

THE CHURCH IS STRENGTHENED AND ENCOURAGED (vv. 22-25).

22 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, men who were leaders among the believers.

23 With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. 24 We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. 25 So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. 28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: 29 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.

30 So the men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. 31 The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. 32 Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. 33 After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them.

[34] 35 But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

1. What are some of the key indicators that the church made the right decision?
2. Do you tend to be more religious or irreligious?
3. What are some key steps you can take to create a more gracious atmosphere at home, work and in the church?

**THE STORY CONTINUES****SOMETHING ENTIRELY DIFFERENT | ACTS 15:1-35**

In the introduction to his book, “Shaped by the Gospel,” Tim Keller tells us, “The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, but something entirely different—a third way of relating to God through grace.”

Religion makes law and moral obedience a means of earning God’s approval, while irreligion leads to a life of self gratification that will eventually implode on itself.

All of us tend to gravitate to one of the two. When you were growing up, were you the rule keeper in your family, someone who always did the right thing and basked in the approval of your parents, or were you the wild child, someone who got their kicks from defying authority and tossing aside every social convention you could think of. You may have even found yourself swimming from one extreme to the other.

Most of us get a bit careless when we first discover grace and our freedom in Christ. We all buy the t-shirt emblazoned with Augustine’s dictum, “Love God and do as you please.” If we were honest with ourselves, though, we would probably have to confess that there is a whole lot more “doing as we please” in our formula than genuinely “loving God.”

This is the tension that is playing out in the book of Acts. Jewish believers are deeply attached to the idea of personal holiness that comes from keeping God’s law. Gentile believers are deeply attached to the personal sense of freedom that comes from no longer being restrained by the rigid confines of the law.

How will those who are meticulously religious ever live with those who are profoundly irreligious? The answer is they will both need to find a third way. A space that only grace can create.

In Acts chapter 15, the tension comes to a head, and the church comes together to consider how salvation “through grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone” draws both the religious and the irreligious together in grace.

A BITTER DISPUTE IN ANTIOCH (vv. 1-2)

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”² 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.

1. Why would it be natural to assume that new believers ought to be circumcised and embrace the law of Moses?
2. Why do you think Paul and Barnabas were deeply opposed to the suggestion?

EVERYONE IS HAPPY, EXCEPT... (vv. 3-5)

³ 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 believers very glad.⁴ 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.

⁵ 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 keep the law of Moses.”

THE CHURCH ADDRESSES THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM (vv. 6-21)

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ 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. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ 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? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

¹³ When they finished, James spoke up. “Brothers,” he said, “listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: ¹⁶ “ ‘After this I will return and rebuild

David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’ ¹⁸— things known from long ago. ¹⁹

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

1. Read verses 6-11. How was Peter’s experience with Cornelius foundational to understanding how Jews should relate to Gentiles?
2. How did God demonstrate his acceptance of Gentiles as equals to their Jewish brothers and sisters?
3. While the outward signs of the Spirit’s presence demonstrated God’s approval, what is the inward work of the Spirit that these signs point to?
4. Read verse 12. How does Paul and Barnabas’s experience on the mission field build on Peter’s argument?
5. Read verses 13-21. What does James’s speech add to the argument?
6. While James does not insist on embracing circumcision and the law of Moses, he does add a few rules to the mix. What are those rules? Why do you think James put them in place?
7. How does James provide a third way, that is neither religious or irreligious, but a new way of relating to God by grace?
8. What are the key motivating factors when we are living by grace?
9. What is the number one abuse of grace?