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Acts 15:1-21

Outward Church: The Battle of the Believers

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We're going back to Acts! We actually started our series in Acts, Outward Church, a year ago. I want to take a moment to look back, because it helps us look forward. When Jesus left his disciples and ascended into heaven he gave believers a special mission, which becomes a roadmap for Acts.

Acts 1:8 (ESV)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

God is going to fill the believers to be his witnesses; first in Jerusalem, then cross-culturally in Samaria, and then to the Gentiles. We see the believers witness to those in Jerusalem as soon as the very next chapter. At pentecost the Holy Spirit descends on the believers as tongues of fire, fills them with his power, Jesus' disciple Peter preaches the gospel and 3,000 repent and believe in Jesus. Then for the next couple chapters Peter and John get in trouble in Jerusalem as they perform miracles and preach the gospel. The gospel is spreading out from the core 12 disciples to the city and the religious powers in the city don't like it.

Something terrible happens in Acts 7. One of their early leaders, a man named Stephen, get's stoned to death by an angry religious mob. And here we encounter one of our first obstacles. Will Christianity come to a screeching halt, or will it persist? Can you imagine if those early believers had all been snuffed out? Would Christianity even be around today? What can keep the gospel moving forward?

Jesus actually uses the persecution itself to fulfill his plan in Acts 1:8. Persecution pushes the gospel beyond Jerusalem outward to Samaria and the ends of the earth, the Gentiles. In Acts 8, the Samaritans start coming to faith. But in order for the gospel message to make it across cultural barriers to the ends of the earth, the lands of the Gentiles, God is going to have to do something special.

First, God takes someone who is persecuting Christians and brings him to Christ—that's Saul, or who we call Paul. God is going to use Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles, the non-Jews. Second, God gives Peter a vision that confirms that the Gentiles are also a part of the family of God. From here the mission really starts to accelerate as the church at Antioch in Syria, sends out Barnabas and Paul, on the first missionary journey throughout the Gentile regions of Cyprus and Galatia. Many give their hearts to Christ.

At the end of Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas return from the mission field, reporting all the amazing things God has done among the Gentiles. Yes they faced trial and hardship, but God used it for good. And things just keep going more and more amazing from there. Ministry get's easier and the mission goes smoothly. Wrong! That brings us to Acts chapter 15, the **battle of the believers**. The church's leaders fight over what it takes to become a Christian. Do you have to be a Christian like me? Do you have to become Jewish to be saved?

Have you ever seen a boxing match? I've seen a couple on TV, but never in person. I did watch *The Fighter* a couple years ago, the boxing movie about Lowell's Micky Ward. Our own Caiti and her sister Becky were extras in *the Fighter* for one of the fights. They filmed it at the Tsongas Center in Lowell. Someone recently told me (I think it was my dentist) that they filmed all the fight scenes over several days, and that the real boxers they hired were really sore afterwards. I don't know if that's true but it's a fun story. In a boxing

match, each boxer has their own corner and stool where they can rest between rounds and yell, “Cut me, Mick!” In the early church we have **two corners**.

Corner #1: Believing Pharisees - To be a Christian you have to become Jewish and obey the law.

Paul calls them the “Circumcision party” in Galatians. They are a group of Jews who say that to be a Christian you have to become Jewish. You have to get circumcised. Circumcision is removing some skin from newborn boys’ private parts. Starting with Abraham, it was the way God marked the Israelites as his people, and gave them a great sense of cultural and ethnic identity (Gen 17:13-14). But can you imagine if you’re a non-Jewish man who wants to believe in Jesus, or you have non-Jewish children in your family? You’re hearing about Christ, and you want to become a Christian, but people are telling you, you and your boys have to get circumcised first? No way! That would be a huge obstacle.

Corner #2: Paul & Peter - Cultural identity and law-keeping won’t save you. We’re saved by grace.

Paul and Peter don’t think you have to become Jewish to be saved. They argue that we’re saved entirely by grace, not cultural or ethnic identity, not any other thing we do. We’re saved by grace, not works.

Now like any boxing match, unless it’s a knockout, it usually goes a couple rounds. This match goes three rounds. Here’s the big argument in round one.

Round 1) You have to become cultural Jewish and obey the law to be saved. (v1-5)

Here’s what happened. The Christians who are Pharisees, the pro-circumcision party, sent a delegation from southern Jerusalem up north 300 miles to Antioch. Antioch is an amazing place where Paul and Barnabas preached for a year and where Gentiles (non-Jews) are coming to faith. They’re the first church to send out missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, and seem like they’re willing to try new things and preach the gospel. They’re the young cool church. But the delegation of Pharisees doesn’t like what they’re seeing. People aren’t becoming Jewish or obeying the law. We can actually read about what these Pharisees taught in Antioch in Galatians chapter 2.

Galatians 2:4-5 (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— 5 to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

Paul takes their arguments really seriously. He calls them false brothers, and says he wouldn’t yield, even for a moment. Paul describes how those pro-circumcision, pro-law, pro-Jewish identity Pharisees convinced Peter to not spend time with non-Jews anymore (v13 Barnabas was also lead astray).

Galatians 2:11-12 (ESV)

11 But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.

Why would Peter do that? Didn’t God give him a supernatural vision of clean and unclean animals coming down from heaven and God telling him to eat them all? Didn’t Peter see the non-Jewish Centurion Cornelius and his family get filled with the Holy Spirit simply by their faith in Jesus? Yes. He did. We don’t know why Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Maybe it was because the circumcision party convinced him that his eating with non-Jews was a stumbling block for Jews coming to faith in Christ in Jerusalem. We don’t know.

But what we do know is that this is a gospel issue. Paul and Barnabas head to Jerusalem to argue their case at the Jerusalem council, a meeting of church leaders. Before they can do so the pro-circumcision party speaks.

Acts 15:5 (ESV)

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.”

Do you get what they’re doing here? They’re saying Jesus + cultural identity + law-keeping (aka. circumcision) = salvation. See, what they’re doing is gatekeeping. Do you know what gatekeeping is? You ever go on reddit, the front page of the internet? They have a whole thread about gatekeeping.

Gatekeeping is when someone takes it upon themselves to decide who does or does not have access or rights to a community or identity. - reddit

People in this thread post examples of people gatekeeping each other. So, for example...

Gatekeeping Saving Lives

“Saving lives? What kind of nurse are you? Are you a surgeons assistant? Not quite sure how YOU save lives.”

Wow. Gatekeeping! Or how about gatekeeping drinking coffee?

Gatekeeping Coffee Temperature

“Hot Coffee is the only way to drink Coffee, not warm, not cold, and definitely NOT iced.”

This person has clearly never been to Dunkin Donuts. How about gatekeeping reading?

Gatekeeping Reading

“Congratulations to anyone who read a book this year.”

“How about 29? And not two dozen 200-300 pages large font flavor of the month feel-good quickies. I’m talking about Robert Caro, Lyndon Johnson, deep dive biography, “A Promised Land,” Obama Vol 1, Robert Dallek’s Kennedy, “An Unfinished Life.” ...But of course, I encourage any reading.”

Or how about this literal picture of gatekeeping?

Gatekeeping St. James’s Palace

This is a picture of a Buckingham Palace Guard guarding St. James’s Palace, where the British royals live and work. In our story it’s like St. James’s Palace is the Kingdom of Heaven and the Pharisees are the guards. The big black gate is Jewish cultural identity and the law. Instead of opening wide the gate because Christ Jesus fulfilled the law, they’ve shut it (Matt 5:17). Instead of recognizing the gospel is for the non-culturally Jewish, they are saying, “You have to match our cultural identity to get in.” So here’s my question:

Do we ever “gatekeep” Christianity?

What are the cultural and identity markers that we say, “If you’re this way, you’re a real Christian.” How might we be erecting a new type of law for non-believers to follow before coming to Jesus? It’s easy to erect well-intentioned gates that keep people from faith in Christ. I think they start in fear. If they don’t become Jewish, we’ll be sent into exile again. If they don’t become a Christian like me, they won’t really be saved.

How about gates we unintentionally erect? Do we require people to dress like us? Or listen to the same kind of Christian music as us? How about worship like us, quiet, with our arms down? Or speak the same language? We would never intentionally exclude anyone, but if we are not intentional about addressing our gates, we're going to end up excluding more than we realize. Our Arrabon course this fall talked about the 70% rule—that if we are comfortable 70% of the time, we're doing something wrong. In other words, if my cultural preferences are winning out all the time, that will naturally exclude others with different preferences.

How about voting like us? We just got through an election season. Do you believe that to be a Christian you have to be a Democrat? Or do you believe the reverse? That to be a Christian you have to be a Republican? That's gatekeeping. Jesus isn't a Republican or a Democrat (Josh 5:13-15). He's on his own side.

How about young-earth creationism vs. evolution? I believe you can be a Christian whether you believe the earth was created 4.5 billion years ago and evolution is true or you believe God created the earth in a literal 24 7-hour-long days. You see what I did there? It frustrates me when I hear that people won't believe in Jesus because they can't believe the earth was created 4,000 years ago. Great! I don't think the Bible says that either. When we insist that you have to believe in a young earth, that's gatekeeping.

Do you ever gatekeep yourself? I know it's about believing in Jesus, but really, I have to be a good person for God to love me. If only I can be better, then I'll really get to heaven. That's Jesus + works = salvation. How many of the ways we think we need to be better are rooted in cultural identity? If only I read my Bible more, I'd be a better Christian. The Bible wasn't mass-produced till the printing press was invented in the 15th century. Was everyone before then a bad Christian? Don't let a good thing, Bible reading and prayer, become gatekeeping. Isn't the point to know Jesus, not beat yourself up? Jesus doesn't gatekeep you that way. Why should you?

It's so easy to erect well-intentioned gates that actually keep us from coming to faith in Christ Jesus. It's tough because we have to discern "What's a gatekeeping issue?" and "What's a gospel issue?" Peter can help us figure it out. Round two of our boxing match.

Round 2) We are not saved by cultural identity or by works but by God's grace. (v6-11)

Peter gets up and recounts how God used him to share the gospel with the non-Jews (v7). And then to prove that he accepted the Gentiles, God poured his Holy Spirit on them (Acts 10:44-48). He cleansed their hearts through faith, not cultural identity, not works (v9). We couldn't keep God's law. Why should we expect them to (v10)? Then he sums up his argument:

Acts 10:11 (ESV)

11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

His argument, and he knows what he's talking about, is the grace of Jesus = salvation. You don't need to become culturally Jewish to be saved. Neither do you need to become culturally Christian to be saved. Believing in Christian values won't save you. Believing in Christ will save you. Neither do you need to do good works in order to be saved (Eph 2:8-9). Paul actually addresses this in Galatians chapter 2.

Galatians 2:16 (ESV)

yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Paul and Peter want to make it very clear that we're not saved by works or cultural identity but by God's grace. We're saved, then we do good works as a kind of fruit of our salvation (Eph 2:10). But God doesn't measure our good deeds vs. our bad deeds to see if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, and then if they do you get into heaven. That's not how it works. Why? Because Christ Jesus paid the penalty for our sin on the cross. He paid for it completely. He doesn't need his blood plus your good deeds or your cultural identity to transform your life. He just needs his blood. His blood opened wide the way of salvation. We are not saved by cultural identity or by works but by God's grace. God's grace will transform us.

You know in boxing matches when they have that final knockout round? Or at least, that seems what it's like in the movies. Here's our knockout.

Round 3) God always planned to save the Gentiles by faith. (v12-21)

The crowd hears Peter and goes silent. Then James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church, speaks.

Acts 15:13b-17 (ESV)

“Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon (Simon Peter's first name in Hebrew) has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 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.”

James quotes Amos 9:11-12 that says God always planned to rebuild king David's nation, the Israelites. He always planned to build the people of God through the Gentiles (Amos: “all the Gentiles”). They too shall be “called by my name.” That's astounding. That means it was always God's plan to create one people out of Jew and non-Jew through faith in Jesus Christ. That means to become a Christian you don't have to become Jewish, you have to become a Christ-follower. You have to know Jesus, nothing more, nothing less. You have to “call” on his name, the name of Jesus, an act of faith.

This is why in the last chapter of Galatians Paul calls the church “the Israel of God.” The church is the fulfillment of Israel, God's ultimate plan coming to fruition. This doesn't mean that God doesn't have a special plan to rescue the Jewish people. I believe we will see a mass conversion of the Jewish people to faith in Christ before Christ returns (Romans 11:25-26). But it's not Christians who have to become Jewish, but Jewish people who need to become Christians, followers of Jesus Christ.

So who wins the battle of the believers? Do the Pharisees win? Does Paul win?

Grace wins.

To be saved you don't need to become one cultural identity or another. You don't need to have your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds. You need to be forgiven by Jesus. And it's amazing how even at the end of the passage God shows grace to the believing Pharisees, to the circumcision party. James get's up and says that the Gentiles should “abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.” (v20) The non-Jews are to respect the Jewish customs, but

understand that those things won't save them. That's a cultural compromise, but not a gospel compromise. Grace still wins.

Grace means receiving a gift we don't deserve. Have you received it? That's what salvation is. It's a gift. If you feel like you have to align with certain cultural markers before you can become a Christian, it's not true. Or if you've been working to earn your salvation, if you've been trying to be good for God to love you, it's not true. Jesus loves you and forgives you for your sins. Believe in him. Grace wins.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think most people think you need to be a good person to go to heaven?
2. Why does the Bible tell us being good enough isn't good enough?
3. What sort of culturally identity-markers do you think make it hard for people to believe?
4. Why don't cultural identity markers matter?
5. Do you ever "gatekeep" Christianity for yourself or others? How so?
6. How does the Bible say we can be saved?
7. Why is the Bible's offer of salvation really good news (aka. gospel)?
8. Do you believe this gospel message? What makes you excited about it?
9. Who can you share the gospel with this week?