

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH THE UNIFYING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

## **Acts 15:22-35**

### INTRODUCTION

Every once in awhile I find out that someone has told other Christians that I believe things about God or the Bible or salvation that I do not believe. I've been misrepresented by someone and this misrepresentation has caused the person who was told the fallacy to not only be suspicious of me but not want to associate with me or our church. Disunity has occurred where unity ought to be experienced due to a misrepresentation of my faith. Sometimes, when I find out about these erroneous reports, depending on the nature of the relationship I have with those involved, I will go to the person who has heard the report and seek to make my position clear so that we can have fellowship with one another. However, these reconciling conversations are never easy because of the suspicion that has been sown.

Our passage this morning describes just this sort of situation. Jewish Christians from the church in Jerusalem have gone to the mainly Gentile church in Antioch and insinuated that the leadership of the church in Jerusalem believes that unless the Gentiles who have believed in Jesus are circumcised and keep the Law of Moses they cannot be saved. This teaching caused much consternation and agitation in the church at Antioch. They had been taught that Jesus fulfilled the law for them and so salvation was entirely a work of Christ and to be received by faith alone and thus requiring them to keep the law would be a seriously different message. The church in Antioch responded in the way everyone should respond when told that others believe certain things. They sent Paul and Barnabas directly to the church in Jerusalem, together with other leaders from their church to find out if the leadership in Jerusalem believed that Gentiles, in addition to trusting in Jesus, needed to become Jewish in order to be saved. We saw last week that there were certain Jewish believers in the church who did believe the Gentiles should follow the law. However, we also saw how God preserved the unity of the church in Jerusalem through the process of discussion and testimony from Peter, Paul and Barnabas and the appeal to the OT scriptures by James, the lead elder at Jerusalem.

This week we are observing how the church in Jerusalem now approaches the church in Antioch which is uncertain about what the Jerusalem church believes. Verse 24 clearly states the difficulty with which they are faced. The minds of the Christians in Antioch have been unsettled. Therefore, the Jerusalem church is in the uncomfortable situation of having to assure people who are suspicious of them that they are all in agreement. In verse 28 we find out in the letter which the Jerusalem church writes to the church in Antioch that the unity which the Jerusalem church has achieved in this matter and thus the unity they are seeking to establish with them is a unity created by the Holy Spirit. The leadership in Jerusalem recognizes that the entire process and thus the conclusion reached has been not simply the work of wise and judicious human conversation but directed and created by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has given them unity on the nature of the gospel.

As I meditated on this passage this week I was reminded of the Apostle Paul's admonition to the church in Ephesus, "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace." We can see in this letter and delegation sent from the church in Jerusalem how they are working to maintain the unity the HS has created. That unity has been threatened by false teaching and false reports and so now we can observe how it is that both churches and the individuals who make up those churches are to maintain the unity which the HS has created and is creating within the church and among churches.

### MAIN POINT

**We maintain the unity the Holy Spirit has given the church by...**

**I. Taking the initiative to clearly communicate in person (vv.22, 25, 27 & 30-32)**

The earnestness of this church to be fully reconciled and united to the church in Antioch is seen in their unanimous decision to choose and send two of their leaders, Judas and Silas, along with Paul and Barnabas, to Antioch (v. 22). The letter they carry informs the folks in Antioch that the purpose for sending along Judas and Silas together with the letter is so that they can confirm and more fully explain what the letter says (v.27). Upon their arrival these two men, who were not only leaders but also prophets, spoke many words to the church in Antioch over a considerable period of time. Notice they do not simply talk to the leaders of the church in Antioch but they gather the entire congregation to hear the letter and they speak to the entire congregation. So not only by their letter but also by their personal presence and personal testimony Judas and Silas prove that the church in Jerusalem is in full agreement with Paul and Barnabas and with them as well. They confirm that the condition of acceptance with God and inclusion in the church is only faith in Jesus Christ. The Gentiles do not have to be circumcised, nor obey the Mosaic Law.

The apostles and elders could have simply written the letter and sent it with Paul and Barnabas who had also witnessed the proceedings of the council. They didn't have to send two of their most gifted and qualified leaders to also bear witness to their decision. The fact that they did this shows how important it was to them that the church in Antioch knows that they were 100% with them in their understanding of the gospel and in viewing them as full members of the body of Christ. It also shows that that they were unhappy that the church in Antioch was unsettled by these false teachers. Being united to the church in Antioch and helping them be at peace in the gospel mattered so much that they were willing to make the sacrifice of sending these men and the men were willing to leave behind the comforts of home to travel 250 miles to spend time with people who were radically different from them culturally in order that there would be no doubt that both communities were fully united to the same gospel, the same Jesus. By their personal presence and testimony in public it became impossible for anyone to ever make the claim again that the church in Jerusalem taught that Gentiles had to keep the Law in order to be saved.

When you discover that other Christians have received and perhaps believed false reports about you it is a difficult thing to want to actually have a personal conversation. We are offended that people would believe false things about us. We are afraid of being rejected or of getting into some sort of conflict. We don't like being put into the position of having to defend ourselves. Yet if we are convinced that the HS wants us to live in harmony and unity with other believers we must take the risks entailed in talking with those who are potentially offended by us. It is hard for people to continue believing false things about you when you talk with them personally and make clear what it is that you believe or think. The purpose behind these conversations is not protecting our reputation but living in the unity of the HS with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This requires we be fully convinced that Jesus wants us to live in unity with other believers. Therefore, I will take the risks entailed in having personal, face to face conversations so that I can be united to those whom I may have offended or may have heard that I believe things I do not believe. Much of the disunity and disharmony that exists in the church of Jesus could be eliminated if people would take the risk to actually have a personal conversation with those whom have become adversaries.

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## **II. Communicating with humility (vv. 23-27)**

I am struck by the humility of the apostles and elders and members of the church in Jerusalem. Remember, the apostles are the 12 men who were with Jesus from the time of John's baptism until the ascension. They had lived with and talked with Jesus. They had spoken with him, touched him and ate meals with him after his resurrection. They had watched him ascend into heaven. It was through them that God had performed mighty miracles and through them thousands of Jewish people had been saved. The church of Jerusalem was the first church of Jesus that ever existed. They were of the same race and culture as Jesus. If anyone had a right to not be questioned and to be accorded absolute respect and submission, it was these men and this church.

However, notice how humble they are as they address these “Johnny-come-lately” folks in Antioch. Their humility is expressed right in the first line. “The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the brothers who are of Gentile birth in Antioch...” Twice they use the term brothers, thus showing that they view these Gentiles as full members of the church of Christ. There is no pulling of rank. Yes they are apostles and elders but they are also brothers with the Gentiles. They acknowledge that they have the same Father and belong to the same family and therefore have the same standing before God in Christ. Then, in v. 24 they openly admit that the troublemakers came from them. They do not seek to deny that it was from their church that trouble has come to the church in Antioch. This is not normally what you do when you’ve been accused of doing wrong. Normally you would disassociate yourself from the source of misinformation but they openly acknowledge that these false teachers came from them. However they also quickly assert that they did not give them authority to say what they said. While they were members of the Jerusalem church they did not speak with the authority of the apostles and elders.

In verses 25 and 26 they openly express their affection and admiration for Barnabas and Paul. They unhesitatingly promote the reputation of these two men as ministers of Christ. They do not care if people think more highly of Paul and Barnabas than of them. Remember, it is Paul and Barnabas’ inclusion of Gentiles in the church without requiring circumcision that was the reason for all the trouble with which they now have to deal. Thus, the apostles and elders show by their open affection and admiration of Paul and Barnabas that they do not love and respect the false teachers who were from their church but their loyalty is with the two accused troublemakers. They do not hesitate to expose themselves to criticism from certain members of their own community by aligning themselves so openly with the primary proponents of this gospel of free grace. They want Paul and Barnabas to be loved and admired by the church at Antioch.

Their acknowledgement of their equal standing as brothers, their lack of defensiveness and open admission that the trouble came from them and their enthusiastic endorsement of Paul and Barnabas reveal humble, meek hearts that want only that the church at Antioch be at peace once again. It is difficult to remain angry and suspicious of people who come to us with such humility. It is hard to fight with a person who treats you as an equal, who openly admits when he is wrong and the ways in which she may have contributed to the problem and who expresses respect and admiration for you and those you love. The apostles and elders were able to approach the church in Antioch with this humility because they actually believed all that they said. They were most impressed with the gospel of Jesus and the amazing reality of his church made up of such wildly diverse kinds of people. They recognized it was through the grace of Jesus that both they and the Gentiles belonged to God. They wanted above all else for the church of Jesus to be united around the glorious Savior. They recognized that these very different men and women were their brothers and sisters in Christ and so they were determined to love them, not preserve their reputation or promote their way of life as normative.

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### **III. Respecting and accepting each other’s differences (vv.29 & 33)**

It’s hard for us to understand just how radically different these two churches, these two groups of Christians were in their lifestyles. Everyone in the church in Jerusalem was Jewish. They were circumcising every male born into their families at the age of eight days old, according to the OT Scriptures. Some and maybe all of them were still offering sacrifices at the temple. They were participating in the Jewish feasts and various other observances. They ate only kosher food. They followed the cleanliness code as described in the OT. These Christians were still practicing the Jewish way of life. On the other hand, the Christians in the church in Antioch, who were mainly Gentiles did not circumcise their baby boys. They ate whatever they wanted to eat

and paid no attention to the dietary code of the OT. They did not participate in the Jewish feasts. They gave no thought to the temple or to the sacrifices or to rules surrounding how to treat dead bodies or skin diseases.

One commentator reflecting upon this incredible difference makes the point that the decision of the church in Jerusalem to declare that Gentiles were acceptable to God and full members of the church of God solely through faith in Christ and apart from circumcision or any other obedience to the Law was an enormously generous and noble decision. They were, in effect, voting that the church of Jesus was going to become thoroughly non-Jewish. They decided that the way they lived as Christians was going to become a minority lifestyle in the church. In making their decision they also unleashed one of the most powerful weapons for evangelization imaginable. They disconnected the Christian faith from any one cultural expression of it. They not only disconnected the gospel and Christian living from Jewish cultural norms but also from white middle class cultural norms and Chinese, rural people cultural norms and African-American cultural norms and every other kind of cultural norm. It is possible to faithfully follow Jesus dressed in many different styles of clothing, in many different languages, with many different styles of music, with many different eating habits, with many different holiday celebrations, in many different kinds of political systems and on and on.

As I said last week, their instruction to the Gentiles in v. 29 to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality” is simply a summary of the life of love that all Christians are to live, not as the basis of obtaining eternal life but as the evidence that they have obtained eternal life. This verse is a summary of what Paul describes at great length in 1 Corinthians 6-10. Christians do not participate in the worship of idols and they do not engage in sexual immorality because they have been given new hearts that love God. In addition, Christians abstain from doing things that God does not call sin because of their love for their brothers and sisters who view certain activities as sin. In the case of the Gentiles the apostles are directing them to watch what they eat for the sake of their Jewish brothers and sisters who believe eating these things to be sin. Thus if the Gentile members of the church, who will be in the majority in the churches outside of Judea, freely eat in front of their Jewish brothers and sisters this may put pressure on them to eat unclean food in order to fit in and when they do so they will be sinning because they believe it is sin, even though God does not. Notice in v. 33 that the result of the letter and visit is that these two communities are at peace, the peace and unity of the HS. Unity has been maintained.

If these people can live in peace, what about us? Is our affection for and acceptance of one another going to be determined by our lifestyle choices: how we choose to educate our children, the size of our families, our political views, our economic status, our educational status, our diet, our age, our marital status or will our involvement in each others lives be determined by our mutual love for Jesus? The reality of our relationship to Jesus is shown in our ability to respect and accept those who think and live differently from us but who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to follow the example of the Apostle Paul as he commands in 1 Corinthians 10:32-33, “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God-- even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” We respect and accept the differences of others and make sure that we do not put pressure on people to do things the way we do them.

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#### **IV. Rejoicing together in the gospel of grace (vv. 28-35)**

Verses 31-33 show this joyful unity. The Gentile church in Antioch, which for some time has been troubled and unsettled in its soul, is suddenly full of joy over the encouraging message of the letter they have received.

Why are they rejoicing? They are rejoicing because salvation is entirely a work of God's grace given in and through Jesus and received by faith alone, apart from any works of the law. The good news which they had believed truly is good news. Sins are forgiven, right standing with God is obtained, eternal life is promised on the basis of Christ's work and not because of their work. Judas and Silas verify by many words the glory of this gospel. Here is a picture of the whole church made up of wildly diverse people united in their joy in salvation and thus united in their love for one another.

I'm currently reading a history of the Eighth Army Air Force which was based in England during WWII and, together with the British Air Force, responsible for bombing Germany in preparation for the Allied invasion of Europe on D-Day. A recurrent theme in this history is the extreme loyalty and unity among the 10 man crews who flew our heavy bombers. The author regularly describes the diversity of the men who flew together and then marvels at their fierce love and loyalty to each other. Each airman, when he signed up for the Army Air Force agreed to fly 25 combat missions and then he could go home. The survival rate among these airmen was less than 30%. Less than 30% of the men made it alive and unwounded to their 25<sup>th</sup> mission. The German air defenses and fighter planes were relentless and deadly. Yet, day after day these men got back in their planes and knowingly flew into absolute terror and mayhem. What enabled these men, who were always terrified of what they were going to encounter when they flew into Europe to get into their planes and continue to fight? The men did not fight out of patriotism or to punish the wicked Germans or because they hated the Germans. They fought for two reasons: because they loved their buddies and didn't want to let them down and in order to finish their 25 missions and go home. It was over a year before anyone successfully completed the 25 missions. When the first crew, the 10 men on the "Memphis Belle" completed their 25<sup>th</sup> mission pandemonium broke out on the plane and on the entire base. There was overwhelming joy among the men that they had survived and made it safely through the war.

The unity on those planes was due to the fact that they all faced the same danger and they were living for the same salvation together. Their love for each other and the amazing feats of self-sacrifice among these crews was born out of the common danger they faced and anticipation of their common salvation. It is to be the same for us. We all are faced with the same terrifying danger, experiencing God's just and eternal anger against us for our sins. We all have received the promise of salvation through Christ. We are awaiting that day when the war will be over and we will be home. So we live together now, united in our joyful anticipation of that salvation and love each other so that we can help each other survive the war and make it safely home.

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