

World Wide Witness: Keep Our Church Mission Centered

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[0 : 00] They could come up. We're going to read nearly all the chapter. It's quite long, but it's a very important one. So we're going to read verses 1 to 35.

So if you just give the page numbers and so forth. We're on page 1110 in the Church Bibles.

Acts chapter 15, page 1110. 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 brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The Church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

[1 : 05] When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the Church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. 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.

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and 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 and believe.

God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.

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. When they finished, James spoke up.

[2 : 18] Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. 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 the ages.

It is my judgment, 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.

For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. Then the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.

They chose Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter, The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.

[3 : 35] We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization 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 that 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.

Farewell. The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.

Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

[4 : 44] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Well, we come to a section in Acts that is, I would say, and commentators all say it too, that it's the most pivotal point in all of church history.

You might be into church history, but this has defined the church throughout all times and ages. It's a critical, critical issue, this council at Jerusalem, this meeting that took place.

So we need to pay close attention to it. And what we look at this morning, everything that we do on a Sunday morning is important, and all the messages that we look at together are really important.

But I want to say that this is the most critical. Because if we get this wrong, then everything else falls apart. It's foundational.

So we need close attention to God's word. So let's pray for that this morning. Let's pray. Our Father God, we come to you.

[6 : 41] We humble ourselves before you. Because we want to learn from you. we want you to teach us and to show us how we should live as your people in your church.

And Father, we pray that we would take what we look at together with the utmost seriousness. and that you would pour out the power of your Holy Spirit upon us all.

That we may be able to apply and work it out and see it filter into our own lives personally and together as a church. That we would make the necessary changes that we need to.

and that above all we would be people transformed by your grace. May what was impacting all those years ago have that same impact upon us today and upon your church.

And we pray for your help in doing this. For we need it. Amen. On Saturday mornings one of the things I do is to coach rugby with a bunch of younger kids.

- [8 : 17] And before we start our training sessions I always hold up the ball in the middle of them and I ask this question with the ball held up high. What's the most important thing in rugby?
- And then they all have to try and guess what it is. Otherwise they get press ups to do. And they all go one by one. Is it passing? No. Is it tackling?
- No. Is it kicking? No. It's the ball. The most important thing in rugby is the ball.
- If you lose the ball you can't win. It's critical that we hold on to the ball. Otherwise we might as well go home and do some skipping with the girls.
- Well the girls do play rugby. It's okay. Don't worry. Girls do play rugby. My daughter does. We just don't do skipping. You know what I mean. But that's what's most important.
- [9 : 16] It's the ball. Now what's the most important thing in the church? The answer of course is it's the gospel.
- If you lose the gospel you've lost everything. It's not the music. It's not our particular brand of theology.
- It's not the building. It's the gospel. It's critical. It's vital that as a church we hold on to the gospel otherwise the church is going to die.
- And that's the issue for every single church and it's at the heart of the issue here in chapter 15. Look at chapter 15 verse 1.
- Some men came down from Judea that is they were coming down from the church in Jerusalem down to the church in Antioch and were teaching the brothers and the sisters listen guys listen to this unless you are circumcised according to the customs taught by Moses you can't be saved.
- [10 : 25] You all think you're Christians well actually you're not. And the message that you're telling to everybody else this message of grace well that ain't going to save anybody else either.
- You've got it wrong. Verse 2 This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.
- Literally a conflict a fight started within the church. We're always saying we shouldn't fight in the church. Sometimes it's important to fight.
- There was a conflict and there was a big issue at stake. But let's be clear this is not a disagreement over spiritual gifts or worship styles. This was of critical importance because the outcome of this debate has the potential to distort the gospel which will in turn disrupt the mission which will in turn destroy the church.
- If you lose the gospel you've lost everything we might as well go home. And it's such a defining issue look at the rest of verse 2 that Paul and Barnabas were appointed along with some of the other believers to go up to the church in Jerusalem to see the apostles and the elders about this question.
- [11 : 53] Verse 4 When they came to Jerusalem they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders to whom they reported everything that God had been doing through them. That's through the Gentiles where they had been reaching.
- So as we travel with Paul and Barnabas and we want to go with them as they go up from Antioch to confront the Jerusalem church we're going to look at three things.
- Challenges to a gospel centred church maintaining a gospel centred church and living as a gospel centred church.
- These are three things that I think come from the passage. First the challenges to a gospel centred church. Surprisingly the challenge to the church comes from inside the church not from outside.

Often the greatest issues come from inside not from outside as was the case here. Verse 5 Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said the Gentiles Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.

[13 : 08] A Gentile was anybody who wasn't a Jew. So if you're not a Jew or of Jewish extraction you're a Gentile. It's everybody else who isn't a Jew. And they were imposing things upon them.

clearly these people they're told in verse 5 they were believers they had heard the gospel they had become followers of Jesus Christ but now they were beginning to add to the gospel.

We might call them the Jesus plus gang. Their basic message was Jesus is not enough. Jesus gets you started but you need someone else or something else to get you over the line.

for them and the Jewish tradition was that circumcision was the outward sign that you were part of God's community.

It was a mark of identity. But they've now turned this outward sign into actual salvation. So if you have the sign well then you are saved.

[14 : 11] the equivalent for us today might be baptism. It's an outward sign that you're part of God's family. It's a mark of identity.

But we could easily turn that sign into salvation. But that would be gospel plus that's the Jesus plus gang message where we're saying grace is not sufficient we need something more.

But I think we've kind of looked at those issues before haven't we? So what are some of the challenges to the gospel that we face in this church today?

Well you might come up with your own and I'd be very interested to hear what they are but here's one that I think of. It goes something like this. We believe that the gospel saves us but once we're in we've got to keep ourselves in.

So Jesus gets us in but then it's up to us to keep ourselves in. I want to quote to you from a book written by a guy called Tullian Chavidian and I'm quoting it not just because it's a helpful quote but I'm recommending it to you as a great book to read on the gospel.

[15 : 34] It's called Jesus plus nothing equals everything. Jesus plus nothing equals everything. And this is what he says talking about our salvation.

Most believers realise we can never earn our salvation. We've come to accept that no one can work their way into God's kingdom.

We know that and most of us who read the Bible believe that to be true and I take it that's exactly how we're thinking this morning. But when it comes to our sanctification that means to become like Jesus suddenly we become legalists in the matter of maturing in Christ likeness and in continuing to please God and find favour with God and acceptance with God we suppose it's all about what we have to accomplish and adhere to all the rules and standards and values that we need to follow.

we get the Christian life all backwards. It subtly becomes all about us and what we have to do which leads to slavery instead of being all about Jesus and what he's done which leads to liberty or freedom.

You see theologically we say yes it's all about Jesus but practically we live as if it's all about me. Jesus' performance well that gets me into the club but it's my performance that keeps me in there.

[17 : 15] But it's not about us. It's never about us. The reality is the only thing that we bring to the table as far as our salvation goes is our failures and our mess ups.

That's all we bring to the equation. the true gospel the pure gospel is not about how good I am today or how much better I am next week than last week.

It's all about Jesus. And there's a quote here. It's all about Jesus who has taken the judgment that I deserve today and tomorrow for my sin so that I am forever treated and treasured today and tomorrow as God's son.

that's what it's all about. You see it's not just a Jerusalem problem with these guys coming along with their Jesus plus issue.

It's actually a carigoline problem. And why would I be so rude to suggest that? Well as one writer put it because it's the default setting of every human heart.

[18 : 26] We've all got a parasaic heart. All of us. And we need to be careful that we don't slip down that path.

And there's two ways and this is by application there are two ways that we can tell if we are adding to the gospel if we've become a part of the Jesus plus gang.

The first is this it's legalism. We know we're adding to the gospel when we've got a little checklist about things we can do and we can't do.

And it becomes the standard by which we judge our acceptance with God. So we take out the list I check it off and I make sure well I've ticked this I've ticked this I've ticked this I'm okay. But if I don't meet these standards if I find a box is not ticked then I'm out of favour with God and I have to kind of work myself back into it again.

But not only do we do that to ourselves we also begin to apply these same checklists to everybody else around us.

[19 : 37] So when people don't meet my standard we begin to question are they really a Christian? I mean if they were really a Christian they wouldn't have done that and they certainly wouldn't have said that.

Which leads to the second which is superiority. Once people don't match up to our checklists we become critical and judgmental.

We begin to look down on people and we begin to pick out all their faults and their failures while at the same time we give ourselves a little pat on the back and I think well aren't I glad that I'm like them because if I was in their shoes I never would have done that.

We become experts in seeing the speck in somebody else's eye but we can't see the tree or perhaps the forest growing out of our own eye.

So let me ask us all have we brought a checklist with us this morning. Do we mentally kind of look around and kind of tick off and think I'm doing this they're not doing that.

[20 : 49] Do we bring our checklist with us through the week? Well if we have a checklist if you have a checklist take it out right now and mentally rip it up burn it stamp on it tread it tread on it and get rid of it and grab a hold of the gospel with two hands.

Legalism and superiority are a lethal combination and together they distort the gospel they disrupt God's mission and they destroy the church.

that's the big issue that was going on that's why it was such a defining issue and that's why Paul was so anxious to get to Jerusalem and to sort it all out.

So those are challenges that perhaps we face to the gospel. What about then maintaining a gospel centre church? Well if the gospel is to be central in the church then grace is to be central to the gospel.

In other words if we're going to maintain a gospel centre church we need to understand that God includes us by grace and he saves us by grace.

[22 : 15] It's all about grace. That's what we've been singing about and thinking about this morning. So first we're included by grace. Verse 6 The apostles and the elders met to consider this question.

The question that we saw in verse 50 in verse 5 that the Gentiles must be circumcised to be included or to be accepted to be saved.

Verse 7 After much discussion Peter who was one of the leaders in the church got up and he addressed them Brothers and sisters 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.

And what Peter here is doing is he's reminding us of his earlier visit to a guy called Cornelius. You might remember him. Go back to chapter 10.

Keep your finger in chapter 15 and go back to chapter 10 and we'll just refresh ourselves about this guy Cornelius. He's a Gentile. He's not a Jew so he'd be kind of considered an outsider.

[23 : 28] Somebody who wouldn't be included. But nonetheless this Gentile this outsider he receives a vision from God and this is what happened in the vision.

Verse 5 of chapter 10 The angel says to him in the vision Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

He is staying with Simon the tanner whose house is by the sea. So that's his message. Meanwhile Peter also has a vision from God which is all about accepting people as God accepts people.

Verse 19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision the spirit said to him Simon three men are looking for you. So get up go downstairs do not hesitate to go with them for I have sent them.

So now Cornelius has the message Peter has the message now they have to meet each other. Verse 33 Cornelius speaks to Peter he says so I sent for you immediately and it was good of you to come.

[24 : 36] Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. Then Peter began to speak.

I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism. God doesn't suffer with what Phil Hogan does obviously.

I do not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

You know the message God sent to the people of Israel telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all. Verse 44 While Peter was still speaking these words the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

Now go back to chapter 15. You see Peter is using, he's recounting this meeting he had with Cornelius to prove to the rest of them that God does include people, not on the basis of their race or religion or on their culture or their colour, what class they come from, whether they're travellers or whether they're settled people.

[25 : 55] He includes people because of his grace. There is no favouritism. Chapter 15 verse 8 God who knows the heart shows that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them just as he did to us.

You see who are we to be people who exclude others whom God has included? The question we should be asking is not do they speak the same language or do they come from the same theological pool as we do or do they practice the same traditions as we do?

No, if God has given them the Holy Spirit then who are we to exclude other people? Which is exactly the same point as James the other leader in the church was making in verse 15.

He goes straight back to scripture to remind us. He says look verse 15 the words of the prophets are in agreement with this as it is written after this this is from Amos after this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent his dynasty his family its ruins I will rebuild and I will restore it that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles all those outside of the Jews who bear my name.

God's plan was to be inclusive in his salvation to include all the nations. He shows no favoritism. He accepts all people from all nations.

[27 : 38] He does not show favoritism. But we're not only included by grace second we are saved by grace. Verse 9 He made no distinction between us and them for he purified their hearts by faith.

You see God doesn't have one way of saving a Jew and then another way of saving a Gentile or saving you one way and saving me another way. The gospel is not get yourself clean and then come to Christ.

It's come to Christ look at the end of verse 9 and by faith he will purify you he will clean you. We come to Christ with our mess with our failures and he cleans us.

that's how God saves us and it's exactly the same for all of us. Verse 10 So then why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

He's getting annoyed. Why are you insisting on adding to the gospel? Why are you running around the place on a Sunday morning and throughout the week with your little checklist making sure that everybody meets your standards?

[29 : 03] Why don't you just look at your own life? You can't even meet your own standards so why are you trying to get everybody else to keep it? Verse 11 No we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved just as they are.

The only contribution that we all make to our salvation and to our sanctification is our sin. God in his abundant grace takes our sin on himself.

He accepts us and he purifies us. Grace is not about what we do. It's all about what God has already done for us in Christ.

Again it's what James is saying in verse 19. His concluding comments it is my judgment therefore that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Stop putting hurdles in the way. God does not ask us to have all our theology all sorted before we come to Christ. He doesn't demand that we're free of our sinful habits when he purifies us.

[30 : 32] He doesn't insist that our lives are immediately all sorted after he accepts us. All of those things are important but it takes time and he will be patient with his grace.

So we shouldn't put those demands and insisting on other people. You see if we take grace out of the gospel, if we remove grace from the gospel, it leads to a church that becomes critical, judgmental, and superior.

And that's why Peter and James and the leaders were adamant that the rest of the people who had gone offline understood what grace was really all about.

so those are challenges to the gospel, how we maintain the gospel.

Third, living as a gospel-centered church. You see, when we have understood the gospel, when we've experienced grace in our lives, then it radically changes the life of the church.

[31 : 53] Verse 19, James is speaking, his summing up of the whole meeting. It's my judgment, 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. Whoa, where's that come from?

I mean, it seems strange to us, and it almost seems as if James is contradicting everything that has already been said. It's like he's going back to the rules again.

No, he's not turning his back on grace at all. James is concerned that the whole church stays united by living out the gospel of grace within the community of the church.

Verse 21, he says, for Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. It's like he's saying this, let me kind of try and paraphrase it.

[33 : 05] He's saying, look, as you guys go and preach the gospel, as you go from town to town, you're going to meet people who are steeped in tradition. You're going to meet people who've had Moses preach to them Sunday after Sunday, year after year, tradition, tradition, tradition.

So don't be surprised that when you bring the gospel to them, this message of grace and freedom, that they don't leave everything behind straight away. It's going to take time for grace to filter into every area of their life.

You didn't get it right, so don't be expecting everybody else to get it right straight away. But you know what, there's something we should do, he says. Make sure we don't go offending anyone by the freedom we have from God's grace.

And that's why he says to them in verse 20, we should write a letter to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

Now again, let me give you some background to all of this. As a Gentile, if you wanted to buy your Sunday lunch, you wanted a nice roast on Sunday, the best place if you were a Gentile in the first century was to go down to the local market, which was usually located outside the pagan temple, a bit like going to the farmer's market out side Mahan Point, the big temple, farmer's market, where you did your shopping.

[34 : 48] Not that they're pagan or anything, just so you get the idea, picture it. And you get there a lovely piece of meat for your meal, a lovely roast dinner. The meat that you got there was the food used in idol worship, the leftovers.

But not only that, most of the idol worship also involved some kind of sex ritual as well. That's the phrase here from sexual immorality. And one temple we know from Ephesians, that there were a thousand prostitutes involved in pagan worship.

So when you went to go down to the local market to buy your lunch down there, well you needed to have dark glasses on, you needed blindfolds on, you didn't want to see what was going on down in the marketplace.

It wasn't a good place to be to buy your lunch. So it's not hard for us to see how it would be a problem for a Christian Jew who was used to these very, very strict clean laws about who you're with and what you ate and what went on, to be on your guard.

As one commentator put it, it's not so much about the menu here, it's the venue that's the problem that was causing the big issue. So James is not going back to rules, he's encouraging the church to remain united by practising the gospel of grace and saying to them, look guys, don't go down to the marketplace because if you do that you're going to help other people come to faith in Christ.

[36 : 29] You won't be putting any barriers in the way. Well I don't think we have to go down to the marketplace or if we went down to Dunn's we're not going to be worried about food polluted to idols or prostitutes hanging around or blood.

So what does it mean for us? Well I think these two things in practice or in application for us. The first is this, to give grace to others.

We all have our own preferences don't we about how church should be? When we meet, where we meet, what we do when we come together and how we should do it.

And you know what, it ain't going to come to a surprise to anybody here that some things that you particularly like, the person sitting beside you might dislike.

Is that a surprise? I hope it's not. In fact they might find that the things that you do very disruptive, distracting, or even unspiritual.

[37 : 42] So instead of insisting on having things my way, we give grace to others. To maintain unity and partnership in the gospel, we hold loosely in our hands practices and preferences that are secondary and not essential to the gospel.

That's the approach we take in this church. We serve others with grace, we're on the lookout, helping people to understand the gospel, helping them to understand grace by being gracious towards them.

And I think we kind of get there, but it's a good reminder. But not only do we give grace to others, we've got to apply grace to self.

We all love the idea, don't we? We like the first one, grace to me, oh I'm going to come and everybody's going to show me grace, which allows me to do what I want to do.

Well no, the opposite also applies. We need to apply that same grace to ourselves. So we don't come to a gathering on a Sunday morning or any other time that we meet or any of our relationships with each other.

[38 : 59] We don't come into that with an attitude of everybody else is going to change to suit me, to help me fit in. No, the attitude is this, what areas of my life do I need to change?

Ask ourselves questions like, is this a gospel issue? is this primary or is it secondary? Will this lead to somebody's faith or will it distract them from the faith?

For the sake of the gospel, I will not insist on my preference. We are to unite around the gospel, not tradition and not practice.

This is why the council, chapter 15 of Acts, is the most defining issue in all of church history. Because if we get this wrong, we might as well all go home.

And what happens when the church does begin to live this out and begins to see it working in the lives of each other? Well, look at verse 35, we'll jump right to the end.

[40 : 23] But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Very simply, the gospel stood firm, the mission continued, and the church remained strong.

May God give us the grace to do likewise and to keep on doing likewise with each other.

Before we sing, let's just take a moment to reflect on some of those things. Maybe there's something we just want to pray privately and quietly.

Maybe there's something we want to pray for our church. Let's do that right now as we seek to apply grace to one another and to ourselves.

... .. Thank you.

[41 : 57] Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[43 : 53] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. We thank you for every life, for every family represented here.

We thank you for all that everybody brings and gives. We thank you for their love. We thank you for the life that you have saved, for bringing us together, for making us part of your family, for uniting us, and we praise you, we thank you for all that we have because of Christ.

It's precious, it's wonderful. And we ask for your help to go on living your way.

In Jesus' name, Amen.