



Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA

GRACE ORIENTED • CHRIST CENTERED

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The Acts of the Apostles: The Spirit sends the Church with the Gospel Acts 15.1-35 The Gospel is by Grace Alone

INTRODUCTION: “*My Burden has been lifted.*”¹

How many of you remembered when the Peculiar People were here a couple of years ago? Peculiar People is a Christian Drama Troupe composed of a husband and wife team, Charlie and Ruth Jones, who have the gift of making deep theological points while being hysterically funny.

And when I started reading Acts 15 in preparation for this message, I couldn't help but think of one of the sketches they did when they were here.

In the sketch, Ruth comes out on stage, with a big smile, and says, “I'm a Christian, and my burden has been lifted.”

And then Charlie comes out, “So you're a Christian, huh. Have you been reading your Bible?”

And Ruth says, “Well, no, I don't have a Bible.”

And Charlie gives her this huge reference Bible, and says, “Well, everything you need to know is right here, in the New Oxford Scofield Dakes Ryrie Open Believers Revised Study Bible (2nd edition). Make sure you read it every day.”

And Ruth looks at the audience and says, “I'm a Christian, and my burden has been lifted.”

Then Charlie comes back out, as someone else, and says, ““So you're a Christian, huh. Have you been studying doctrine?””

And Ruth says, “Well, no, I don't know much about doctrine.”

And Charlie gives her this **huge** stack of tapes, and says, “Well, here, everything you need to know is right here, in the Swin Chuckdollar 98-tape series on Romans. Make sure you listen to all these tapes.”

And with a bigger pile in her arms, Ruth looks at the audience and says, “I'm a Christian, and my burden has been lifted.”

¹ With apologies to the Peculiar People, the introduction is poorly adapted from their sketch, “*My Burden has been lifted,*” by Charlie and Ruth Jones.

And so it goes, with Charlie piling up more and more “must do’s, must haves, and must knows” in Ruth’s arms until you can’t even see Ruth behind the pile of books, tapes, and videos in her arms. And Ruth is practically falling over from the weight, but you hear this small voice from behind all the junk in her arms, saying, “I’m a Christian, and my burden has been lifted.”

And it’s pretty funny ... except its all true.

And it’s been true for thousands of years.

And it was true back in Acts 15. There’s lots of good stuff here in Acts 15, but I’m not going to get to all of it this morning. There’s the first General Assembly and we have solid evidence for the authority of elders here.

But all of that serves the main point of the passage, which is what we’re going to focus on, which is what the people needed to know, without a doubt ... that the **Gospel is by Grace Alone**. The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, is something that is **given**, not earned.

Turn with me to Acts 15, where we see ...

v. 1-5: **DISSENSION OVER THE GOSPEL**²

After Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey, they gave the church at Antioch a missionary report of their journey back in **Acts 14:27**, “*Upon arriving in Antioch, they called the church together and reported about their trip, **telling all that God had done and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too.***”

The river of God’s grace had overflowed its banks and there was a graciousness among the early believers that attracted others to Christ. Things were going well — too well for the enemy’s taste, and the inevitable counterattack from Satan soon came. And once again, it came from within the camp.

And it came in the form of **legalism**, **Acts 15:1**, “*While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the Christians: “Unless you keep the ancient Jewish custom of circumcision taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”*”

Goodbye, grace! Goodbye, joy! These men, these legalists — often called **Judaizers** — didn’t deny salvation by grace. They simply said salvation came by “**grace plus ...**” — specifically “**grace plus circumcision.**”

These were the kind of people who were played by Charlie Jones who gives unbearable burdens to new believers. They can listen to the testimony of a new Christian and say, “Well, that’s okay, but there’s something **more** you must do

² The exposition of the text is adapted from *Preaching the Word: Acts* by R. Kent Hughes, pages 191-199 and *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 13-28* by John MacArthur, pages 59-75. Lloyd John Oglivie quote and description of the Pharisees comes from his book, *Drumbeat of Love*, pages 190-192.

before you have **real** Christianity.” Legalists simply don’t know, or have forgotten, what grace really is — God’s divine favor freely given.

This is upsetting, to say the least, and so we see, verse 2, “***Paul and Barnabas, disagreeing with them, argued forcefully and at length.***”

There was passionate argument, perhaps even some shouting. No doubt the Judaizers claimed front-office support from the church in Jerusalem, and Paul and Barnabas said they have no such support. The result was dissension and division among the believers. This was tragic, but not uncommon. It’s one of Satan’s favorite tools to disrupt the work of the church. It seemed the only solution was to send Paul and Barnabas up to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders there, picking up in verse 2, “*Finally, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. [3] The church sent the delegates to Jerusalem, and they stopped along the way in Phoenicia and Samaria to visit the believers. They told them—much to everyone’s joy—that the Gentiles, too, were being converted.*”

So the Paul and Barnabas set out for the Jerusalem. And on the way they shared what God had been doing among the Gentiles. However, when they got to Jerusalem, they found that the Judaizers there were **well entrenched**, verse 4, “*When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported on what God had been doing through their ministry. [5] But then some of the men who had been Pharisees before their conversion stood up and declared that all Gentile converts must be circumcised and be required to follow the Law of Moses.*”

Some of the Pharisees who had converted to Christ were insisting on their version of Christianity. To become a Christian, according to them, one must go through a procedure very much like becoming Jewish. The apostles were faced with a huge problem, a problem compounded by the fact that these Pharisaic Christians were not intrinsically evil. If they had worn horns, it would have been easier. They had genuinely come to know Christ, and their faith had cost them dearly. But they were also the product of their upbringing.

Lloyd John Ogilvie put it this way, “Think of the stability of the Pharisee’s training and Hebraism, his immersion in Mosaic Law and tradition, his pride in being part of the chosen people of God. Live in his shoes as we relive the steps of his rigorous education and joyous participation in Israel’s customs. Feel the loving arms of parents and family as he is circumcised on the eighth day; catch the awe and wonder he felt sitting at the feet of the elder Pharisees studying the Scripture; identify with the pride he felt when he became a son of the Law at his bar mitzvah. Become one with him as he grew to full manhood and earned the revered status of a Pharisee, and consider how he must have burst with satisfaction as he put on the

dignified robes of a leader of Israel.”

And into the Pharisees’ neat, well-ordered life came the claims of Christ, and with that an agonizing civil war within. Then came conversion — new life in Christ. Of course, they gained so much by knowing Christ, but parents, other relatives, and friends would consider them **dead**.

They lost everything because of their association with the Savior.

It was natural for some of them to find it difficult to make a clean break with their past as Pharisees. Though Christians, they could not bring themselves to give away centuries of distinctives that had set their people apart from the world. So with good intentions they thrust those distinctives and traditions onto others.

If Jesus was the Hebrew Messiah, anyone wanting his salvation would have to become Hebrew first! How else could he know the full meaning and purpose of God? They weren’t bad people at this point. But given time, their views, tightly held, would pull them so far away from the doctrine of grace that they would become apostate. We all are influenced by our backgrounds. Each of us has experienced some doctrinal or practical distortion because of past experience or environment. The challenge is to identify those points of error or **mis**-emphasis before we drift too far from Christ.

Nevertheless, the future of the church of Christ and the doctrine of salvation were at stake. History and experience have proven that **anything** made a requirement along with faith soon shoves faith aside and becomes the means of salvation. If the apostles had capitulated, there would soon have been a “Christian” doctrine of “salvation by circumcision” and “The First Church of the Circumcision.” Similarly, today we must withstand false doctrines that add to salvation by grace alone. We don’t need grace-plus-baptism, grace-plus-gifts, grace-plus-knowledge, grace-plus-experiences. The Scriptures are clear, **Ephesians 2:8-9**, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* (ESV) The New Living translates verse 9, *“Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”*

The list of Christian groups, churches, fellowships that have gone bad due to legalism is as old as the church. Christ-plus salvation is the oldest and most destructive heresy. Most ministries start out well, with good leadership, and sound doctrine. But then someone gets a “special word from the Lord” ... and says that everyone else has to follow it. It’s the problem of “continuing revelation,” some new word from God that comes from outside the Scriptures. They get some “continuing revelation,” some special spiritual understanding that went beyond the clear meaning of Scripture.

And that new revelation can cover how men and women should dress, act,

speak, or socialize. It can tell us that we should or should not be involved in this ministry or that church. It can tell us how to live, where to go, what to do, who to know, when to move, and the why is always “Because **God** told me.”

And “continuing revelation” is simply **adding** to the Scriptures.

Be clear on this – in the Presbyterian Church in America **we do NOT accept** “continuing revelation.” You can’t tell anyone to do anything if you can’t open the Bible and point to it. And neither can I.

I have a saying on my bulletin board behind my desk that says, “As a preacher and teacher I want to be as clear as the Bible is clear, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Therefore I am required to believe, to preach, and to teach what the Bible says is true, not what I want the Bible to say is true.”

When we accept continuing revelation, when we accept Christ-plus-works salvation, when we accept legalistic thinking, then the good news of Christ is reduced to a list of do’s and don’ts.

And we wind up following **rules** instead of following Jesus.

Theologically, the truth of the gospel was at stake in Jerusalem. And relationally the stakes were just as high. A wrong decision in Jerusalem and the grace open to all, even Gentiles, would be replaced by a jaded superiority carried around by a new version of Christian Pharisees.

Providentially, the Jerusalem Council followed Christ, and in so doing they gave us a basis upon which to build grace into our theology and our relationships.

Let’s see what they said, turn to ...

v. 6-18: **DISCUSSION ABOUT THE GOSPEL**

By the time we get to verses 6-7 the Council has convened, “*So the apostles and church elders got together to decide this question.*”

And there has been much debate, the text says, “*At the meeting, **after a long discussion**, Peter stood and addressed them as follows...*”

No doubt some had already said things for which they were sorry. Perhaps there were times of chaos before Peter rose to speak. Knowing Peter, he probably couldn’t sit still any longer. And so, Peter, the leading Apostle, stands up and takes the floor. First, he recalled his experience with the Gentiles, “*Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. [8] God, who knows people’s hearts, confirmed that He accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He gave him to us. [9] **He made no distinction between us and them, for He also cleansed their hearts through faith.***”

He was referring to his ministry years earlier in seeing the Gentile Cornelius and his entire house receive Christ and the Holy Spirit through faith. The conclusion? “*[God] **made no distinction between us and them.***”

Then came Peter's stunning pronouncement, verse 10, "*Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?*"

Peter affirmed his bewilderment as to why the Judaizers would saddle anyone with the Law. They themselves couldn't bear it, so why heap it upon others? Peter warns the Judaizers not to be questioning God. It was not their place to challenge or question the Gospel of God's Grace. He pointed out the folly of placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither their fathers nor they had been able to bear. The description of the law as a heavy yoke was an apt one. Describing the legalism of the Pharisees, Jesus said in **Matthew 23:4**, "*They crush you with impossible religious demands and never lift a finger to help ease the burden.*" It was foolish of the legalists to expect Gentiles to shoulder a burden they themselves found too heavy to bear and rejoiced to be freed from.

It was equally wrong to impose on the Gentiles what had **not worked** for the Jews. Not one of Peter's Jewish listeners had been saved by the law, cleansed from their sins by the law, or received the Holy Spirit by keeping the law. Since keeping the law could not do any of those vital things for them, why require it of the Gentiles? God had given them the Law as a schoolmaster **to lead them to Christ** by demonstrating at every turn they were sinners in need of mercy.

Galatians 3:23-25, "*Until faith in Christ was shown to us as the way of becoming right with God, we were guarded by the law. We were kept in protective custody, so to speak, until we could put our faith in the coming Savior. [24] Let me put it another way. The law was our guardian and teacher to lead us until Christ came. So now, through faith in Christ, we are made right with God. [25] But now that faith in Christ has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian.*"

And similarly, look at **Romans 3:19-20**, "*Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to bring the entire world into judgment before God. [20] For no one can ever be made right in God's sight by doing what His law commands. For the more we know God's law, the clearer it becomes that we aren't obeying it.*"

They broke the greatest commandment to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and their neighbor as themselves ... daily.

The conclusion of this talk? By Grace alone! Look at verse 11, "***We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the [grace] of the Lord Jesus.***"

Every person — the Ph.D. and the least-taught child — comes into God's family the same way — solely by the undeserved kindness of a forgiving God!

With the conclusion of Peter's speech a turning point came, evidenced in Acts 15:12 by the multitude's silence. During that silence, Barnabas and Paul seized the moment and verified what Peter said, verse 12, "*There was no further*

discussion, and everyone listened as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas recited all of the miracles of their first missionary trip, and the Council was awestruck. It says, *“There was no further discussion, and everyone listened...”* We learn when we listen. I’m convinced that the ability to truly listen is one of the greatest skills you need for ministry, or for virtually any career field, for that matter.

After some time Barnabas and Paul finished, and James stood up.

If there had been silence before, there was absolute silence now, for James was the Lord’s earthly half-brother. After the Resurrection Jesus had visited him personally (1 Corinthians 15:7). Called “James the Just” because of his piety, he lived a simple, devout life. In discussion with others, he was considered conscientious and careful. When he died, his knees were allegedly callused like those of a camel because of his many hours of prayer. He was a pillar of the church, right up there with Peter and John, who were both Apostles. And the Apostle Paul said as much in **Galatians 2:9**, *“In fact, **James, Peter, and John, who were known** as pillars of the church, recognized the gift God had given me, and they accepted Barnabas and me as their co-workers. They encouraged us to keep preaching to the Gentiles, while they continued their work with the Jews.”*

Church history calls James the first bishop of Jerusalem and he’s the moderator of the assembly now considering an all-important dispute. The hopes of the legalists went up as James stood to speak. Surely he would set Peter and Paul right. They were surprised at his response, for first James showed how the conversion of Gentiles was in accord with the Old Testament Scriptures, verses 13-18, *“When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me. [14] Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for Himself. [15] And this conversion of Gentiles agrees with what the prophets predicted. For instance, it is written: [16] ‘Afterward I will return, and I will restore the fallen kingdom of David. From the ruins I will rebuild it, and I will restore it, [17] so that the rest of humanity might find the Lord, including the Gentiles — all those I have called to be mine. This is what the Lord says, [18] He who made these things known long ago.’”*

Through this combination of passages taken largely from Amos 9, James was saying that according to the Old Testament prophets God’s people would consist of not two groups, but one group, Jews and Gentiles together.

James says, verse 16, *“I will restore the fallen kingdom of David,”* the Jews, so that, verse 17, *“the rest of humanity might find the Lord, including the Gentiles — all those I have called to be mine.”*

All would share the messianic blessings without having to first become

Jews, because everything that was happening was just as **the Scriptures** said.

And thus, James renders a ...

v. 19-29: DECISION FOR JUST THE GOSPEL

Here comes James, verse 19, *“And so my judgment is that we should stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, [20] except that we should write to them and tell them to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, from sexual immorality, and from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals.”*

James has advice for both groups. To the pharisaical Jewish believers he said, “Lay off these new Gentile Christians — do not trouble them with burdens they can’t keep any better than you.”

But James was equally concerned that the Gentile believers not trouble the Jewish believers, and so to the Gentile believers, he gave three restrictions:

First, Stay away from anything that has to do with idols. There was to be no idolatry because there is only one true God, and only He is to be worshiped.

Second, avoid sexual immorality. Sexual immorality, fornication, and adultery were forbidden in all cases because immorality was at that time rampant amongst unbelievers, and for the most part, defined the Gentiles.

Third, do not eat meat that has been strangled or has blood in it.

Why this third restriction? It sort of sounds like grace-plus religion?

But James explains why in the next verse, verse 21, *“For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.”* In other words, Jewish communities existed in nearly every city, and the Gentile converts were not to do anything that would offend the Jewish believers’ conscience.

James gives us two principles for grace-filled living.

First Principle: As those under grace we are not to make non-Biblical requirements of others — specifically, those that come from our own cultural traditions. In that day this meant not imposing a Jewish lifestyle on Gentiles. Today this means we’re not to impose areas our lifestyle that are not spelled out in Scripture on others if they are to be “good” Christians — for example, how we dress, how we run our church, the standards of living we think are best, personal tastes, musical preferences (including in a worship service), and so on. If we thrust any of these on others as necessary to a life of grace, we repeat the sin of the Judaizers! And we **love** legalism! We have a sinful desire to want to be **right!**

We so easily push our preferences on others. We assume they’ll either do things our way or they’re unspiritual. Way too often we put others through the paces of our own heritage, our own traditions, our own preferences before we fully accept them as brothers and sisters.

Sometimes a church communicates **this** more than the gospel!

One of the reasons (though not the only one) we're not to do this is because of what it does to us. Somehow others are never quite right. There's always something more that's needed for them to measure up. Such an attitude is not only bad for us — it's deadly to the church. Dr. Howard Hendricks, a godly man who taught ministry for years at Dallas Seminary, has remarked that he grew up in a legalistic home where the use of fingernail polish was enough to condemn one to Hell. He said, "I repudiated legalism intellectually and theologically in 1946, but in 1982 I am still wrestling with it emotionally." Extra-Biblical requirements take their **toll** on people. Perhaps even more serious, they block the proclamation of God's grace (God's free and undeserved divine favor) to a dying world.

Second Principle: As those under grace, we gladly restrict our own freedom for the sake of others. There wasn't anything intrinsically wrong with eating a rare steak, but James said to make sure it's cooked through for the sake of fellowship with the Jews. Their conscience, still in submission to the Law, won't allow them to eat meat that still had blood in it. And even though you're free from that law, why bother their conscience, why offend them if it's not necessary.

The Apostle Paul states the principle in **1 Corinthians 9:19-21**, "*For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. [20] To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. **To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.** [21] To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.*" (ESV)

Obviously, this problem of using our freedom to offend others was an issue in the Corinthian church because Paul addresses it again in **1 Corinthians 10:27-33**, "*... Eat whatever is offered to you and don't ask any questions about it. Your conscience should not be bothered by this. [28] But suppose someone warns you that this meat has been offered to an idol. **Don't eat it, out of consideration for the conscience of the one who told you.** [29] It might not be a matter of conscience for you, but it is for the other person. Now, why should my freedom be limited by what someone else thinks? [30] If I can thank God for the food and enjoy it, why should I be condemned for eating it? [31] Whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, you must do all for the glory of God. [32] **Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God.** [33] That is the plan I follow, too. I try to please everyone in everything I do. **I don't just do what I like or what is best for me, but what is best for them so they may be saved.**"*

James's magnificent pronouncement here in Acts 15 carried the day! Salvation is by grace alone! We pick up the story in verse 22, "*Then the apostles and elders and the whole church in Jerusalem chose delegates, and they sent them*

to Antioch of Syria with Paul and Barnabas to report on this decision. The men chosen were two of the church leaders—Judas (also called Barsabbas) and Silas. [23] This is the letter they took along with them: "This letter is from the apostles and elders, your brothers in Jerusalem. It is written to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! [24] "We understand that some men from here have troubled you and upset you with their teaching, but they had no such instructions from us. [25] So it seemed good to us, having unanimously agreed on our decision, to send you these official representatives, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, [26] who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. [27] So we are sending Judas and Silas to tell you what we have decided concerning your question. [28] "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: [29] You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell.""

The letter's conclusion was almost word for word as suggested by James.

The Council's proclamation is one of the most courageous documents in Church history because its authors declared the truth even though they knew it was going to antagonize the Jewish establishment. From this time on, Christian work in Jerusalem became **very difficult**. While still trying to carry on a ministry to the Jewish people, the apostles heroically refused to do anything to slow the progress of the gospel among the Gentiles. They were incredibly brave men!

At various times in its history, the church's leaders have met together to settle doctrinal issues. For example, historians recognize seven ecumenical councils in the first several centuries of the church's existence. Of those, the two most significant were the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. At those councils, false teaching about the person and nature of our Lord was condemned, and the biblical position carefully defined.

As important as those councils were, the Jerusalem Council, described here in Acts 15, was the first and the most significant of all. For it fixed the most momentous doctrinal question of all – What must a person do to be saved?

The apostles and elders successfully resisted the pressure to impose Jewish legalism on the Gentile believers. In other words, they denied the inclusion of works as a part of salvation. They affirmed for all time the truth that salvation is wholly by God's grace through faith alone, apart from any human efforts.

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone.

And then they left to once again to ...

v. 30-35: DELIVER THE GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL

Starting at verse 20, "*The four messengers went at once to Antioch, where they called a general meeting of the Christians and delivered the letter. [31] And*

there was great joy throughout the church that day as they read this encouraging message. [32] Then Judas and Silas, both being prophets, spoke extensively to the Christians, encouraging and strengthening their faith. [33] They stayed for a while, and then Judas and Silas were sent back to Jerusalem, with the blessings of the Christians, to those who had sent them. [34] [35] Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to assist many others who were teaching and preaching the word of the Lord there.”

Having been sent with the blessings of the Jerusalem church, the messengers went to Antioch. There, they delivered the letter. The entire congregation, which had been anxiously awaiting the news of whether their salvation was genuine, gathered to hear the apostles’ decision.

The reading of the letter evoked four responses from the assembled believers. First: **they rejoiced**. The confirmation that salvation was indeed by grace alone lifted a tremendous burden of worry from their shoulders.

Second was **encouragement**. They no longer needed to fear that their salvation was not genuine. Legalism produces fear, guilt, and pride, while grace alone brings comfort and hope.

Why were they encouraged? The letter imposed some dietary restrictions. Why were they happy about that? Because news that may not sound good ... sounds great if seen from a different perspective. For the believers in Antioch, a few minor restrictions in order to maintain fellowship with their Jewish brothers was nothing compared to the whole burden of the Law. Compared with what the Jerusalem Council could have said, the final recommendation was a great relief.

Third was **strength**, as Judas and Silas, *“spoke extensively to the Christians, encouraging and strengthening their faith.”* Legalism produces neither strength nor encouragement; it is Grace that does that, **Acts 20:32**, *“And now I entrust you to God **and the word of His grace**—His message that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those He has set apart for himself.”*

Fourth is **perseverance**. Verse 34 is not in the best manuscripts, but verse 35 notes that *“Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch to assist many others who were teaching and preaching the word of the Lord there.”*

They picked up where they had left off teaching and preaching the word of the Lord. They made it clear that salvation is by grace alone.

The apostolic church thus survived the greatest challenge it had faced so far and established the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Satan’s attempt to inject heretical teaching was thwarted. So was his attempt to split the church along racial and cultural lines. With the truth about salvation safeguarded, the church experienced greater days of ministry than ever before.

What does this mean to us today?

First, we must preach “By Grace Alone.” Second, like James, we must tolerate nothing more, nothing less, nothing else!

CONCLUSION: *Christ Plus Nothing* ³

Remember Ruth Jones, falling over from the weight of all the junk in her arms, saying, “I’m a Christian, and my burden has been lifted.”

It **is** funny. And it’s all true.

Those of us in “Professional Ministry” love to pile up our people with more stuff to do, more stuff to have, and more stuff to know.

And we’re good at it.

And it’s **all good stuff**.

Especially Reformed people, because we think we **know** more of it than anyone else, and we certainly **have** more of it than everyone else.

But what happens when we keep piling people up with good stuff.

Something gets lost ... grace.

And something gets added ... legalism.

One by one, we add more spiritual activities to our lives. Each are good. Some are vital. Yet without realizing it, we allow a dangerous shift to take place in our minds and hearts. You see, what God had intended to be a means of experiencing grace, we have changed into a means of earning grace.

Instead of an expression of confidence in God’s work in our lives, our spiritual activities have become a frenetic race to maintain our own standing before God. And when we can’t keep up with it all, which is just a matter of time, we become hesitant to approach God, hesitant to pray to God, hesitant to worship God.

Why?

Because our confidence is no longer in the Gospel, what God has done for us; our confidence is in our own performance, which hasn’t been so great lately.

Do you see the danger here?

It’s a Christ-plus-nothing religion.

But when it becomes Christ-plus-my good works religion, it’s just a matter of time until my works dominate and Christ gets pushed aside and relegated to a back burner. Legalism is nothing more than **man-centered self-worship**. If I can get some of the credit for my own salvation, if I **earn** it, than **I get the glory**, I get the praise. It’s arrogantly telling Christ that the cross **wasn’t enough**, You need my works. And at its root, legalism is nothing more than **idolatry**.

Now, in case you're wondering, breaking free from legalism doesn't mean you stop reading your Bible, praying, or sharing the gospel. If you and I want to

³ The conclusion is adapted from “*Breaking the Rules of Legalism*,” chapter three in The Cross Centered Life by C. J. Mahaney, pages 24-35, which can also be found at www.antithesis.com

grow in our faith, we need to take advantage of the means God gives us in these important spiritual pursuits. The issue is our motive and our understanding of what it means to be saved by grace.

Remember what happened the day you first repented of your sins and trusted in Jesus Christ? **Romans 3:26**, which we just read at the beginning of our service, says that, in that moment, you were **justified**, or declared righteous before God.

That word is important. It refers to your status before God. When you put your faith in Jesus, God, the judge, hands down the verdict that you are righteous.

He transfers the perfect, sinless record of Jesus **to you** ... justified

This is amazing grace at its most amazing. In the moment that you first believed, your past sin didn't cease to exist. You hadn't done any good work that could somehow make up for your disobedience. Yet God **completely and totally forgave you**. He not only wiped the record of your sin away, He credited the righteousness of His Son to you. That's grace. That's the Gospel.

Remember **Acts 13:38-39**, *“Brothers, listen! In this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in Him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God—something the Jewish law could never do.”*

Because it's all of **Grace** from beginning to end, and it's all of Grace because it's all of Christ.

And all who believe said, “Amen.”