

<b>Series:</b> Proclaim	<b>Reference:</b> Acts 15:1-11	<b>Title:</b> By Grace Alone	<b>Date:</b> 05.22.2022
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How people are saved is still an important question today as it was for the early church. From the writings of Paul & in Acts 15 we see certain Jewish believers were following Paul around & after he left they'd tell the gentile converts they weren't fully saved unless they were circumcised & followed the Law of Moses placing upon them unnecessary requirements for salvation. Today we explore more clearly the answer to the question, how are we saved?			

## COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

The early church proclaimed people are saved by grace alone in Christ. When Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg door setting the world on fire, he wasn't inventing something new. Point 62 stated, *"The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory & grace of God."* It shocked people who weren't aware of what the Bible taught. People hadn't read the Scriptures for themselves, they'd only relied on a priests. When the Bible's made available & people read it, they're convicted & find freedom.

The Council of Jerusalem is recorded in Acts 15 where we see both a literal proclamation & a defense made to the council. Turn with me to p755 of your pew Bibles to Acts 15:1-11, follow along as I read...*Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch & were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."* *<sup>2</sup>This brought Paul & Barnabas into sharp dispute & debate with them. So Paul & Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles & elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia & Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church & the apostles & elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.*

*<sup>5</sup>Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up & said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised & required to keep the law of Moses." <sup>6</sup>The apostles & elders met to consider this question. <sup>7</sup>After much discussion, Peter got up & addressed them: "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 & believe. <sup>8</sup>God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. <sup>9</sup>He did not discriminate between us & them, for he purified their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."*

We've talked in past weeks how both enculturation & tradition have a strong hold on people. We don't easily change. This story's clear example. These guys were Jewish first, Christians second. Judaic tradition had a strong hold on early believers. For the first 100

years of the church many just went to synagogue still, then began to mix church & synagogue, until finally these past traditions were worn away to just church.

The Law & purity rites all foreshadowed Christ. The Law outlines the best way to live, but it's not something we can achieve in our sinful state. They led one to understand their need for salvation by grace through faith, but when it's been your culture of practice you don't let go easily, and seek to apply them to others. It's the Gospel+.

How people are saved is still an important question today as it was then. From the writings of Paul & here in Acts 15 we see certain Jewish believers were following Paul around & after he left they'd tell the gentile converts they weren't fully saved unless they were circumcised & followed the Law of Moses placing upon them unnecessary requirements for salvation. Paul even wrote in Galatians 2:14...*When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile & not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"*

Apparently Peter was acting one way with Gentiles, and another with Jews. Paul & Barnabas disagreed with these false teachers & took their argument to the church leaders in Jerusalem. They gather & debate the matter at length, until Peter stands & makes a speech in vv1-7. What's clear is there wasn't uniformity of thought on all matters in the early church. The church had to come to a unified position of what the crucifixion & resurrection of Jesus meant for believers; to define the Faith. **V9 points out, Gentiles had been purified in their hearts by faith, not by observance of the Law. It's not that the Law was unimportant any longer, but that it's impossible to attain salvation by observance to it in our fleshly state. Which is why he states in v11..."We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved."** The Law's still our metric & impetus to find salvation by grace through faith in Christ, we're driven by gratitude of grace to pursue a life reflective of God's Moral Law, but we can't earn salvation by it.

Contrary to today's common rhetoric, unity's found in shared belief, not in toleration of various beliefs. We're not just a social club gathering because we like to sing & the guy speaking for 30 minutes may or may not have something good to say & we can take it or leave it. We gather under the banner of Christ. When the writers of the New Testament wrote about sharing the Gospel, they say 'the faith' because 'the faith' encompasses all the shared beliefs of who God is as found in Christ & Scripture. Not the 20th century or Kierkegaardian concept of faith as a leap in the dark. Faith, isn't some magical power which emanates from within or a leap. It comes from outside, revealed by God, the shared truth of the Gospel we all agree upon - believing the solid promises of God. I've tried hard to expunge from my sermons of any 'feeling language'. Meaning if I'm tempted to write in a sermon that 'I think' or 'I feel' then I may not be speaking out of conviction as to which the Scripture actually teaches. What I say up here shouldn't be my opinion, nor anyone else's, it should be straight from Scripture & why teachers are held to a greater accountability.

One person left our church given they had family members of a different religion listening to my sermons online who didn't like the exclusive claims of Christ in my preaching. Problem is, I only reiterate in sermon what God reveals in Scripture. This person wanted me to speak of love, mercy & grace, but not the exclusive claims of Jesus, or to mention sin - which I couldn't do. It's the whole Gospel, or it's not the Gospel at all. Pure, not mixed, or detracting from it. You wouldn't drink a glass of water someone sneezed in, nor drink Coke without the main ingredient & still call it Coke.

It's unpopular to say, but in the Church of Christ there is right & wrong belief; absolute Truth. Not my truth vs. your truth, but God's truth. Jesus is inclusive & invitational of all people, but exclusive in the Truth of how we find salvation & walk in Him. In Christ we confess shared Biblical Truth - the Christian Worldview. Jesus said...*"I am the way, the truth & the life, no one comes to the Father without me"* (Jhn 14:6). God doesn't have multiple personality disorder - He communicates Himself in the only way that He can, true to who He is as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

If I came to you introducing myself, explaining who I am inviting you to follow me to end at a wonderful mansion which has you all you need for eternity. Only I know the way & have the keys. You see me, I explain my history, my likes & dislikes, etc. Then someone else walks up claiming also to be me. You can see them, they explain different likes & dislikes, history, etc. They're a different person. It wouldn't be arrogant or wrong of me to say, "Wait...that's not me! Don't follow them, they'll not take you to where you need to go, and they don't have the keys to the mansion!" It would be true. If you followed the other guy you wouldn't be following Jason, you'd be following a facsimile thereof; walking a different path not leading to where Jason's going. Likewise, if someone said, "Oh, you can follow either, they'll get you to the same place." They'd be wrong. That's what that person wanted me to do, to validate a false religion which doesn't lead to Jesus, rather away from Him.

The God of the universe has come to humanity through Judeo-Christian history - the same God from beginning to end. One God for all peoples - all peoples need to hear His message & won't find Him by any other path which is why He's given us the ministry of reconciliation outlined in the Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20). The all exclusive, but all inclusive invitational message of the Gospel to follow the one true God in Christ; the only One who has the keys to the Kingdom.

**This is why the Shema of Israel found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 has always been so central & important which says...*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the Lord your God with all your heart & with all your soul & with all your strength. Emphasizing the unique character & personhood of God, only one God - all others, false. We may not like the messenger, or how it's communicated, but it's still true!***

Verses 6-9 discuss how important it is to teach this to ourselves & to others... *<sup>6</sup>These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup>Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home & when you walk along the road, when you lie down & when you get up. <sup>8</sup>Tie them as symbols on your hands & bind*

*them on your foreheads. 9Write them on the doorframes of your houses & on your gates.* In every aspect & moment of life with everyone around you, remember & impress the oneness of the true God in Christ - no compromise, no matter the cost.

So Peter stands & begins to speak to those assembled. Making the point he'd made in Acts 10 with Cornelius - God doesn't make a distinction between Jew & Gentile (v. 9). Peter asks, "Why are we requiring them to do something that we ourselves recognize is impossible? For we know that we're saved by the grace of God" (vv10-11). Though official unity isn't yet established, this message of Peter is in line with what Paul proclaimed in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13; we're saved by the grace of God in Christ alone. *In line with the five Sola's outlined in Martin Luthers teaching; we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, all for the glory of God alone.*

*"All five, central to the evangelical faith. Not only capturing the gospel of Jesus Christ & explaining how that gospel takes root in the sinner, but also defining where the authority of that gospel resides & to what end that gospel is preached & proclaimed. These 'solas' distinguished the Reformers from the teachings of Rome. At the heart of this divide wasn't merely a theological dispute, but a celebration of the gospel itself. The Reformers were willing to lay their lives down for these solas first & foremost because the gospel itself was at stake!*

*Sola Scriptura, is the belief - "only Scripture, because God's inspired Word is our inerrant, sufficient & final authority for the church" (God's Word Alone, 23). The basis is Scripture's inspired nature. As Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed-out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). That can't be said of church tradition, councils, or leaders, as important as they all are. While Scripture has many human writers, it has one divine Author. The Holy Spirit, Peter tells us, carried along the biblical authors so that what they said, God Himself said (2 Pet. 1:21), down to the very words.*

*For that reason, Scripture is also inerrant, inerrancy follows inspiration. Inerrancy means Scripture's true, without error, in all it asserts. As the Holy Spirit carried along biblical authors, He ensured human words reflected Gods holy character. Hence Scripture's truth because God Himself is truth; God's Word. Inerrancy is essential not only because it provides warrant for our assurance, giving us every reason to believe Scripture's trustworthy, but also distinguishes Scripture from all other fallible authorities. Scripture alone is our infallible, inerrant authority.*

*Our only sufficient authority. Paul says all Scripture's God-breathed, "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction & for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Or as the Belgic Confession says, "We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein." Teaching us that all other authorities in the Christian life serve under Scripture. Scripture alone rules over other authorities, it alone is God's inspired, inerrant & sufficient word.*

Which brings us to *Solus Christus*. Scripture, as final authority, is a gift from God because in Scripture we're given Jesus Christ. God would've been perfectly just & holy to leave us in our sin & condemnation. But He stooped low to speak a saving word to lost sinners, reaching its pinnacle in the living Word, Jesus Christ (John 1:1). Our temptation is to think there's something in ourselves, even in the slightest, which can contribute to our redemption; the Gospel+. Obedience to the law, or good works which spring from faith itself. But Scripture counters: "*None is righteous, no, not one*" (Rom 3:10). God & God alone saves & sustains in salvation.

The Father has done just that by sending his Son to "become flesh" (John 1:14) to represent us, substituting Himself on our behalf. Whereas we failed to keep the law, Christ obeyed the law for us; whereas we deserve the penalty for breaking the law, Christ died for us. Christ fulfilled the law we couldn't keep & bore the wrath of God we deserve in full (Rom. 3:21-26). Jesus paid it all - the work of Christ alone, is the basis on which all are justified in God's sight.

Which brings us to *Sola Fide*. The believer receives the redemption Christ has accomplished through faith & faith alone. Rather than trusting in ourselves, we trust in Jesus for our salvation & continued walk in Him. The Reformers loved to talk about a "great, marvelous exchange." Christ has taken our sin & its penalty on the cross. We receive in exchange the perfect, spotless, righteousness of Christ. Not only forgiven & our debt paid in full, but imputed to our account is Christ's perfect record of obedience to the Law. This doesn't give freedom to live as we want, but creates an atmosphere where we can make mistakes & proceed with gratitude. As Francis A. Shaeffer said, "We do not come to...the true Christian life merely by keeping a list (doing good things), but neither do we come to it merely by rejecting the list (of good) and then shrugging our shoulders and living a looser life." Ephesians 2:10 says, we were created in Christ for good works - but not that we earn salvation by them.

God declares us right with Him **not** on the basis of something in us, but only on the basis of a righteousness from outside ourselves; the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Faith's the instrument through which we receive this outside righteousness. Through faith in Christ, the blessed status in Christ which God alone can give, is reckoned to us. Hence Paul warns Christians no one will be justified by works of the law but only through faith in Christ (Gal. 2:15-3:14).

Then we come to *Sola Gratia*: If the work of Christ is the basis of our right standing before God, and if we're justified by God not on the basis of our works but only through faith in the works of Jesus, then it follows, our salvation is by grace & by grace alone. Not limited to our justification, spanning all of salvation from start to finish. The grace which saves is truly amazing, because it doesn't originate with us at all, but stems from God's mercy in eternity. As Paul says, God "*chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world*" (Eph. 1:4).

You might think, "Surely my will & choices must be the determining factors." Not according to Paul, God's election "*depends not on human will or exertion, but on God,*

*who has mercy*” (Rom. 9:16) His choice isn’t conditioned on us, that would give us reason to boast. Rather, His electing grace is unconditional. And if grace in eternity is so free, then so too must grace be unconditional when applied by the Holy Spirit. The God who’s chosen us by grace alone, is the one who alone can call us out of darkness into the light of His own Son (effectual calling; John 6) and raise us from spiritual death to spiritual life (regeneration; John 3). His grace isn’t dependent on our cooperation, as if it depends on our will for its success. He alone works to bring dead lifeless sinners to new life in His Son. He alone can grant us the faith which believes & work such belief within us to embrace Christ as our Savior & Lord (Acts 13:48–50; Eph. 2:8–10; Phil. 1:29–30; 2 Pet. 1:1).

Then we come to *Soli Deo Gloria*: Only if our salvation is by grace alone will God alone receive all the glory. If there’s something of our own we can claim, then we no longer boast in Christ alone. But if He’s the author & finisher of our salvation then He alone is to be magnified for His sovereign grace. These solas should cultivate an attitude of total humility. Whether it’s in secular vocation or our praise on a Sunday morning - to God alone be the glory.”<sup>1</sup> And this is why our statement of faith says you can’t lose your salvation, if we could that would mean we have something to contribute, but don’t...it’s all by God & to His glory!

God’s grace is unmerited favor. Kindness undeserved & unearned. In Christ we don’t get what we do deserve (death), and get what we don’t deserve (everlasting life)! The children’s story *Eric Says Sorry* has a great illustration of grace. Eric’s broken his neighbor’s flowerpot & confesses to his dad. Dad takes him to the store to buy a new one. Eric takes out his money, but it isn’t enough. His dad tells him not to worry, that he’s paid for all of it. “Thanks, but I don’t deserve it!,” says Eric. “You’re right, you don’t. But no one’s perfect! Learn this lesson & never forget it - this is grace - and grace is epic!”<sup>2</sup>

We can’t keep the rules the Law of Moses lays out although they are our moral metric. Peter acknowledges this, God’s people hadn’t been able to bear the yoke of the Law (Acts 15:10). Remember, Jesus was asked by people in John 6, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” He answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the One He’s sent.” That’s it - constantly believing in Christ given He’s done the work for us...So why test God by making others do what God’s own people can’t do?

Every day we’re faced with a choice; try to earn God’s favor & approval by being as good as we can, or respond to His love & grace, knowing when we fail, He loves & His grace covers us. The Gospel isn’t just relevant to the day we’re saved, but everyday afterwards - we need to continually preach the Gospel to ourselves day in & day out. To do that, we need to know it, surrounding ourselves with the things God’s made available to grasp it; time in the Word, worship, fellowship, prayer, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-five-solas/>

<sup>2</sup> Dai Hankey, *Eric Says Sorry*, [Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2016]

We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, all for the glory of God alone, what Peter proclaimed that day, a proclamation reverberated throughout history ever since. And the message which we're called to bring to all peoples until Christs return!