

## Law And Gospel: Final Answer (Part 1) – Acts 15:1-35

Acts 15:1-11 (Title). Acts 15 records one of the most significant decisions in all the Bible.

Significant *theologically*, because it clarifies and confirms the doctrine of salvation; and significant *practically*, because it tells us how to live it out. It was huge.

And it was made (**Intro**), this decision, at what has come to be known as the Jerusalem Council – a gathering of the major church leaders in that day.

Sparked by the issue of whether Gentiles needed to become Jews in order to be saved; needed to follow the Old Testament Law to be a Christian.

To which we would say, “Of course not. That’s ridiculous.”

But 2000 years ago, as the Gospel was just starting to spread and the church was in its infancy, it wasn’t so clear.

The Old Testament was the only Bible they had, Jews had followed it for centuries, and the implications of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection were still being worked out.

Not to mention the advent of his Spirit and what it all meant for Gentiles. Especially Gentile *salvation* and the life they should live. It was anything *but* clear.

So the debate raged. Is it faith *plus* works that equals salvation, or faith alone?

Do Gentiles need to be *circumcised*, or can they remain as they are?

Are they bound to the Law or free from it?

These were the questions addressed by the Jerusalem Council.

So let’s work our way through the text and see what they decided. Thanking God for their courage and clarity, and embracing the implications for our *own* lives. (**Blank**)

➤ V1-5. [1] *But some men came down from Judea* [the word “but” indicating that the peace and fellowship in Antioch was about to be upset; proof that *no* church is exempt from unrest] *and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”* Boom. That was it.

The *custom of Moses* referring to the commands he wrote in the Old Testament.

Among which, was the requirement of circumcision in order to be a part of God’s people. Gen 17. You had to be circumcised to belong. It was biblical.

And if you were a woman, your husband or *father* had to be circumcised to belong.

So the men from Judea, the area around Jerusalem, said, “Hey, if it was true then, it’s true now. Get out the knife or go to hell.” That’s what they were saying.

[2] *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question* [the center of church-world in that day; with many of its leaders]. [3] *So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria* [two regions on the coast, between Antioch and Jerusalem], *describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers* [the brothers and sisters in Christ; the church].

[4] *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them* [again]. [5] *But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees* [meticulous law-abiders who had come to Christ] *rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them* [the Gentiles] *and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”* That’s the issue.

And the *takeaway* from these first few verses, is that . . .

**The Gospel is worth fighting for. (v1-5)**

The Gospel being the good news that Jesus saves, and how. That’s the Gospel.

The good news that God has provided a way for us to be forgiven of our sin, and released from the consequences.

The consequences of eternal separation from God, in hell.

He’s provided a way to avoid that; a way to be saved.

And that *way*, is to **admit** your sin and sinfulness. Your sin nature that we all inherit from Adam and Eve, and the sinful things you’ve done and do.

You need to admit that you’re a sinner, facing real consequences.

And then **believe** in Jesus to save you. Believe that he’s the Son of God, God in the flesh, and that when he died on the cross he did so for you. For your sins, in your place.

And rose again so that you could too. Spiritually now, and physically later.

You have to believe. You have to trust. In faith.

And then **repent**. Asking God to *forgive* you of your sin and sinfulness, and committing to live his way, for his glory, from now on.

You have to admit your sin and repent of your sin.

And **receive** Jesus into your life; his Spirit into your soul. To be with you from now on; forever and always. Guaranteeing you life to the full and life forever.

Admit, believe, repent, and receive. That’s the way and how of the Gospel. (**Summary**)

➤ And the point, demonstrated by Paul and Barnabas here, is that it’s worth *fighting* for. The Gospel is worth fighting for; worth defending; worth preserving; worth upholding. Even if it means dissension. Paul and Barnabas, v2, *had no small dissension* with the men from Judea. No small disagreement. No small discord. And no small *debate*. No small dispute. They argued.

And don’t miss the expense; the expense of time, money, effort, and emotions.

Like going to Jerusalem on a 300-mile multi-day journey that required food, lodging, and transportation. Or the emotional expense of argument and confrontation.

But it was worth it. Every last bit of it.

And still is. The Gospel is worth *fighting* for. Because:

A. **It’s the core of God’s revelation.**

Everything in the Bible either flows to or from the Gospel; the good news of Jesus.

B. **It’s the truth.**

By virtue of the fact that it’s *in* the Bible; God’s Word. A book thoroughly attested and *supported* as true. Make no mistake.

C. **It’s the means by which we are saved.**

Saved from death and hell. And the *only* means by which we are saved.

It’s exclusive and powerful. (Jn 14:6; Rom 1:16)

All of which makes it worth fighting for. Worth defending.

➤ What’s *not* worth fighting for, what we *shouldn’t* defend, is a *watered-down gospel*. 5 quick examples. Don’t defend a watered-down gospel.

One that glosses over sin and doesn't teach repentance.  
*Repent and believe*, Jesus said (Mk 1:15). Believe *and* repent. Both.  
Leave one out, and you're not saved.

Second, don't defend a *social gospel*. One that meets a person's *physical* or *emotional* needs, without addressing their *spiritual* needs.  
Because it doesn't matter how well fed or how well clothed a person is if they end up in hell. It doesn't matter if they find their way in *life* . . .  
By saving their marriage or contributing to society, if they lose their soul in death.  
Not that we shouldn't *address* physical and emotional needs, but that the *spiritual* are most important.

Third, don't defend a *universal gospel*. Where God is all love and no justice. All live and none perish. Just try to be good. Fight that. Because it leads to false assurance.

4<sup>th</sup>, don't defend a *works-based gospel*. The very thing advocated here by the Pharisees.  
And in our day, taught in most religions.  
Where your salvation is based on faith *and* works. Faith *and* mass. Faith *and* penance.

And last, don't defend a *prosperity gospel*. Like I mentioned last week.  
One that says if you give enough, do enough, or believe enough, God will bless you; materially. With health and wealth.  
Far from defending that, we ought to fight it. Along with the others.  
Because they're false. *Perversions* of the truth. That lead to anything *but* salvation.

But the *true* Gospel does; the biblical Gospel. (**Summary**)  
Which makes *it* worth fighting for in *every* respect. That's our first takeaway.

➤ The second, from v6-11, is this:

**We are saved by grace through faith, not works. (v6-11)**

A doctrine so common and so accepted in biblical Christianity, we take it for granted. And assume it's *always* been clear and embraced.  
But it wasn't. Especially in the *early* church.  
Which made this meeting in Jerusalem so crucial. And still is. V6.

[6] *The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter* [of whether Gentiles believers had to be circumcised and follow the Law]. [7] *And after there had been much debate* [there it is again; worth fighting for], *Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe* [referring to his interaction with Cornelius back in chapter 10; 10 years earlier; you know this, he said].

[8] *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them* [affirmed their salvation], *by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, [9] and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith* [not works of the Law, but faith].

[10] *Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples* [the Gentile believers] *that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?* [Referring to the Old Testament Law. We couldn't even keep it, Peter says. So why are you forcing it on them?] [11] *But we believe* [contrary to the works-based crowd] *that*

*we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will* [just as the Gentiles who believe]."

V9 says that God *cleansed their hearts by faith*. V10, that works are futile. And v11, that we are saved through *grace*; the grace of *Jesus*.

Put all that together, like Paul did 14 years later in his letter to the Ephesians, and you get this: we're saved *by* grace, *through* faith, not works. **Eph 2:8-9**.

[8] *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing* [this saving]; *it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*  
We're saved by grace, through faith, not works.

➤ And not just any grace, but **God's grace**.

We're saved by God's unmerited favor, and undeserved blessing.

Favor and blessing we *don't* earn, and *can't* earn. Don't *deserve*, and can't *afford*.

In fact, in his holiness and our sinfulness, we deserve just the *opposite* of God's favor and blessing. Just the *opposite* of his salvation. Which makes it all the *more* gracious.

And when you consider everything that's *involved* in our salvation, all that God's grace *does* in saving us, it's even more so. Let me give you 10 of them.

10 aspects of God's grace, to save us.

Number 1, he . . .

1. **Elects** us – *chose us in him before the foundation of the world* (Eph 1:4); before we did anything either good *or* bad (Rom 9:11). That's grace.
2. **Calls** us – *those whom he predestined he also called* (Rom 8:30). Grace.
3. **Awakens** us – *makes us alive together with Christ* (Eph 2:5).
4. **Regenerates** us – causing us to be *born again* (Jn 3:3).
5. **Justifies** us – *those whom he called he also justified* (Rom 8:30).
6. **Adopts** us – as sons and daughters (Gal 4:5).
7. **Indwells** us – with his Spirit (1 Cor 3:16).
8. **Sanctifies** us – *he who began a good work in us, will complete it* (Ph 1:6).
9. **Preserves** us – keeps us blameless; *he will surely do it* the Bible says (1 Thess 5:23).
10. **Glorifies** us – *those whom he justified, he also glorified* (Rom 8:30).  
We're saved by *grace*. God's grace.

➤ Through faith. **Our faith**.

We're saved by God's grace through our faith.

God *cleansed their hearts by faith*, v9; and we are *saved through faith*, Eph 2.

Our faith. Your faith. My faith.

Not that we're *saved* by our faith; but that *through* our faith, we receive *God's* salvation.  
Faith being the conduit through which God's pours *out* his grace.

All we do is open it. Open our heart. Open our lives. Receive his grace.

And just as there are multiple aspects of grace, so there are multiple aspects of faith.

Like belief. Part of faith is **belief**. Believing in who Jesus is and what he's done.

And part of faith is **trust**. Trusting in his sacrifice for our sins.

Part of faith is **hope**. Hoping in *his* resurrection to ensure ours.

Part of faith is **assurance**. Assurance of our salvation forever.

Part of faith is **confidence**. Confidence in God's promises.

We're saved by the outpouring of God's grace, through the conduit of our faith – our belief, trust, hope, assurance, and confidence – in the Gospel.

➤ What we're *not* saved by, is works. **Not works.**

In this case, works of the Law; the *Old Testament* Law.

That's the implication of v11, and the clear sense of Gal 2. *We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.* Gal 2:16.

Nor are we saved by *good* works, law or not.

Like being baptized. Or sprinkled as a baby. Or participating in the Lord's Supper. Or giving your money. Or serving in ministry.

Or helping a little old lady across the street. Or a thousand other things man has manufactured as necessary for our salvation.

*God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.* Titus 3:5.

➤ The bottom line is this: good works don't save you, good works don't *complete* your salvation, and good works don't *keep* you saved. They don't.

In fact, belief and reliance on good works, to maintain your salvation, shows you're not really saved. **Gal 5:4.**

*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law* [you who think you're saved by good works; or kept by good works]; *you have fallen away from grace.*

Believe and live as though good works save you or keep you, and you're not saved.

You're not in *Christ*, and he's not in you. Grace is absent.

That's why it's particularly dangerous to follow a religion that teaches or models a works-based salvation.\*\*\*\*\*

We're *saved* by grace through faith, and we're *kept* by grace through faith.

➤ Which means, praise God, there's nothing we can do to *forfeit* our salvation.

**Rest assured.**

No sin, no deed, no thought, no word, no nothing *can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Rom 8:39)

Can you thwart God's will to save you? His grace to keep you?

Can you reverse your adoption? Your regeneration? Your new birth?

Can you expel his indwelling presence? That he promised is permanent?

Can you return eternal life? As if it's a package instead of a reality?

Can you negate God's declaration of righteousness in your life?

No. You can't. And he won't either. His word is true and his promises sure; forever.

And there's nothing you can do to change that. Nothing *good* you can do to *keep* your salvation, and nothing *bad* you can do to *lose* it. **(Summary)**

God is *that* good, and his grace that amazing. Rest assured.

Prayer – Lord, thank you for the Gospel, and thank you for your grace. Increase our faith, keep us from error, and assure our hearts as we fight the good fight.