

Acts of the Holy Spirit #17, The Scandal of Grace
Acts 15, Week of Nov 05, 2017
Bay Park Life Groups – Leader

The first Christians were predominantly Jewish believers. As such they didn't give up their Jewish culture, traditions or worship. If anything, they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of their Jewish faith. That's why they continued to meet in the Temple and local synagogues. So when did Christianity officially break away from Judaism? Several factors contributed to the transition, which was a process not an event. The notion that God was doing something new was clearly signalled by Jesus' death and resurrection; gained momentum with the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's family; and was galvanized by the Jerusalem Council (circa AD 50) as recorded in Acts 15. The destruction of the Second Temple (AD 70) further cemented the divide, as did the growing number of Gentile conversions and churches worldwide. Eventually, even those Jewish believers who continued to attend synagogues were ousted. They didn't fit the religious mould of salvation in keeping the law; of God indwells this space, on this day, via this holy man, and through these holy relics.

The uniqueness of Christianity is found in the gospel of by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Grace shines light on our utter helplessness and need of a Saviour. For this reason, grace is both glorious and scandalous. Our sin nature fights to put works ahead of grace, as a means of deserving God's grace. The message of God's grace doesn't just prick the pride of atheists, pagans and those of other religions. It's a hard pill for Christians to swallow on a daily basis. Acts 15 reminds us of the need to keep coming back to grace plus nothing!

1. From your personal experience, give an example of:
 - Church at it's worst . . .
 - Church at it's best . . .

Read Acts 15:1-21

2. Over the years, Christians have debated, argued and fought over who is church for? Is it for believers or seekers? How does Acts 15 help answer this question?

From Acts 15 we learn that the church, the gathering of God's people, is for both believers and seekers. It's for growing disciples that make new disciples.

- Paul and Barnabas were on mission with the church, not apart from it. They were commissioned by the church (13:1-3). When a problem arose they went back to the church (15:2-4). The Church itself is a gathering of people on mission (cf Mtt 28:16ff). Without mission, the church becomes a social club.
- Paul & Barnabas preached the gospel and established churches which they returned to and strengthened (cf 14:21-22, 15:3).

- The whole point of the Jerusalem Council was to come up with guidelines for the church (15:20). The spiritual health and growth of believers was a main concern.
- Not making it hard for seekers was also an equal concern and the result of the Jerusalem Council verdict (15:19).

Clearly discipleship and evangelism are two sides of the same coin and should never be separated. Think about it, there is no discipleship without evangelism and likewise evangelism without discipleship leads to nothing.

3. The controversy then was grace plus circumcision. That would definitely have made it hard for Gentile men interested in Christianity! What are some contemporary equivalents of grace plus? In what ways might we be making it harder than necessary for people to come to faith?
4. Reread 15:7-11. What practical insights can we glean from Peter's reply that might help us in the struggle to keep grace ahead of works, rules, traditions, and preferences?
 - 7 – God chose to include Gentiles and to make no exceptions. Who are we then to tell God who he can or can't choose/call? Turning that truth into a daily prayer is a powerful way of staying grace based.
 - 8 – God knows the heart, and that's what he looks at. God sees what we don't. What if when we're critical of others, we called each other out on it, reminding each other that we're not God?
 - 8 – God gives the Holy Spirit to those who believe. The presence of God in our lives is the sign of our being accepted. Not circumcision or any other rule or tradition. What if we made it our main concern to look for the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives before worrying about others?
 - 9 – God purifies our hearts by faith and not by faith plus. By grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus alone (cf 11). Is this really my faith today?
 - 10 – Making people jump through hoops to find God is to challenge God. There's a mental image we should all keep in mind!
 - 10 – The very burdens we want others to bear are often the ones we can't stand ourselves. Again, there's another great image to keep in mind.
 - 11 – Remembering how we have been saved keeps us from making it harder for others to be saved.

Read 15:22-35

5. What does this entire debate and event teach us about how to settle disputes when Christians differ?

First, we learn that church councils — meetings of church leaders — do have the right and authority to regulate belief and behavior. The letter they sent is not just advice, but a judgment.

Second, we learn that we need to give in on some issues, namely those issues that are “cultural”. We must not elevate customs and traditions that are not Biblical to the level of absolute principle.

Third, we learn that we are not to give in on the gospel. Underneath this controversy, the gospel of grace was at stake. On that concept there cannot be any compromise.

Fourth, we see that the Holy Spirit does not just lead through miraculous revelations. The council clearly prayed, studied the Bible, and debated. Then they wrote, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (v.28)! They saw the Holy Spirit guiding them through the conversation-debating-discussing —consensus-building.¹

6. What can we do to ensure that we’re not testing God by laying burdens on future generations of believers at Bay Park? How is God challenging you personally?
7. Which of Sunday’s “food for thought” speaks to you most? How can we encourage each other in staying grace based and focused?
 - A life of faith keeps coming back to grace (15:11). How do we know that we’re living out the grace of God in the power of the HS? Am I a blessing or a burden?
 - Is our passion for outsiders or pacifying insiders? (15:19) Are we advancing mission or preserving traditions?
 - Err on the side of grace (15:7, 13) There will always be nameless people more interested in building their kingdom than God’s Kingdom. It’s more comfortable. God uses those who humbly & sacrificially seek his grace. Both Peter and James went through a second conversion. They made a radical turn from being burden imposers to burden lifters (cf Gal 2:11ff).

We know that as you’ve prayed, gathered, and shared, God has spoken. Be sure to tell us some of your brilliant discoveries and creative ideas!

¹ Tim Keller, *Evangelism: Studies in the book of Acts*, (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2005) p 132