

## EXPOSITION OF ACTS

### Message #34

### Acts 15:22-35

Years ago, when we were in school, we were in our church one Sunday listening to a missionary give a report and the report was emphasizing how many people he had baptized. The more we listened to the guy, the more we became convinced that he had come to think that his “water baptisms” were the critical priority of his ministry. Back then we didn’t know much about sound doctrine, but if we had known then what we know now, we would have asked some very interesting questions when he opened it up for questions. It would have gone something like this:

So you apparently really believe that people have to be baptized don’t you? I am sure he would have answered “yes.” I would have probably said, “Do you teach the people that?” Again I am sure he would have said “yes.” So since we are supporting you, assume that we want you to go to the mission field and teach people that they must be baptized. He would have said “yes.” I would have then asked where did you get this idea and I am sure he would have cited a passage like Mark 16:15-16 that says “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation; he who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved, but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” My response would have been did you ever examine the grammar there and consider the fact that Mark was talking about Spirit baptism, not water baptism? As Dr. Chafer said, there seems to be a “strange inattention to the evidence which serves as proof that this text refers to real baptism by the Spirit” (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 381).

Then I would have said, isn’t it interesting that you don’t find this type of focus on water baptism to the one apostle who did take the Gospel to the whole world. Apparently, you have overlooked what Paul did in the book of Acts. It seems to me there is a huge lack of understanding of grace because nowhere in the Pauline epistles do you find your doctrine.

I believe one of the biggest problems in ministry is the problem of theologically illiterate people who are in ministry and confusing people with their distorted doctrines. Thank God that never happened in the church of Antioch or in the church of Jerusalem.

What we are about to see here is something very eye-opening. **The local churches of Antioch and Jerusalem sponsored mission trips that were all about protecting and communicating the doctrine of the grace of God.**

The context is critical to remember. Paul and Barnabas had come back to their home church of Antioch to give a full report of what had happened on their first missionary journey. Some legalists came from Judea and started telling the people of the church that they had to be circumcised and keep the O.T. Law. So the church of Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas to the church in Jerusalem to the apostles and elders so they could solve this theological issue.

**A big meeting was held in Jerusalem and the apostles and elders all agreed that all are saved by grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone.** Now the church in Antioch, which is 300 miles north, was waiting for news about what had happened at the meeting.

There were no ipads, or cell phones or computers or telephones. The people of the church of Antioch would have been waiting for some answer. They had believed in Jesus Christ and were growing in the Word of God, but were wondering whether or not they were supposed to be circumcised and whether or not they were supposed to keep the O.T. Law.

What we learn here about the early church is critical.

**LOCAL CHURCHES INVESTED THEMSELVES IN CAREFULLY SEEING TO IT THAT PEOPLE UNDERSTOOD THE WRITTEN GOSPEL OF GOD'S GRACE WITHOUT ANY WORKS OR ANY STRINGS ATTACHED.**

What any person must do to be saved is believe in Jesus Christ. You do not have to believe and repent, or repent and believe other than to change your thinking and belief about what saves you. You do not have to believe and publicly confess Christ; you acknowledge to God you believe. You do not have to believe and be baptized. You do not have to believe and surrender to God, other than surrender to the idea that Jesus Christ alone saves you. You do not have to believe and raise your hand or go forward in a church or make some public profession of your faith. What one must do to be saved is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ; faith alone in Christ alone.

In this part of Acts, the apostles and the elders from the church of Jerusalem clearly communicate this and answer the questions of the church of Antioch. They responded in three ways:

**RESPONSE #1** – The apostles and elders in Jerusalem decided to send two faithful men with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. **15:22**

Now we learn a lot here as to how that early church operated. There was a tremendous unity between the apostles, elders and congregation. All the people of the church of Jerusalem agreed that it would be a good thing to choose some key men of the church to send along with Paul and Barnabas to help defend the grace doctrine. They would sponsor the trip and they would fund the trip.

We need to carefully observe something here about mission support, because it shows up many times in this very chapter (**15:3, 22, 27, 33**). Mission support in the church of Antioch was intimately connected to the ministry in the church of Antioch. What I mean by this is that they sponsored things that were part of their church and they held people accountable. These churches kept their hands on the pulse of everything going on in their church and in their mission outreach. They sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, who had been key teachers in their church. When doctrine trouble broke out they sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem sends men from their church to Antioch and then Antioch sends them back to Jerusalem (**15:33**). You cannot find in Acts the idea of some unknown who is a friend of the family getting into a church to try to get money. Local churches in Acts were directly engaged in every detail of their outreach.

Now most missionaries today send their newsletter, but that is not the same as the church holding those missionaries accountable. These early churches would not settle for a news letter, they demanded a report of what God had done.

According to **verse 22**, everyone in the church of Jerusalem agreed on two men:

- 1) Judas called Barsabbas, whom we only meet in this text, and it is speculated that he was the brother of Joseph Barsabbas who lost the toss for apostleship (Acts 1:23).
- 2) Silas (Greek name) Silvanus (Latin name), who will become an important associate of Paul.

Now we learn three facts about these two men:

- 1) Both were leading men of the Jerusalem church. **15:22** – Godly authority and reputation.
- 2) Both were men with the gift of being a prophet. **15:32** – received direct revelation from God.
- 3) Both were skilled teachers of the Word. **15:32** – these men were skilled in grace.

By sending these two men to Antioch, it would have shown that the church of Jerusalem really cared about the church of Antioch and its doctrine. Also, when men from Jerusalem came back with them, it would tend to silence any Jewish or non-Jewish legalist. The legalists would be completely outclassed by the grace doctrine.

**RESPONSE #2** – The apostles and elders decide to write a detailed letter of their conclusions.  
**15:23-29**

In this church we hand out a full set of written manuscript notes for every exposition. I have told you before, I was first exposed to this kind of thing back in the early 1980's in Dallas, Texas when me and my brother Tim went and sat under the manuscript ministry of Dr. S. Lewis Johnson. This idea of put it in writing is not new to this church; it came from the Jerusalem church. They put things in writing. God put His precious Word in written form.

Now because the actual contents of the letter are recorded in the Bible, it is obvious God wants us to carefully understand it because it shows up in His inspired Word. This is, as one writer said, “no ordinary memo.” **God has inspired in written form truth and He really wants the church to understand that salvation is by grace and not by law, and that they are to live their lives by grace and not under O.T. Law.**

It is interesting that Clement of Alexandria who lived at the end of the second century said that these verses right here were “the Catholic epistle of all the apostles.” As we examine the data there are four key content areas:

**Content #1** – The Jewish leaders of the church of Jerusalem send their greetings to the Gentile believers of the church in Antioch. **15:23**

Just imagine what this would mean to have the great, godly Jewish apostles care about a Gentile who had believed in Jesus Christ out of a lifestyle of heathenism. This greeting also included believers in Syria and also Cilicia. This shows us how deadly this legalism had spread. Not only had these Judaizers infiltrated Antioch, but also other areas in Syria and Cilicia.

The church of Antioch was the key church who had underwritten this trip, but they certainly were not opposed to other Gentile churches taking advantage of their theological conclusions.

**Content #2** – The Jewish leaders of the church of Jerusalem identify the source of the problem. **15:24**

Actually, this is almost an official apology that comes from the church of Jerusalem. The reason for this theological trouble was because some Pharisee legalists from Jerusalem had gone to Antioch and started teaching people they had to go back under the O.T. Law and be circumcised. The text says that they had “disturbed” these believers with their words and they had “unsettled” their souls. The word “disturb” (ταρασσω) means these legalists were stirring up trouble with their faulty doctrine. And the word “unsettled” (ανασκευαζω) means they were dismantling and subverting what they believed in their souls. These legalists were trying to pull these people away from grace.

**Notice that the Jerusalem leaders clearly state they did not get their instruction from the apostles.** The apostles did not send them to Antioch and the apostles never taught what they were teaching.

Now you had better grasp this point. If you or anyone else tries to pull you away from your focus on grace and put you under legal codes or rules, they did not get that from God or from the Word of God.

R.C. Sproul said that there are churches all over the world who have tried to bind people with their rules when God has set them free. He said he knew people who believed it was a terrible sin to wear lipstick, play cards, go to a movie or even play Ping-Pong. Often people would ask him about this and he would say, if you think it is a sin don't do it, but don't you dare heap your conscience convictions on other people as a basis for being right with God (*Acts*, p. 273).

Years ago there was a guy who came up with his seminars that captivated unstable, untaught people in Christianity. People flocked to his seminars and they purchased his material and when you analyzed this material much of it was designed to get Christians to leave their focus on grace and follow his rules. It started infiltrating our church, so we asked to examine the material. When we did we pointed out that this was really nothing more than an attempt to get people to follow a legal code and we did not support it or him. What he was teaching, he did not get from God's teachings of grace. He was disturbing people just like this group was doing.

**Content #3** – The Jewish leaders thought it would be good to send two of their own representatives with Paul and Barnabas to give a full report of exactly what they all believed. **15:25-27**

We need to observe that these leaders in Jerusalem thought very highly of Paul and Barnabas. Again, notice the mention of “Barnabas” first because he was so loved in the Jerusalem church. **But both Paul and Barnabas had “risked their lives” proclaiming the grace doctrine of faith alone in Christ alone that saves.** They preached to the Gentile world that any could be saved who would believe in His name no matter what the sin (*Acts* 13:39).

According to **verse 27**, Judas and Silas were sent to report the same doctrine that they were putting in writing. This would be a report of the same doctrine that all apostles embraced. **Here is an important point to see concerning the early church – the written Word of God was carefully expounded by gifted men in a way that was accurate with grace teaching.**

It is not enough to own a Bible; the church needs gifted men of God who can accurately teach the Bible in a way that is consistent with the doctrine of God's grace.

**Content #4** – The Jewish leaders wrote their conclusions to the O.T. Law question. **15:28-29**

We may recall that the two issues in question were do believers in grace need to be circumcised and do they need to keep the O.T. Law? It is interesting that the Jerusalem leaders don't even bring up circumcision or the O.T. Law. They simply say believe in Jesus Christ and it would be good if you could keep away from any idolatry or immorality.

If you do that, you are doing well. Don't participate in idolatrous worship and don't participate in any immorality. If you embrace grace and keep away from idolatry or immorality, you are doing just fine. That is our conclusion and that is exactly what they wrote. These conclusions were not just those of men, but they were led by the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit will always prompt believers to move away from idolatry and immorality.

**RESPONSE #3** – The men leave Jerusalem and travel to Antioch. **15:30-35**

Notice the text says they “went down” to Antioch, which means down in elevation because Antioch is actually 300 miles north of Jerusalem. When they got to Antioch seven actions occurred:

**Action #1** – The leaders gathered the congregation together. **15:30a**

**Action #2** – The leaders gave them the written letter. **15:30b**

**Action #3** – The leaders read the written letter to the congregation. **15:31a**

**Action #4** – The congregation rejoiced and was encouraged by the written letter. **15:31b**

The written Word of God concerning the grace of God has the power to encourage you and cause you to rejoice.

**Action #5** – The congregation was encouraged and strengthened by the teaching of Judas and Silas. **15:32**

That word “strengthen” (επιστηριζω) means they were made stronger and confirmed in their faith. Now notice what it was that encouraged them and strengthened them; a lengthy or many words exposition of God's Word. You do not encourage or strengthen a congregation by a ten minute sermonette.

You make the greatest impact on people when you carefully and accurately take the time to preach God's Word. Not only did they read the letter, they gave a lengthy exposition of God's grace. That is what encouraged and strengthened the people.

The thing that will deliver a church from legalism is an accurate communication of God's written Word. When people know the truth of God's grace found in the written Word, they are set free.

**Action #6** – Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem by the church of Antioch. **15:33-34**

Some of the manuscripts omit **verse 34** because **verse 33** that says "they," both Silas and Judas, were sent back to Jerusalem and **verse 34** says Silas decided to stay in Antioch. But probably one of two things happened.

- 1) It is possible that Silas started back toward Jerusalem, but then changed his mind and went back to Antioch.
- 2) It is possible that Silas went all the way back to Jerusalem and decided to travel back to Antioch.

We certainly know from verse 40 that Silas was back in Antioch when Paul decided to take off on his second missionary journey.

**Action #7** – Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to preach and teach the Word of God. **15:35**

Notice the emphasis on preaching and teaching the Word of God. That is what every true New Testament church will have as its focus – careful teaching and preaching of God's Word by those who have been gifted by God.

### **KEY OBSERVATIONS:**

- 1) Leadership of a church is very important, especially in protecting sound doctrine.**
- 2) There should be a unity in church to want to know God's written truth. The church of Antioch is one of the greatest missionary churches in the history of the Church Age and the thing that made them so dynamic was everyone wanted to be taught God's Word.**
- 3) The mission program of the early church was about proclaiming the Word of God and the pure grace of God to the world.**
- 4) Those given to O.T. Law or legalism are not of God, no matter how eloquent they sound. If you are a rigid legalist, you are not in harmony with the apostles. What a contrast between the legalist not instructed by the apostles (v. 24) and Paul and Barnabas sanctioned by the apostles who risked their lives for grace (vs. 25-26).**
- 5) An accurate understanding of God's Word and God's grace will encourage and cause anyone in the church to rejoice.**
- 6) The only way for a sinner to be right with a Holy God is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.**