

A MOST IMPORTANT LETTER

Summer 2022, Acts 15:1-35

July 10, 20212

“To the Gentile believers

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.”

Acts 15:23-29

What happened after Paul and Barnabas returned

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.³ The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵ Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Acts 15

1. The “scandal” of grace is immediately challenged by the bad news of legalism
2. The early church handled this dispute the correct way: get help!
3. The new believers’ story should make us all glad
4. Legalism always hides a bigger question: the relationship between law and grace (see Galatians 3, Ephesians 2:1-10)

The first synod

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “ ‘After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’
¹⁸ that have been known for ages.

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

Acts 15

1. Peter’s argument: God’s grace has been at work, confirmed by the Holy Spirit
2. Amos, “the Burden”, closes his five visions of judgment with one of the great “remnant” promises
3. James’ argument: God’s works and God’s word are consistent, therefore we can’t exclude Gentiles whom God has included in his covenant family
4. James’ advice: Add no burden to these new believers, but remind them that “turning to God” includes a new connection to God’s people and God’s word

The letter

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

Acts 15

1. These new Gentile believers had already developed a nose for a false gospel (but see again Paul's warning in Galatians 1)
2. What “seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” was a necessity, not a suggestion
3. Why these requirements? These would encourage fellowship with Jewish believers and identify an important challenge to new believers who are “putting off” a Roman sexual ethic

What happened when the letter was delivered

³⁰ The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. ³¹ The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. ³² Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. ³³ After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

Acts 15

1. Of course they were glad!
2. The teaching (here “preach the good news”) never stops

Two ways to read this letter

- 1) This is a letter to us: Am I trusting in something other than the cross for my salvation?

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. ² I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?

Galatians 3:1-3

- 2) This is a letter from us: Is there a burden being placed on new believers today?

¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ When they finished, James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself . . . ¹⁹ It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Acts 15:12-19

Resources for further studies in Acts

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at <https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg>

Spurgeon has fewer sermons on Acts available than I would hope at

http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/index/r_ac.htm . His “Gospel Missions” sermon is at <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols1-3/chs76.pdf>

Tim Keller has said much on the topic of mission. See “5 Practices” at <https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/> and <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/gospel-culture-and-mission-an-interview-with-tim-keller/>

Kim Riddlebarger has an interesting article on Acts 15 at <https://www.kimriddlebarger.com/the-riddleblog/three-take-aways-from-the-jerusalem-council-acts-15>

J.C. Ryle has a reflection on self-examination from Acts 15 at

<https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract1.txt> and an essay on conversion in Acts: <https://www.monergism.com/conversion-j-c-rylehttps://www.onergism.com/conversion-j-c-ryle>

Deffinbaugh has a helpful introduction at <https://bible.org/seriespage/unique-contribution-book-acts> His Acts series is at <https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts> His sermon on this text is at <https://bible.org/seriespage/21-great-debates-acts-151-41>

John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)



5 Practices of a Missional Church

Tim Keller at <https://brave.is/5-practices-of-a-missional-church-tim-keller/>

In the West, for nearly a thousand years, the relationship of European Christian churches to the broader culture was a relationship known as Christendom. The institutions of society “Christianized” people and stigmatized non-Christian belief and behavior.

British missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, went to India [in 1936]. When he returned to England, some thirty years later, he discovered that the Western church now found itself in a non-Christian society, but it had not adapted to its new situation. While most traditional evangelical churches can win the temperamentally conventional and conservative to Christ, American author Michael Wolff notes that this market is shrinking. If evangelical churches settle the decline in numbers, with the remaining Christian body not becoming missional, they will decline and die. This has instituted an even greater need for “missional” churches, which adopt the following practices:

1. Speak in the vernacular

In Christendom, technical biblical terms are well known inside and outside of the church. In a missional church, however, these terms must be explained.

The missional church:

- avoids “tribal” language, stylized prayer language, and evangelical jargon that seeks to set a spiritual tone.
- avoids “we-they” language, disdainful jokes that mock people of different politics and beliefs
- avoids sentimental, pompous, “inspirational” talk
- avoids talking as if non-believers were not present

2. Enter and retell the culture's stories with the Gospel

In Christendom, it is possible to simply exhort Christianized people to do what they know they should. There is little or no real engagement, listening, or persuasion. Often, along with exhortation, there is a heavy reliance on guilt to motivate behavior change.

In a missional church, preaching and communication always assume skeptics are present and consequently engages their stories. To enter the culture's stories mean showing sympathy towards and deeply acquainting with literature, music, theatre, and other arts expressing the existing hopes, dreams, heroic narratives and fears. To *retell the culture's stories* is to show how only in Christ can we have freedom without slavery and embrace-of-the-other without injustice.

3. Theologically train laypeople for public life and vocation

In a missional church, laypeople need theological education to “think Christianly” about everything and work with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know three things: (a) which cultural practices manifest common grace and are to be embraced, (b) which practices are antithetical to the Gospel and must be rejected, and (c) which practices can be adapted/revised.

Christians will have to use the Gospel to demonstrate true, biblical love and tolerance in the public square towards those with whom we deeply differ. This tolerance should equal or exceed that which groups with opposing views show towards Christians. The charge of intolerance is perhaps the main “defeater” of the Gospel in the non-Christian West.

4. Create Christian community that is countercultural and counterintuitive

In Christendom, “fellowship” is basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support, and accountability.

In a missional church, however, Christian community must go beyond that to embody a counterculture, showing the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.

- *In sex.* We avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life-patterns are different from ours.
- *In money.* We promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak.
- *In power.* We are committed to power sharing and relationship building among races and classes that are alienated outside of the body of Christ. A missional church must be deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice and deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion.

5. Practice Christian unity as much as possible on the local level

It is very important that we do not spend time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches. That criticism simply plays into the common “defeater” that Christians are all intolerant. While we align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate with, reach out to, and support the other congregations and churches in our area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.