

# 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: In Loving Unity

Acts 15:22-35

22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. 24 "Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, 25 it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 "Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. 28 "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: 29 that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell." 30 So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32 Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. 33 After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. 34 [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] 35 But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.

The issue of Acts 15, what we often call the Jerusalem Council, this meeting between the leadership of the church of Antioch and the church of Jerusalem is simply this; what is the gospel? Even at such an early stage in the life of the church, the gospel, this question as to how is a person saved, was already being twisted, spun, and made to fit into the molds of human thinking. Free grace and faith in Christ alone, apart from human additions and efforts to acquire or to maintain the favor of God for salvation, always strikes at the heart and pride of the human heart. As stake was this; what did the gospel require of those who were Gentiles and who were converted to faith in Christ? According to the message that Paul and Barnabas preached on their first missionary journey the gospel could be summarized like this:

*The gospel, the good news concerning Jesus Christ, requires nothing more than a personal faith and trust in the substitutionary death (Christ died in my deserved place), burial (Christ really died for me), and in the resurrection of Jesus (Christ really rose from the dead). It is to believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the chosen one of God, to die in the sinner's place, resulting in the forgiveness of sin, the imputation (the charging to my account) of Christ's righteousness, and the certainty of eternal life.*

Remember back in Acts 15:1, there were certain unnamed men who had come down to Antioch from Judea who proclaimed a very different “gospel,” which was no gospel, no good news at all. It was nothing short of false teaching; it was heresy and it would seek to divide the young church. The so-called gospel of these men was this:

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*Christianity is essential Jewish. Therefore, to be saved, one must believe in Jesus as the Christ, the promised one from God, but in order to be a part of this covenant community, Israel, one must first become Jewish, which is practice the rite of circumcision and the obligation to keep the Law of Moses.*

In other words, to be a Christian is not simply to find one's identity and well-being in Christ alone, but salvation was found in identifying with and being a part of the nation Israel. It meant placing oneself under the burden of laws of Moses.

What we know with certainty is that these men who taught a different gospel than Paul and Barnabas were from Judea, verse 1. We know they were Jews and that they had been and continued to be Pharisees according to verse 5. We are also told that these men were believers in verse 5, which may simply mean they were professing Christ, but their profession here revealed a misunderstanding of the purpose of God for salvation. These men came to the church at Antioch, some 300 miles north of Jerusalem, implying that their teaching represented the viewpoint of the apostles and the church in Jerusalem. I think it safe to say that they taught with great confidence and had an air of authority. When Paul and Barnabas stood against them, trouble arose and the church in Antioch was thrown into confusion and potentially on the brink of separating on ethnic lines, the Jews and the Gentiles.

Not to excuse it, but consider how easy it would be for these men to conclude that to be a Christian, one must become and go through the works of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, the Jewish Messiah. Jesus was circumcised. Jesus came to fulfill the law. Therefore, if men wished to benefit in the blessings which God promised in and through the Messiah, they must identify themselves with Israel, with their covenants, and with the Mosaic commands.

The problem with this position is this; that a person does not have to identify with Israel to be saved, but only with Christ. Salvation is never about what church you attend faithfully, or about your serving in a ministry; those are all good and important, but the question is this, are you “in Christ” – trusting in Christ. You see, the baptism of John and later that of our Lord and His apostles was a public renouncing of Judaism as a system of works and, in its place, identification with Christ on the basis of faith in what He had done alone. Those who followed Christ had turned their backs on legalistic Judaism and turned to Christ, who alone kept the law and bore its (death) penalty for sinners. The teaching of Christ and the New Testament reveals that law (be it the Law of Moses or any other system by which men try to appease God) cannot save anyone; it can only condemn all people as sinners. Christ alone saves, and thus people must choose between coming to God based on self-righteousness, based upon whether or not they can claim and prove perfect obedience to the law, or upon Christ's righteousness, which is a gift of God's grace alone, through faith alone in the person and work of His Son, Jesus.

However, the debate raged in Antioch to the point that the leadership knew they must get the input of church in Jerusalem. It was in Jerusalem that many of the apostles would be found, and this was the Jerusalem church from which (at least it would seem) that these Judaizers (these who were calling Gentiles to keep the law for salvation) had come. Because these Judaizers portrayed the notion that they were speaking for the apostles and the Jerusalem church, the leaders at Antioch wanted confirmation as to whose message was correct. To this end, Antioch determined to send Paul and Barnabas, along with others (perhaps leaders of this

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opposition) to Jerusalem to seek to settle this issue and unite the churches under the banner of the one true gospel. The church was resolved to live in loving unity and to do that, doctrine must be settled.

You might recall that on the way to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas demonstrated no lack of confidence or zeal concerning their ministry to the Gentiles. According to Acts 15:3, they continually reported, in detail, the conversion of the Gentiles which brought great joy to those who heard of God’s grace in their salvation. Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem in verse 4 and were received by the church. It would see that they entire congregation, along with the apostles and elders, gathered to hear the report of Paul and Barnabas along with the problem that was occurring in Antioch. But as they reported how the Gentiles were coming to Jesus by faith alone, the congregation of Jerusalem did not receive the message the same as in the churches visited along the way. There is no report of rejoicing here. Maybe some were pleased, but they dare not do it openly, fearing perhaps the reaction some of the Pharisaical brethren.

I promise you this, the Judaizers, those of the Pharisee party in the church believed that their Pharisaical traditions and theology was correct and in verse 5 they boldly pronounced their **doctrine** saying, “*It is necessary to circumcise them (the Gentiles) and to direct them to observe (keep perform) the Law of Moses.*” Initially, I doubt that many would have been surprised by this statement in in Jerusalem church. At one level, it seemed reasonable enough. This teaching was in Judea and had now spread to Antioch. But while this teaching was spreading, Paul and Barnabas were far off, seeing Gentiles come to faith in Christ and so the issue was not addressed, the error of this “faith in Christ plus the efforts of man” theology were not rebuked and corrected. It is clear that the leaders of the Jerusalem church had not considered their position on this matter and now, because of disunity in the church, a Biblical judgment had to be made.

Then, beginning in verse 6, the apostles and elders scheduled a meeting to hear the testimony of those who were involved. There was much heated debate we are told, but Luke records for us the testimonies of Peter followed by Paul and Barnabas. In verses 7-11 Peter relates how he had already had a run in with some of these same Judaizers (Acts 11:1ff.). Then, Peter was called on the carpet by the “circumcised” who challenged the validity of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles at all. Peter related how God led him to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and how the Holy Spirit bore witness to the legitimacy of the salvation of these Gentiles. Even the circumcised saints had to admit that God must have opened the door to Gentile evangelism. And so now, having lost the battle over the issue of whether or not Gentiles can be saved, the Judaizers are now calling into question how Gentiles are to be saved. Beloved, at issue is not can the gospel be preached to everyone, but the doctrinal issue of what is the gospel to be preached.

Peter’s testimony ended with the evidenced that God had cleansed the Gentiles hearts by grace through faith (see verse 10). They had not yet been baptized, and they were apparently never circumcised, and yet the Holy Spirit came upon them, baptizing them in exactly the same way that He had Jews at Pentecost. If God testified to their salvation, based solely upon their faith (15:9), and this being so, how could this Council require anything more of Gentile Christians? If God made no distinctions between these new Gentile saints and those who came to faith who were Jews by giving to all who believe His Holy Spirit, then how could this Council make any distinctions in the gospel which was proclaimed to Gentiles?

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Peter’s testimony of the salvation of Cornelius was not simply a precedent of Gentile salvation, but also set the pattern, that simple faith in Christ alone was all that was necessary for a Gentile to be saved, just as it was for the Jew.

Next, in verse 12, Paul and Barnabas gave their testimony. Peter’s defense had calmed the situation down enough so they could speak and report their ministry and their message. Luke summarized their testimony saying that God had authenticated their gospel of faith alone in Christ alone by the signs and wonders which God performed through them, in addition to their words. Beloved, these signs and wonders were God’s “Amen” – His stamp of approval to their message and ministry. This was a proof that the gospel of Paul and Barnabas was the true gospel as no evidence of God’s approval of salvation in Christ plus circumcision, plus adherence to the Law of Moses, plus identification with the right group, that is Israel, saves.

So, with the testimonies given, it was no long Paul and Barnabas who were on the spot, but in reality, it was the leadership of the church at Jerusalem. It is clear that they had sidestepped the issue, but now they were forced to address it. Interestingly, as soon as the gospel that Paul and Barnabas preached was identified as the true gospel, Paul would take it upon himself to do the definitive work on the subject of circumcision and the Law of Moses, as it relates to the Gentiles in some of his later letters to the churches.

This brings us to verses 13-21 and the judgment of James. This again is all by reminder of ground we have covered. Here, James, the half-brother of Jesus, takes up where Peter left off. He now takes the testimony and experience of Peter puts it to the test of biblical revelation. Is Peter’s experience in line with the Scriptures? Beloved, theology, doctrine, what we believe can be learned from our experience, but it must never be viewed as biblical doctrine until it has been tested by biblical revelation. James affirms Peter, Paul’s and Barnabas’ theology by Old Testament revelation.

James says in effect that what Peter had just said had been prophesied in the Old Testament, appealing to prophecy of Amos 9. This OT text speaks of God’s judgment and the destruction of Israel, which is not complete, and which is not permanent. God promises to return and to restore Israel; and to rebuild it as in the days of old (Amos 9:11). But Amos reveals that the restoration of the kingdom to Israel is not an exclusive blessing for the Jews alone. God promises that as Israel is restored, it will open up the way by which Gentiles will seek the Lord and worship Him. In the context here, James is saying that both Jews and Gentiles will worship God together when the kingdom is restored to Israel, but they will do it as Jews and as Gentiles. Gentiles will be blessed as Gentiles, not as Jews. Therefore, there is no need for a different gospel, and there would be no need for the Gentiles to become Jewish to become Christian. This is exactly what Paul and Barnabas had reported and this was consistent with the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets concerning the restoration of the kingdom. For while the full restoration of Israel is still yet future, it all began with the work of Jesus, the rightful King of Israel, performing His work of redemption.

With this said, we come to the portion of this text that we have yet to deal with; the proposal of James to the Council and to the congregation. Beginning in verse 19, James concludes that the Gentiles who were turning to God should not be troubled (that is be harassed, or annoyed) by the Jewish saints. We about to see one of the applications for us here; that believers in Christ are to show deference to one another; but more on that in a moment.

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But James follows up this statement of non-harassment with four proposed requirements, things that were not requirements for salvation, but rather requirements for fellowship and effective evangelism between Jews and Gentiles. In verse 20, James lists four prohibitions that would be four of the most offensive things to a Jew. Notice them with me as I summarize:

- (1) To abstain from the partaking of foods contaminated by their involvement with idol worship;
- (2) To abstain from fornication; that is from sexual practices contrary to God's standards;
- (3) To abstain from eating those things which were strangled, not killed as God had instructed; and,
- (4) To abstain from eating blood.

What was the point? Beloved, the means by which a church is to fight for unity is to be committed to right doctrine, as we saw the gospel defined; and by showing deference to one another. For by instructing the Jews to not burden the Gentiles with the rites and ceremonies of the Law, which Jesus fulfilled, James was asking the Jewish believers to show deference to the Gentiles. But there would be a need for the Gentiles to show deference, a determined attitude of putting the needs and concerns of other before your own, to the Jewish believers. For by refraining from the four things James listed, much of the cultural tensions that which existed between Jews and Gentiles would be minimized and that would have a positive effect in Jewish evangelism.

By the Gentiles showing this deference, they would not hinder the evangelism of the Jews as the Old Testament would not be simply thrown out as though it were evil or worthless. Indeed, the Gentiles had access to the synagogues, where the Law of Moses was taught each Sabbath as verse 21 states. This means there were many opportunities for the truths and principles of the Law to be taught to Gentiles. The point is that studying the Law (something we do ourselves) is a very different thing from placing oneself under the law, obliging ourselves to keep the whole law, something no one could do anyway.

So, notice what had taken place. With this decision, the gospel that Paul and Barnabas preached was seen as the true gospel and was effective for both Jew or Gentile to bring salvation solely as a gift of God's grace, through faith alone, faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone as the chosen One of God who bore the sins and judgment of those He came to save, so that they could be pronounced righteous (right) in God's sight and have eternal life in the kingdom of God.

The point is that those who taught anything else, any other gospel, simply did not have the approval of church in Jerusalem or was in keeping with the teaching of biblical revelation. Paul and Barnabas were right, and those men who came to Antioch from Judea were wrong.

There is a great pattern of how a church is to deal with issues. Notice that there was opportunity given for both discussion and debate. Notice that their decision was based on both human and divine testimony, which was in accordance with the teachings of the biblical revelation. And now, having reached their definition of the gospel, they figure out how to implement their decisions.

In verses 22-23, we see that the first thing the leaders did was to put their decision in writing, this being truly the first recorded refutation of false teaching. And then, they determined to appoint men from the Jerusalem church to accompany Paul and Barnabas with the letter. Why

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would they do this? To testify to the believers at Antioch that the true gospel was not what these other men from Judea has been saying, which was another gospel altogether, but that what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching was the gospel. Notice the two men that were selected in verse 22, Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas. These were leading men among the saints, men whose word would be accepted among the Jewish saints in Antioch. Judas is a relatively unknown individual to us, but Silas will actually accompany Paul on his second journey.

Now I have been flapping my jaw for a while, so let me get you involved here for a moment. As you look at this letter that was written as recorded in verses 23-29, what do you notice immediately? [Pause] This is not a long letter. It is not a deep theological treatise. In fact, the emphasis is not so much on content, but upon men. The letter discredits the men and the message of those who had come from Judea, those who insisted on the gospel being Christ plus work, and authenticates the message of Paul and Barnabas, as beloved brethren; men, who according to verse 26, risked their lives for the sake of the gospel.

With this condemnation of the false teachers and the commendation of Paul and Barnabas, Paul would seize the opportunity to write in greater detail on the matters decided in this chapter. You know how a book has a forward, an endorsement from a respected author or teacher at the beginning to set the stage for the rest of the book? Well, Paul's epistles, his letters, had the forward written by the Jerusalem Council, and his views were officially approved as consistent with the gospel. The four prohibitions were laid down as those things which the saints would do well by observing in order to show deference to the Jewish saints. And then, without fanfare, James ends the letter with a simple "**Farewell**" – a word that means to be strong and in good health.

With the close of this council and the issue of the gospel settled, the delegation of Paul, Barnabas, Barsabbas and Silas headed to Antioch, letter in hand. They gathered the congregation and read the letter (15:30-31) and notice the response of the people; there was rejoicing, why? Because the letter was an encouragement. It confirmed salvation as a gift of God's grace alone, affirmed that faith alone in Christ was sufficient and it gave them some direction in how to unify the church. It settled the fact that being a Christian did not mean being Jewish.

Then, in verse 32, we see that Judas and Silas stayed and ministered to the congregation there in Antioch (and, notice one of my personal favorite verses stating what they did there; they gave what? They gave a lengthy message which encouraged and strengthened the saints. What was the content of their message? Well, I think it safe to say it was a message that confirmed the gospel that Paul and Barnabas had been teaching, but, being Jewish, it might have well included exhortations like that found in Hebrews 13:9 where we read:

*Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited.*

Luke informs us in verse 33-34 that after some time, the Jerusalem delegation returned home, all except for Silas who would soon join Paul in the next missionary journey. In verse 35 we find that Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for some time, teaching and preaching to the saints.

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What does all this mean for us today? Beloved, we have seen two key means by which a church is able to maintain loving unity. First, by discernment in doctrine and second by deferment, the placing the opinions and needs of others before your own. Notice that deferment comes after doctrine. We do not defer to bad or false teaching; but once the key issues of doctrine are settled and agreed upon, specifically as it relates to the question of, what is the gospel, then we can defer. Can Christians differ on other issues? Of course and we actually will see that next week as Paul and Barnabas disagree; not over the gospel, but over a secondary matter.

So how do we maintain loving unity in the church? How do we appropriately stay on the same page not only practically, but as is clearly revealed in our text also doctrinally? We are not only to be doing similar things for the progress of the gospel, but we are to be believing the same fundamental truths as taught in the Word of God. Yet, as you know, we are surrounded by a plethora of competing teachings and theologies. A number of “teachers” have arisen over the years, teachers, that if you examine what they teach carefully, are actually teaching misrepresentations of the truth at best and outright heresies, departures of the faith at worse. Worse yet, like the men who came down from Judea and taught the church at Antioch things that were in stark contrast to the teachings of Paul and Barnabas, we have people, men and women, teaching in the church, some invited into our pulpits, other from the protected veil of self-established and self-governing ministries where they broadcast their pop dogmas and doctrines via the airwaves and through the writing of books.

Why is it that much of what is “popular” among Christians today is not readily endorsed by the most conservative and established of churches and seminaries? Why is it that the teachings of the most “popular” of the teachers among Christians are at odds with the historic teaching of the church, at odds with the teachings of the Reformation, at odds with the teachings of Augustine and other church fathers, and ultimately at odds with the Scriptures themselves? Why is it that what is most popular among the masses of believers today is not written by “theologians” but by often self-authenticating gurus who often hang just on the edges of some denominational authority at best or are autonomous altogether? I find it all quite disturbing to hear and read of all the self-help and self-esteem gospels when my only hope and identity is found in Christ and thus I must pursue “Christ-esteem”. Does it not bother you that some of the most popular “Christian” teachers today, who are selling millions of books and influencing countless people with their teachings cannot or will not define sin? That they cannot explain the simple biblical gospel, and that they are more concerned with having the best now than being steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our citizenship is not of this earth but is in heaven from where we eagerly await our Savior to deliver us from the body of this death and from this sin-plagued world? Does it not bother you that the most popular of these “Christian” teachers are preaching a gospel of emotional wellness rather than the gospel of Christ? Does it not bother you that some of the most popular of the “Christian” teachers out there believe and proclaim that Jesus did not suffer for our sins on the cross at the hand and by the wrath of God the Father, but suffered in hell at the hands of demons? Does it not bother you that some, who claim to be backed by the authority of the church, deny the Trinity?

This is disturbing. You ought to be disturbed. And like the church at Antioch, we ought to appeal to an authority, which today, is not the church at Jerusalem, but rather is found in the complete canon of Scripture, the word of God. The words of 2 Timothy 3:16 are not idle and

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abstract, but dynamic and specific, **“16 All Scripture is inspired by God (not all human opinion and experience) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”** Notice “equipped” – outfitted by doctrine for what? For good works. The good works do not save the man of God, they flow out of his salvation which is characterized by his commitment to know and practice his only authority, the Word of God.

How does a church resolve to live in loving unity? It begins with the right doctrine, belief concerning the gospel; concerning the work and person of Jesus Christ; and when we are overcome by God’s grace and settled in on this true gospel, our hearts will long to show deference to one another, even as the Jews and Gentiles were being asked to do as noted in our text. It will be our practice of Romans 12:10, that we would... **“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor...”** That is the result of salvation, loving God, by loving and keeping His Word; and by loving God by loving His people. Would you resolve afresh today to maintain the unity of the church by loving God’s gospel (doctrine), and by considering the interests of others even above your own (deference)? This will cause a church to rejoice and help the church in its mission to reach the lost for Jesus.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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