

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL

THE CHURCH ON MISSION

THE GOD WHO SENDS

The Message: 'Christ Alone'

Peter proclaimed in *Acts 4:12 (ESV)* ¹² *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*” The gospel of Christ stands on this truth. Paul wrote in *1 Corinthians 2:1-2 (ESV)* ¹ *And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.* ² *For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

A modern-day example of what it means to trust in Christ alone for your salvation comes from the life of Donald Smarto, a national leader in prison ministry. Before he came to Christ, Smarto was in seminary, preparing to enter the Roman Catholic priesthood. He had developed a fascination with all the trappings of Catholic religion—the sacred rituals and the ornate vestments. One night he went out to the movies, where he saw a scene that shocked him: A bishop dressed in sacred robes was caught by a gust of wind that parted his garments to reveal what was underneath: a rotted skeleton. At that instant, Smarto's conscience cried out, "That's me!" But as he soon as he said it, he tried to deny it. He drove back to the seminary, and the whole way back he was muttering, "That's not me. It can't be me. I'm a good person!"

Frantically Smarto rehearsed his many pious deeds—his fasting, his penance, his prayers—searching for some assurance of his salvation; finding none, he went out into the corn fields, where he wandered for hours. Eventually the moon clouded over and the night became so black that he could not even see his hand in front of his face. He began to panic, and in his fear he cried out for a sign from God. As he waited, panting in the black darkness, he heard a faint humming sound. Slowly he walked toward it, until he bumped into a hard, rough, wooden post. He put his hands out to feel it. "Of course!" he said to himself. "It's a telephone pole!" As he stood there, the clouds parted, and he was able to see again. He looked up, and there, silhouetted against the moon, was the wooden crossbar that supported the phone lines. He was standing at the foot of a giant cross. In that moment, everything Don Smarto had ever learned from the Bible came into focus, and he realized that all he needed to do to be saved was to hold on to Christ and His cross.
– Donald Smarto *Pursued*

Often people like Smarto stand in their own way of coming to Christ and then there are those who stand in the way of others coming to Christ. From the beginning there were forces within Christianity that worked to destroy or sidetrack the grace of God and distort freedom in Christ. Such as: (1) Judaizers who were Jews who recognized Jesus as the promised Savior yet, they wanted any Gentile desiring to become a Christian to become a Jew first. They added human traditions and standards to God's law and subtracted from the Scriptures God's clear concern for all nations. Still today, we find people who do not acknowledge that

God's family extends beyond denominational lines. (2) Legalists who lived by a long list of 'don'ts' teaching God's favor is earned by good behavior thinking God's love is something to earn rather than to accept freely. We still encounter people with the legalist mindset. God may forgive you but they never will! (3) Libertines who supported a lawless type of Christianity. Libertines teach that Christians live above the law and need no guidelines. Frequently, Baptists are mistaken for being libertine in our thinking. Some so-called 'Christian' lifestyles often suggest that since salvation comes by being "saved by grace" actions do not matter. Libertines ignore **James 2:26 (ESV)** ²⁶ *For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

A conference was held about 49 A.D. between delegates from the church at Antioch, Syria, and delegates from the First Jerusalem Church. This was about 20 years after the Holy Spirit came to earth on the Day of Pentecost. This council met to settle a dispute over whether Gentile converts to Christianity first had to identify with Judaism by being circumcised.

The Dispute: Jesus Alone vs. Jesus Plus

Acts 15:1-5 (ESV) ¹ *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* ² *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.* ³ ... ⁴ *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.* ⁵ *But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."*

'Legalists' went down from Jerusalem to Antioch – to that grace-filled church family where followers of Christ were first called Christians. Undoubtedly the Antioch congregation would have been dumbfounded by their message. No one had mentioned that they needed to be circumcised to be saved and these 'authorities' from Jerusalem were now preaching a "different" gospel from what they had been taught. Basically, the troublemakers were telling the Gentiles that they were going to have to become JEWS in order to be saved. In God's grand design, Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch when the dissenters appeared!

These men were associated with the Jerusalem congregation but not authorized by it. Their intent was to rob both Jewish and Gentile believers of their liberty in Christ. Paul later wrote about it in **Galatians 2:4 (ESV)** ⁴ *Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—*

God's plan for salvation, Christ alone is so simple that many still wonder, "Is Christ alone enough for our salvation or should something be added?" At the root of the debate are differing views on the basis of salvation. The importance of the issue helps fuel the intensity of the discussion.

As a Christian, we need to know what we believe and why we believe it. One important reason to know what we believe is to be able to share the truth about Jesus with others. **1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.* Another reason to be well-grounded in the faith is so that we will not be deceived ourselves. **Ephesians 4:14 (ESV)** ¹⁴ *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

Although there were those whose hearts were not right with God in the Jerusalem church, it is not surprising that there were those in the First Jerusalem Church who were ignorant of the relationship between Law and grace. These Jews had been trained to respect and obey the Law of Moses. It was a time of transition, and such times are always difficult.

The Discussion: Tradition vs. Scripture and Experience

Peter spoke first by reviewing the past. We recently studied Peter's personal experience of having the privilege of bringing the Gentile, Cornelius, and his family to faith in Christ. Peter himself had been shocked that Christ was for the Gentiles in the beginning of his experience on the rooftop. (*Acts 10*). Let's read just a little of what he said.

Read Acts 15:8-11 (ESV) ⁸ *And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

The only way to salvation is by faith. God has never saved anybody through the keeping of the Law. Do you know why? There has never been a person who has kept it. God saves on one basis and one basis only: faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Next, Paul and Barnabas spoke of their present experiences. We studied their first missionary journey last week. Then, James spoke up. James was the half-brother of Jesus and he spoke concerning the future. We will begin where James quotes the Old Testament prophet, Amos and what James believed should be said to the Gentile Christians in Antioch.

Read Acts 15:16-21 (ESV) ¹⁵ *And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ¹⁶ "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, ¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.' ¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹*

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

James did not say what was currently happening was a fulfillment of Amos' prophecy but that the prophets agreed with the testimony. Time does not permit for a deep study of James' words. Ironside explains James' words this way: "God is working out His own plan: Israel, His covenant people, have been set aside nationally because of their rejection of the Messiah. God is now taking out a people, Jew and Gentile, to constitute the Church of God. When He completes this work, the Lord is coming back the second time. That will be the time of blessing for the whole world. Wars will cease. Then nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; the Lord Jesus Christ shall reign in righteousness over all the earth and Jew and Gentile will be one happy, redeemed people, glorifying God together."

James advised the church write to the Gentile believers and share the decisions of the conference. This letter asked for obedience to two *commands* and a willingness to agree to two personal *concessions*. The two commands were that the believers avoid idolatry and immorality, sins that were especially prevalent among the Gentiles.

The two concessions were that they willingly abstain from eating blood and meat from animals that had died by strangulation. The two commands do not create any special problems, for idolatry and immorality have always been wrong in God's sight, both for Jews and Gentiles. But what about the two concessions concerning food?

These concessions were not a matter of putting the Gentiles under Mosaic Law. It was a request that they should not do something which would be very offensive to their Jewish brothers. The prohibition against eating blood was actually given by God before the time of the Law (**Gen. 9:4**). If an animal is killed by strangulation, some of the blood will remain in the body. Part of idol worship was consuming blood. According to scripture life is in the blood. **Leviticus 17:14 (ESV)**¹⁴ *For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.*

If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would please God and get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, other actions were inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four. This compromise helped the church grow unhindered by the cultural differences of Jews and Gentiles. When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for faith we set up are God's, not man's. The Jerusalem council made a decision based on freedom and love. **Romans 8:2 (ESV)**² *For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.*