Pharisaism) they will constantly try to pull us and others back into line to keep their particular set of rules and regulations. Legalism is more a mind-set than a theological position. Sadly! Those who are of a perfectionist mentality tend to be legalists. It is important for us to recognise the battle that goes on between legalism and grace. We then need to remember that our Gospel is a Gospel of grace alone, therefore there can be no place for legalism in a Gospel Church. And yet history tells us that those who have been strongest on *'preaching the Gospel'* have usually ended up in legalism. This is an on-going battle that we need to be aware of. So how did the early church address it here in this chapter?

Well we're told in v.6 that the apostles and elders met together to consider this matter. And we're told that it was *'after much discussion'*, as people were given opportunity to air their views, that Peter got up to address the gathering.

3. Peter Defends the Good News (vs.7-11)

How does the Gospel save people? What did Peter believe about this?

Well, he believed that people are saved whenever they *'hear'* and *'believe'* the message of the Gospel – that God is holy, that we because of our sins are separated from God, that Jesus came to die for our sins, and took our punishment in our place on the cross. So now we can be forgiven by accepting what Jesus has done on our behalf at the cross. We can be forgiven and become members in God's family, by hearing and believing this Gospel.

So as far as Peter was concerned, all we have to do is **hear** this message and **believe** it personally for ourselves. In other words we need to exercise faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ, as being all sufficient to save us. That's all we need: Faith alone in Christ alone - and by God's grace we are saved!

That's enough – nothing else is necessary – no plusses are needed!
Romans 10:17 – *'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.'*

But let's ask a bigger question: **What proof is there that simply hearing and believing the Gospel is enough to save people?**

(i) The Evidence of Conversion: The Changed Lives of those who have simply heard and believed the Gospel (v.3) –

Gentiles had been converted, completely changed, by this message. Lives had been changed completely. They had been totally transformed. Simply by trusting in Christ by faith. They had heard and they had believed, that's all they had done, and the change in their lives was dramatic!
(See 2 Cor 5:17). *'If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone: the new has come.'* (e.g. John & Lorraine).

(ii) The Evidence that the Holy Spirit was received by those who simply heard and believed the Gospel (v.8) –

God had shown his acceptance of those who had exercised faith in the Gospel by placing his Holy Spirit into their hearts. (See Ephesians 1:3) – *'Having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.'* – Think of Cornelius' household in Acts 10:44-48 where Peter had first experienced Gentiles coming to faith in Christ – simply on hearing and believing the Gospel, the Holy Spirit fell on them before he had even finished preaching!

(iii) The Evidence of hearts purified by faith on hearing & believing (v.9)

God made no distinction between a Jew and a Gentile who had believed. He purified both their hearts simply because they put their faith in Christ. Not because of any ceremony or ritual washing, baptism or circumcision, they may, or may not, have received. They were simply purified in their hearts, cleansed from their sin, by faith alone in Christ alone.

(iv) The Evidence that God is 'calling out' a people for Himself (v.14)

This people that God is calling out of the world are His Church – made up of Jews and Gentiles. The word for church is Ecclesia / ex-kaleo (to call out). Those who put their faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone, become part of God's redeemed people – His Church, His Covenant people – by faith. So Jew and Gentile in the Acts, and Catholic and Protestant today in Ireland, Hindu or Muslim around the world, all become part of God's People, the Church, in exactly the same way – by faith alone in Christ alone – all because of God's grace, not because any one of us has earned it or merited it.

(v) Peter's Conclusion (v.11)

So on the basis of all this evidence Peter could summarize his position as follows:

*'We believe that **through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they'** (v.11) - Jew & Gentile alike!*

i.e. Salvation is by God's Grace – unmerited favour.

God's Salvation is for those who don't think they deserve it! It's for you!

To try to work for it by keeping the law, or by being circumcised or even baptised as an infant or any other way, would mean salvation would not be by grace, but by merit. If salvation is to be by God's grace, then it can only be by faith alone in Christ alone.

4. Paul & Barnabas Endorse the Good News (v.12)

Sometimes people try to drive a wedge between what the Apostle Paul taught in the New Testament and what Peter as one of the original 12 Apostles taught, but it's important to notice that on this foundational truth of the Gospel they were absolutely at one with each other. No sooner has Peter given his speech, than Paul & Barnabas hold the audience in rapt attention as they tell of their recent exploits in Asia. *'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!'* (v.12)

They were amazed at it themselves, and their listeners were equally amazed! But if God was pleased to perform signs and wonders among the Gentiles just as he had done among the Jews, then this was further evidence that God saves and accepts Gentiles on exactly the same basis as he does Jews. It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that God works. So Paul and Barnabas had plenty of recent stories to back up the evidence that Peter had just presented. That brings us to...

5. James' Summary of the Good News (vs.13-21)

James as we've seen before is now the leader of the Jerusalem Church. (He was the half-brother of Jesus). Like a chairman, it is his job to summarize all that they have heard and have been discussing. This he does in vs.13ff.

'Brothers, listen to me. Simon (Peter) has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself.

(So here he was referring to Peter's account of Cornelius and his household being the first Gentiles to respond to the Gospel of God's grace.)

He goes on to give the Biblical basis for this in v.15:

'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.'*

So having carefully considered the evidence of how God accepts the Gentiles who believe, on exactly the same basis as the Jews who believe; and having listened to how Paul & Barnabas have been blessed (as they have taken the Gospel to the Gentiles) with many conversions; and having found Biblical warrant for all that they have said and done; James gives his conclusion (v.19)

*'It is my judgement, therefore, 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.'***

WHY?

*'For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times
and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.'*

That was their conclusion:

- Not to make it any more difficult for Gentiles to be converted.
- Not to insist that they should be circumcised or become Jews.
- But simply to accept them as Christians, like themselves, on the basis of personal faith in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.
- The only stipulation they put on them was to ask them to bear in mind the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ:
- **They couldn't cope with** Gentile believers indulging in food that had been polluted by idols.
- **They couldn't cope with** Gentile believers indulging in sexual immorality (– nor should they!)
- **They couldn't cope** if they went to a church lunch and knew that the meat had come from animals that were not killed in a kosher way - that didn't have the blood properly drained out of it.

So the only stipulations put on the Gentiles who were turning to Christ, were really matters of cross-cultural sensitivity. Respect for their weaker brothers, those who had come from a strict Jewish background. So all of this was an attempt to keep unity within the church, now that the Gentile-believers were increasing in number beyond those who had come from a Jewish background. And what was the outcome?

6. The Whole Church Unites around the Good News (vs.22-35)

Now that everything had been agreed, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, together with the whole church, thought that it would be a good idea to write a letter from the Church Council, and to appoint certain representatives to take this letter to the various churches that had already been planted in the rest of Asia. So two men were chosen from Jerusalem: Judas and Silas, and they were sent with Paul & Barnabas back to Antioch with the letter from Council:

This was what was contained in the letter:

*The apostles and elders, **your brothers**,*

*To the **Gentile believers** in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: **Greetings!***

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said.

So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul – men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.’ (Or these things are only for your own good!)

Farewell.

Do you hear their desire not to put any stumbling block in the way of more Gentiles coming to know the Lord?

Do you hear their desire not to put any extra burden on them as newborn Christians?

Do we have the same concern not to load new believers, newcomers to Christ, with 101 rules and regulations for them to try to follow?

If we do, that’s not the Gospel – that’s legalism, we’re introducing them to!

The Early Church, stuck to the Gospel of God’s Grace, not legalism, and so must we!

The men were sent off in v.30 and they headed back to Antioch, where again, they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. And look at what happened: (v.31) *‘The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.’* They were accepted as fellow believers with the Jews, even though they came from a Gentile background, even though they had not been circumcised. They were accepted on the same level - as believers!

Anything that the wider church required of them in terms of practice was simply for their own good. They had no other burden placed on them than that!

Judas and Silas stayed around for a while in Antioch, ministering to and encouraging the believers there. So throughout that period, believers from a Jewish and a Gentile background were enjoying wonderful unity and fellowship in the Lord – united around the Gospel of God’s Grace that had accepted both of them on exactly the same basis – faith in Christ alone! Not law, not works, not legalism, not circumcision. All of these were secondary. And at the end of their time in Antioch Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem with the blessing of the Antioch Church resting upon them.

And so the predominantly Jewish Church centred on Jerusalem, and the predominantly Gentile Church centred on Antioch, were completely united. This deliberation about the Gospel became a cause for unity in the church rather than division.

Paul and Barnabas continued to minister in Antioch as part of the Team (v.35)

Conclusion:

So what must we learn from this Very Important Passage of Scripture today?

It doesn't matter what background we come from in the world, or in this community, we all get saved in exactly the same way – by God's grace, through faith, in Christ alone.

Those of us who are already in the Church of Jesus Christ, and who maybe have been there for some time (maybe our families have been in the Evangelical Church for some time) must not make it any harder for new people to be saved, by setting some high standard that nobody can attain to.

We must not make it difficult for non-churched people to come to faith in Christ. We must not set rules and regulations for newcomers to keep, that in all honesty, we can't even keep ourselves!

We must accept people purely on the basis of Grace.
Purely on the basis of their faith (belief) in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.
We must welcome all such new believers with open arms.

We must all be careful that we operate within this church on the basis of Grace, not on the basis of slipping back into legalism.

Let's not be putting impossible burdens on one another that none of us can keep. Instead, let's remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28:

*'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*

**Let's not be known as Legalistic people.
Let's be known as people who are filled with God's Grace,
Who accept people on the basis of Grace.
Who operate within this church on the basis of Grace!
Who preach, and who illustrate by our lives,
the Gospel of God's Amazing Grace. Amen!**

© Ian Grant