

# Resolved to Live – As a Witness for Jesus

“...about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1).

## **R<sub>2</sub>L – Resolved to Live: The Crisis That Almost Crippled the Church**

*Acts 15:1-12 (Part 1)*

*15:1 Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3 Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4 When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.” 6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7 After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9 and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10 Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” 12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

When we think about the early church, it is easy to have a somewhat idealistic perception of what it must have been like. The early church focused on service and ministry; they were people oriented. They were seemingly not hung up on doctrine. They did not use words like “Trinity” – although they certainly believed that God had revealed Himself in three Persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They did not use the word “premillennial” – although they did believe that Jesus would come prior to the Millennium to set up and rule His kingdom on earth. Some would have us believe that such words and the concern of them are not profitable simply because the early church did not use them.

However, we need to remember that as the early church got underway, while there were wonderfully service oriented, they were nonetheless greatly concerned about doctrine. This is seen throughout the book of Acts. The doctrine of Christ and the importance of His death, resurrection and ascension are repeatedly taught. In Acts 5 we see the doctrine of church discipline in the lives of Ananias and Sapphira. In Acts 6 we have teaching on ecclesiology, how the church is to function. Back in Act 2:42, we see that the early church devoted itself to first to the apostles’ teaching. Therefore, we find that doctrine is important to the early church.

Here in Acts 15, we have one of the most pivotal of doctrinal issues that the early church faced. As “we” 21<sup>st</sup> century Gentile readers work through this chapter, we might have a hard time relating to what was at issue, and, more significantly, how what the church wrestled through at this time has any bearing upon our lives today. For basically the issue we just read about is that some Jewish men, upon hearing that Gentiles were coming into the church, began to teach something entirely different than what Paul and Barnabas had been preaching to the Gentiles.

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These other men were teaching that faith in Christ was great and necessary, but that it was not enough for the Gentiles to only believe in Christ. Something else was needed; they need to be circumcised and they need to become part of the Jewish community by becoming Jewish and keeping the law.

How does that relate to us today? I have heard very few people tell me that in order to be saved, I must be circumcised. Nor have I heard anyone instruct me that to be saved, I must first become Jewish and keep the Law. I am grateful for that. But how does this relate to the church today? I need you to remember that while the specifics of any issue may change, there is always a principle in the background. There was a teaching of Paul and Barnabas that was being challenged, and this teaching is still being challenged today. What is that teaching? That teaching is that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone. The false teachers were proclaiming it was faith plus works; faith plus circumcision; faith plus becoming Jewish. So is this passage important for us to understand? Absolutely, for people everywhere, in every generation will struggle with the Biblical teaching of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

Now up to this point in our study of the book of Acts we have seen the birth of the Church on Pentecost at the Jewish Temple. The Church grew and flourished but stayed in Jerusalem until the martyrdom of Stephen. Following the martyrdom of Stephen, the Church spread to Phoenicia, Samaria, Cyprus, and then to Antioch. The Christians who arrived in Antioch at first shared the Gospel with the Jews only, but then some of them began to preach also to the Gentiles in the city. Many of them came to faith as a result, and thus the church at Antioch became the mother church of the Gentiles. This was the church to which Barnabas brought Paul to become part of the teaching staff, as it were, before they both departed on the first missionary journey, which is covered in Acts 13 and 14.

At the end of chapter 14 Paul and Barnabas have just returned from the first missionary journey and then, having met with the church in Antioch, shared with them the things that God had done among the Gentiles. The grand reunion at Antioch continues for some time (14:28). But then some from Judea came and begin to teach “**another Gospel**”. We are going to take this passage in sections, seeing this morning; the argument of the men (1-6); then the apology of Peter (7-11); and ending with the awe of the congregation (12). So in verses 1-6 we find...

## I. The Argument of the Men (Acts 15:1-6)

***And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”***

We begin with the problem and the argument that is being made. Some men came into the church at Antioch and began to teach a different gospel than what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching. This is not the first time that the church at Antioch had visitors. Back in Acts 11:27 we read...

***Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.***

In the Acts 11 verse, these prophets had told of a coming famine, which led to Saul taking a love offering to Jerusalem from the Gentiles. But this time the visitors from Jerusalem were bringing a message that was not from God.

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These men may have acclaimed themselves to be Prophets, but if so, Luke refuses to recognize them as such. Notice that Luke does not say that they came **“from Jerusalem.”** That may have conferred on them an authority that they did not have, so he says that they were vaguely **“from Judea,”** stressing the fact that they did not have the authority of the church of Jerusalem behind them.

Notice that Luke says, “They **‘came down from Judea’**”—it doesn’t matter where in the world you are, be it North, South, East, or West of Jerusalem, according to Scripture, you are always going UP to Jerusalem, and DOWN from Jerusalem, which is the mount upon which the Lord resides. So, despite the fact that Antioch is north of Jerusalem, Luke says they “came down from Judea” to this city, as every Jew would have understood this expression.

The word **“teaching”** is in the verb tense that means teaching over and over and over again—very persistently—that they could not be saved unless they were circumcised according to the Law of Moses. They were saying: it is perfectly all right to believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is perfectly all right to believe in the atoning work of Christ, it is perfectly all right to believe in His death, burial, and resurrection, and His bodily resurrection, but in order to be saved, you must be circumcised.

This introduced a crisis that almost crippled the church at Antioch. If this issue was not handled correctly, it would at best split the church and at worse crush the church altogether. What was the teaching that could so devastate the church? Specifically, they were teaching: *“In order to become a Christian, you must first become a Jew.”* Their “gospel” might be stated: “Christianity is Jewish. To be saved, one must believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ, but in order to be a part of this covenant community, Israel, one must become a proselyte, which is entered into by circumcision, which obligates the individual to keep the Law of Moses.” This is what they specifically taught; but the same thing is still found in far too many churches today when the equation of grace alone + faith alone = salvation through Christ alone is modified by saying it is grace + faith + human works or efforts that equals salvation.

These men that came down from Judea were the founders of the first and oldest of heresies in the church. These men would be those against whom Paul would do theological battle for the rest of his life. These men became known as the “Judaizers” – those who taught that salvation meant identifying not only with Christ, but with the nation and laws of Israel. It meant placing oneself under the Mosaic Covenant and keeping the Laws of Moses, as defined by Judaism.

It is interesting to note that it appears that these Judaizers also followed the same path of Paul and Barnabas and visited every one of the cities they had just come from on their missionary tour, and taught this same heresy of Christ plus law in these places. How can we know this? The apostle Paul wrote the book of Galatians shortly after arriving back from the first missionary journey, maybe within a year or so; and the theme of his letter is to address this very same question that is present here in Acts 15; how a person is saved? Turn with me to the book of Galatians as I would have you see that this theme of how is a person truly saved; is it by grace alone through faith alone, or do human efforts and works play a part in securing and keeping our salvation. We look first at Galatians 2:16...

***nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in***

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**Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified.**

Now turn over one chapter to Galatians 3:11 where we read:

**Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”**

Paul is clearly teaching that salvation is by faith apart from works. Again, this letter was written sometime between the close of the first missionary journey and this Jerusalem Council. It was to the very churches that Paul and Barnabas had visited, to straighten out this heresy of faith plus circumcision; faith plus keeping the law; of faith plus works.

The issue keeping Old Testament Law in order to be saved has thankfully faded away into obscurity. You hear very few saying today that you must be circumcised to be saved. But the principle behind it is alive and well today, perhaps more so than you think. A majority of the different groups who claim to be Christian insist on adding something to the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church, in their most recent catechism teaches the following:

*page 292, paragraph 1129, “The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are necessary for salvation.”*

*page 487, paragraph 2010, “...we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed to attain eternal life...”*

Then we have the Jehovah Witnesses, who write this in connection with what people must do to inherit eternal life:

*“All who by reason of faith in Jehovah God and in Christ Jesus dedicate themselves to do God's will, and then faithfully carry out their dedication, will be rewarded with eternal life.”*

This is exactly what the Judaizers were saying, that salvation is faith plus works; plus human efforts. And then we have the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, who teach, and I quote:

*“We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel. ‘They who believe not your words and are not baptized in water in my name, for the remission of their sins...shall be damned.’ Baptism is...the very gateway into the Kingdom of Heaven, an indispensable step in our salvation...”*

If we substitute baptism or obedience to the law of God or attending the right church in the place of circumcision, then we are dealing with the same question; how is a person to be saved? This is no obscure or irrelevant issue that does not need our attention. We are surrounded by this mentality of faith plus works. But what was the response of Paul and Barnabas to this teaching? Look with me at Acts 15:2 where we read:

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**And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.**

They had “**great dissension and debate with them.**” The word “dissension” is from the Greek word “stasis” from which we get the English word, static. There was a lot of static, energy being experienced. It was an uproar in the church at Antioch, because the apostles knew that to be false teaching, and they did not hesitate to say so! There was no political correctness; no “let’s just love on Jesus together and keep the divisiveness of doctrine out of it” mentality. This was love, a love for God, a love for the truth and a love for the Church being expressed by Paul and Barnabas. They spoke out. They engaged. And then there was an explosion in the church that was related specifically to the doctrines of the word of God. I would have loved to hear Paul and Barnabas arguing with Judaizers.

What was the message that Paul had been preaching. Look back with me to Acts 13:39. Paul is in the city of Antioch in Pisidia, in Asia Minor and he proclaimed this:

**and through Him [Jesus Christ] everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.**

It is a sad thing, but there will always be contention when we speak about the way of salvation. The reason for this is that there are so many opinions about the way of salvation. There are those who believe that it really does not make a difference what you believe, so long as you believe it with sincerity and zeal because God is not concerned about how we come to Him, so long as we come to Him. This is the opinion that says in effect that all roads of religion lead to God. Yet this is not Biblical. This is the way so many people think about religion. Everybody is going to heaven, they are just traveling by different roads. And, if they are religious people, it does not make a bit of difference which religion they may have, so long as they have religion. The problem with opinions is that they are based upon our feelings or our logic rather than upon what God has revealed in His word.

The point is this, how a person is saved is a question of eternal importance. This is no side matter. Paul and Barnabas could argue whether or not John Mark, who had deserted them on the first missionary journey, should go on a second missionary journey and the issue of salvation is not at stake. With the question as to how a person is saved, there could not be disagreement among believers, with some believing you must be under the law, and some believing Christ had fulfilled all the law on our behalf. This issue lies at the very core of Christianity, and it had to be resolved. And before you think that you could not be sucked into the subtleties of believing some form or faith plus works for salvation, do not forget what happened to Peter, who evidently was influenced for a time by the Judaizers. Paul addressed this in Galatians 2:11:

**But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.**

We do not know exactly when Peter had come to Antioch, but it must have happened before the meeting at Jerusalem in Acts 15. And Paul stood face-to-face with Peter, condemning

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him in front of everyone. Can you imagine taking on Peter, the pillar of the church, in front of the other church leaders? Peter was the spokesman; the people loved, appreciated and respected him for his work in the church and among the Jews of his day. And yet Paul says that Peter, **“stood condemned.”** The idea here is that just as a criminal is found guilty of a crime and has been proven to be wrong in a court of law, Peter had been found guilty of a wrong which had been proved. What was Peter’s crime, for legalistic hypocrisy, of being influenced by the Judaizers. What Peter was doing was to be condemned as being out of accord with the Word of God, and there were to be consequences; in this case a rebuke to set the matter straight. In Galatians 2:12 we find out specifically what Peter was doing wrong:

***For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.***

Let me paint the picture here for you. In the church of Antioch, Syria we had a fully integrated congregation of Christian Jews and Gentiles. Peter had regularly followed the custom of eating with Gentile Christians and, since Peter was both a Jew and one of the preeminent leaders of the church, his fellowship with Gentile Christians around a table was seen as a stamp of approval on the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church. What an encouragement it would have been to Gentile believers to be accepted by Peter! So we have Peter in Antioch, enjoying himself with the Gentile believers, eating bacon-wrapped shrimp. In the middle of all this, some Jewish believers, sent from James, show up. Now Peter changes his tune. For fear of what these men might think, Peter quits eating with the Gentiles and begins to eat only what the Jewish law allowed him to. But it gets worse as we note in Galatians 2:13:

***And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.***

In other words, Peter’s actions were a cause for other Jewish believers to join in this legalistic hypocrisy. For they had been saying one thing with their actions and believing another in their hearts. Did you notice that verse 13 says, **“even Barnabas was carried away.”** There seems to be heartache in these words as Paul expected more from Barnabas since he had been on the missionary journey. Barnabas, one of the first pastors of the church in Antioch, had warmly welcomed Gentile believers. He had worked side by side with Paul in that church. How could Barnabas deny the truth of the Gospel now? Of all people, Barnabas knew that Gentile believers were to be fully accepted in the Church, not because they had become Jewish, but because they had been accepted by Christ.

How could this have happened? It happens when we get swept up in the emotion of a crisis and then are willing to act contrary to the truth as revealed in Scripture. Even Barnabas, along with the rest of the Jewish Christians, were guilty of hypocrisy; behavior inconsistent with the basic beliefs of Christianity. And evidently, Barnabas withdrew in this matter, leaving Paul to stand alone. The seeds of “faith plus works” were being planted and it had to be dealt with. Having evidently worked through that, Paul and Barnabas, having now seen the light, saw to the heart of the question and stood firm against these new teachers coming in, disagreeing with them

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and challenging the basis of their teaching. Finally, it was agreed by the whole church at Antioch that what was needed was to go to the apostles and the mother church in Jerusalem to get some resolve on the matter. This is what we read in Acts 15:3...

***Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren.***

Paul and Barnabas, along with a few others made their way to Jerusalem, being officially sent by the church at Antioch. It is interesting that along the way they stopped in on other congregations of Gentile and Jewish believers, telling them in detail of the things that had been happening among the Gentiles. And those Christians rejoiced in what Paul and Barnabas told them about the things that were happening among the Gentiles. This brings us to verse 4 where we read...

***And when they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.***

The message of Paul here remains clear, that God had been saving Gentiles, not by having them become Jewish, but simply because of their faith in the person and work of Christ. But, as you know, people of differing opinions when it comes to doctrine do not like to give up. We read of this in verse 5...

***But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”***

“**But**” – in contrast and opposition to what Paul had been reporting in verse 4, the circumcision party began to argue their case. They included Pharisees who had come to believe that Jesus was the Christ, but yet contended that salvation was Christ plus circumcision along with the keeping of the Law of Moses. Of course, the Pharisees were well-known for their high regard for the law; we might say they had a “high-view of the Law of Moses” and their supposed scrupulous observance of that law. Their argument was that all who responded to Christ, in order to become true Christians had to first become true Jews; to enter into the covenant community and to then practice the whole Law of Moses. This would involve temple worship, the offering of sacrifices when in Jerusalem, the payment of the temple tax, separation from Gentiles who did not observe the laws of cleanliness, the regular and ritualistic washings in order to maintain cleanliness, the avoiding of anything that might render them unclean according to Jewish principles, the abstaining from the eating of blood and of various meats, the strict observance of the Sabbath by not working, and the following of the multitude of Laws that governed the daily living of every Jew. Wow, that is a list huh? The Judaizers believed that all this was necessary in order to be saved. Having made their argument, we see the response of the church leaders in verse 6:

***And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.***

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Verse 6 indicates that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem had not yet taken a position on this matter. The powerful lobbying group of the Pharisees, a group that had long swayed the hearts and minds of the people in Jerusalem, were probably confident that the church leaders would see things their way. And now, confronted with the question, is a person saved by faith alone in the work of Christ, or faith in Christ plus one’s own works had to be settled. At stake was whether or not the church would remain whole; perhaps splitting into a Jewish Christian Church and a Gentile Christian Church. You might wonder why they had not thought about this question before, until you remember that up until this time, there had been relatively few Gentiles in the church.

Next week we will look at Peter’s apology or defense of salvation by grace alone through faith alone, but for now, let us remember that defending the truth of God’s word, especially when it come to the question of, “How is a person saved”, is not a bad thing. We can think it is wrong to defend the faith, at least to be overly dogmatic about it. But here in our text we read how Paul and Barnabas vigorously defended the faith. As I said before, we might be dogmatic on some things, like whether or not the Lord’s Supper is to be taken weekly or monthly, or whether a church should be congregationally driven or elder driven; but when it comes to the question of, “how is a person to be saved?” there is no wiggle room. This is the heart of the gospel. We need to defend the answer to this question. Next week we will look at how Peter defended the faith regarding this very question. But lest you think that this is only something apostles do, look with me at 1 Peter 3:15 where we read...

***but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you***

The word “**defense**” there is the Greek word “apologia” – we get our word “apology” from it. An apology is not technically a saying that you are sorry. An apology is given a defense or a reason for why you did what you did or why you believe what you believe. Beloved, to who did Peter write these words? To theologians? No! To Pastors and Elders? No! To all believers, to you and to me! We need to be educated. We need to be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks us why we have this hope of salvation within us and sometimes that means debate, logical arguments and the ability to do it all with grace.

J. C. Ryle, a 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote, “*Controversy and religious strife, no doubt, are odious things; but there are times when they are a positive necessity. Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth. It is a pity, no doubt, that there should be so much controversy; but it is also a pity that human nature should be so bad as it is... It was a pity that Arius (250–336 AD) taught error about Christ’s person: but it would have been a greater pity if Athanasius (296-373 AD) had not opposed him. It was a pity that Tetzl (1465–1519) went about preaching up the Pope’s indulgences: it would have been a far greater pity if Luther (1483-1546 AD) had not withstood him. Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in every age has to be defended and maintained, and it is nonsense to ignore it.*”

So, how is a person to be saved? As I close, let me remind you of what Paul said to the Gentile, Philippian jailer; a man who was most likely not circumcised, nor one who kept the Law of Moses. What did Paul say to this man in Acts 16:31? You know; “**Believe in the Lord Jesus,**



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**and you will be saved...**” Have faith; that is trust in the Person and work of Jesus Christ; that He came to this earth, that He died for your sins, that He was raised on the third day and ascended into heaven where He intercedes for you before the Father and that He will return to take to heaven all who have trusted in Him. Do not depend upon yourself and what you can do, but trust wholly, fully and completely in Jesus. Paul did not tell the jailer to become Jewish, or to run out and have a surgical procedure. There was nothing for the jailer to do but have faith alone in Christ. That is the good news; that is the gospel.

Beloved, as I have preached through the past few chapters of Acts, I have asked you to have a high view of God; a high view of Scripture, a high view of the church; and even to have a high view of the Lord’s Supper. Today, I ask you, do you have a high view of salvation; that it is by grace alone, through faith alone. Have you believed that? Will you proclaim that? That is what is at stake, the pure preaching of the gospel of God’s grace!

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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