

From the beginning of the church in Antioch there had been uncircumcised Gentiles together with circumcised Jewish believers. What once distinguished them, their Greekness or their Jewishness, no longer was a source of contention or devaluation, but rather was another sign of God’s great grace. If one did not conscientiously eat pork and another, according to his freedom, did, it was not an issue of salvation, of godliness, or of exclusion, but rather was a matter of conscience.

In a similar way, it may be a bit like a man who believes that there is freedom in the gospel to tattoo one’s body and a man who believes that tattoos mar God’s creation. Yet, in the gospel, they each accept one another in Christ, knowing that their salvation is not contingent upon one’s skin pierced by inked needle, but solely upon the hands of Christ pierced by bloody nail. In Christ there is conscientious freedom when it comes to such things.

For the believers in Antioch, this question of the necessity of Gentiles following the clean laws given to the nation of Israel during their Exodus wandering was the issue. The Gentiles remained uncircumcised and not following the customs which distinguished Jews from non-Jews, and there were some Jews who had become followers of Jesus who were claiming that a person, even though believing in Jesus as the Messiah, MUST follow these in order to be saved at all.

Yet, it must be noted, that at the beginning of the Antioch church this was not an issue. Following the story of the uncircumcised centurion Cornelius placing his faith in Jesus and receiving, palpably, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the believers in both Jerusalem and Antioch recognized that they were included into Christ's work by faith in Him alone, and not by circumcision or by adhering to any works of Law. Therefore, when the gospel took root in Antioch, among the mixture of formerly distinguished peoples now united as one in Christ, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate, and he found that the Holy Spirit was indeed at work among them, so he encouraged them and compelled none of them to be circumcised.

This connection between the largely Gentile Antioch church and the largely Jewish Jerusalem church continued to be close following Barnabas' visit.

Prophets came down to visit and encourage them from Jerusalem, and when one of them, Agabus, prophesied about a coming famine, the Antioch church volunteered to send a financial gift to the poorer believers in Judea without provocation.

However, at the time of Acts 15, following Paul and Barnabas' first journey through Asia Minor and Cyprus to proclaim the gospel, the increase of Gentile believers became a threat to the self-interested distinction of some Jewish believers of Judea. Luke calls them "certain men from Judea", indicating that they were a subset of Jewish Christians, not representing all. We learn from

verse 5 that they were most likely connected to those who were of the Pharisees who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

Their own consciences, however, were not the problem. The problem, we are told, is that they were teaching. Not only did they believe such things, but they had set up shop to teach the Gentiles what Paul would later refer to as “a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all.” So, the presence of circumcised believers was not the issue. It was the teaching that the Gentiles must also become culturally Jewish through circumcision and the distinctive cleanliness laws *in order to be saved at all*.

Now, this teaching was taking place in the church, to “the brothers” Luke explains. This indicates that this young church, mere years after the resurrection of Jesus, was still having to define, defend, and delineate the gospel, because people were trying to pervert it from within their own churches.

The attempt to pervert the gospel of Christ Jesus into self-righteousness is not a new thing, or even something that happened hundreds of years after the apostles were dead. It was happening immediately, and just like in Lystra, where some Gentiles tried to combine the gospel with their own dearly-held customs and values, some Jewish people did the same. And in both cases it was an abomination that rankled Paul and Barnabas to take a stand and not give in to such diversions a single inch.

So, what was the teaching that these certain Judeans were teaching? It was that a person's salvation, his or her acceptance with God, was conditional upon their adherence to a custom or a law. This was being stated so strongly that even within one conditional statement it is emphasized no less than three times. "Unless" – that clearly indicates a condition by which one must follow. "You are not able" – that indicates the incapability of salvation. That is, it is not possible without meeting the conditions. And finally, "be saved." This clinches the severity of the teaching. Without meeting the conditions, which were added to faith in Jesus, they were teaching that the Gentiles were not saved at all.

Therefore, the false gospel they were teaching was not primarily concerning issues of post-conversion behavior, but rather of what constitutes true conversion in the first place.

So, why was circumcision, "according to the law of Moses", so important to these men? Though circumcision is embodied in the Mosaic law, it was first given to Abraham as a sign of God's covenant with him, indicating His promise to give Abraham many descendants and a land to call their own in which God would dwell with His people. Circumcision was the sign which would remind the following generations of the faithful that God had made such a covenant and would fulfill it. To reject circumcision, to a Jew, was to reject the significance of the covenant and thus to place oneself outside of

needing the promise of God. What these men failed to realize, however, is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham. Paul calls Jesus the “seed of Abraham” to whom the promise was made and who receives the promise fully. Jesus is the means by which God dwells with His people, and the Church is the new land, that place and community whereby righteousness dwells through the Holy Spirit of God poured out upon those who believe.

Circumcision, however, rather than becoming a sign of the covenant, had become a litmus test, a proof of one’s own righteousness and faithfulness and a means of obtaining a position in the promise of God, rather than a symbol of the promise of God’s righteousness and faithfulness to His promise to be received by faith alone. This is the argument that Paul makes to the Galatian churches, when he says that “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” And this crediting of righteousness, or being accounted as righteous before God, was received only by faith before he had ever even been circumcised. Thus, righteousness, that is being counted acceptable to God, comes through faith in God’s promise and not through the works of the law, no matter how important those works may be. That was true for Abraham, and it is true for us. Circumcision is not a bad sign, but it’s a sign, not a righteousness. To use the sign or the law as a righteousness itself, by which one makes himself acceptable to God makes Jesus unnecessary. As Paul tells the Galatians again, “If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly.” (Gal 2:21)

This self-righteous distortion redefined circumcision as the price of entrance into the covenant, and obedience to the law of Moses to the price of maintaining one's standing as acceptable to God. Thus, not only did you have to perform to get in, you had to perform to stay in. So, these teachers are telling these Gentiles who have entrusted themselves to Jesus as their righteousness, that they have to obey all the cleanliness laws in order to stay in God's good favor to be saved in the final day.

What was this law of Moses? Well, first of all, God takes His moral law very seriously, which is the universal declarations of what God revealed to be His will for all of humanity and which Jesus summed up as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." There are laws revealed by God to which Christians are still to strive, though even these not as a means of salvation. Rather, they reveal what God loves and what humans were made to be and do in order to flourish in His image.

Yet, these "clean laws" or "ceremonial laws", were things pertaining to food and dress and customs which the law of Moses, as directed by God, set up to externally distinguish the nation of Israel from the pagan and idolatrous nations around her. They were laws which Abraham never even knew and which chronologically followed God's declaration to him that he was righteous *by faith alone*. Also, under these "clean laws" the Gentiles as a

whole were “unclean” and “unfit” unless they were circumcised and adopted these laws for daily living. Before the Christ was sent, if a Gentile wanted to worship the Lord, he or she had to become culturally Jewish in food, dress, and customs.

These clean laws had two primary purposes for the nation of Israel coming out of the Exodus:

First, it served to keep the Jews a culturally distinct group and from being assimilated into the large, idol-worshipping cultures around them. This was the *cultural* purpose of these laws – to make it hard for them to form deep and meaningful partnerships, like marriage, with those who did not love the Lord. Thus, these rules were boundary markers that distinguished them both ethnically and culturally and protected them from their own sinful inclinations. This is why Paul comments to the Romans that what the Law could not do (save us), because it was weakened by our sinful inclinations, God did by sending His Son to die in our place. (Romans 8:3)

Secondly, the clean laws served to demonstrate that God is a holy God, and we can only come into his presence if we are cleansed of our impurities. This was the didactic, or teaching, purpose of the laws – to teach us we are not naturally clean or acceptable in God’s holy sight, but must be cleaned by God. Hence the rituals to clean one who had failed one of these laws via sacrifice or washings.

What is intriguing here in Antioch, however, is that the idea that God “had granted the Gentiles repentance which leads to life” (Acts 11:18), without having been circumcised or required to follow the law of Moses, seems to have been settled by Peter’s reflection on the Cornelius incident from Acts 11. In fact, right after the incident, people in Jerusalem were appalled that Peter went in to eat with an uncircumcised Gentile *as a fellow brother*. Peter then recalled to them that the uncircumcised Gentiles “received the Holy Spirit *just as we did*. So, who am I to stand in God’s way?” So, you can see that Peter understood that the sign of God’s new covenant was not circumcision at all, nor adherence to the Mosaic clean laws, but the sign and seal of the Holy Spirit who bears the fruit of repentance in the heart, not the external constraints of a law. A law can restrain a wicked heart, but it cannot change it. Only the Holy Spirit can change one’s inclinations so that he wants to obey and walk in love for God and for one another.

And this explanation seemed acceptable by the majority of the Church, both in Jerusalem and elsewhere, that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish at all, but simply were united to Christ by faith alone. It was this union to Christ alone which made them acceptable, and this was evidenced by God’s new sign of such a covenant, the gift of His Holy Spirit. Yet, there were clearly some who did not agree with such an obvious conclusion and went on teaching otherwise, indifferent to Peter’s questioning if he could stand in God’s way, these men apparently thought that they could. Some still do.

Interestingly, what we have here is precisely the same thing that Protestant Reformers of the 15th-16th century recognized so clearly in the Roman Catholic teaching and thus focused so intently on what became known as the five solae. Any teaching which adds our merit, or the merit of another, to the work of Christ, whether biblical or not, alters the gospel into something which is impotent and dangerous.

This was a question of grace *alone*. These men weren't arguing that we could be saved apart from God's grace. And the Catholic church still agrees with this. Yet, they were saying that you need grace and merit. You need grace and clean laws, grace and circumcision, grace and penance, grace and "hail Mary's", grace and avoiding tattoos, grace and proper clothes, grace and a second blessing, etc.

They also, then, denied that we are saved by faith alone. These men weren't arguing that we could be saved apart from faith. And the Catholic church still agrees with this. Yet, they were saying that you need faith and works in order to be justified, or declared acceptable to God, or faith and penance, or faith and Bible reading, or faith and pure thoughts and perfect intentions., etc.

This distinction was so imperative to see, so monstrously opposed to the gospel, that Paul and Barnabas caused a great "dissension". Literally, they caused a "standing". They unswervingly stood up to and against these men; they would not compromise; they would not seek unity for the sake of unity

on the issue of the nature of the gospel and the means of salvation by God's grace ALONE through faith ALONE in Christ Jesus ALONE, because it robbed God of His glory and men of their souls.

So in this debate, and there was a debate, a seeking of the truth together, Paul and Barnabas would not even give an inch "so that the truth of the gospel might remain among you" (Gal 2:5) he told the Galatian churches. There is something here to be said about contention in the church here. There are surely matters which are inconsequential to which we ought to look to compromise and to extend gracious tolerance of one another, as Paul explains about eating meat from the pagan markets to the Corinthians. However, there are, we learn, some doctrines, the word doctrine just means "teaching", which are so central to the faith that to compromise on them is to lose the faith itself and pervert it into something which is not merely untrue, but is catastrophically destructive rather than salvific. That we are justified by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is one of these central doctrines, and upon which the Reformers' lives were staked. On this there can be no compromise without losing the entire gospel.

Yet, even with such severe consequences, Paul and Barnabas debated first. They "were seeking" first. They contended through words without giving an inch. It will get more severe as we move forward, but it began with strong and stubborn debate together. They didn't jump to excommunication or calls

of heresy (though they did end there, I believe). They were quick to listen and slow to condemn, yet they would not compromise. There is something to be learned here about the process of disagreement within the Church.

Orthodoxy is slow and stubborn if it is to remain true in both content of the faith and the character of love constituent to it.

And it is very difficult to overstate the significance of this moment in the life of the church!

If Paul and Barnabas had given in to this teaching, then the Church would look very different. It would have been culturally monolithic in its expressions, its forms, and its approbations. That is, it would have looked just like Judaism, maintaining the rituals and forms within it, so that any Gentile who believed in Jesus would have to become Jewish, both culturally and practically, so that there would be no observable diversity within it and the freedom of the gospel of grace would have become like every other religion dependent upon one's moral perfection rather than the gift of God.

If the Church had split over this issue, it would have split into two distinct "gospels", one of which wasn't the gospel at all, and Christ would have become needless.

Thus, we should read this passage with great fear and with great gratitude because of what was at stake. God protected you and me on that day when

Paul and Barnabas and the church at Antioch said “no!” so that the truth of the gospel of God’s great grace would remain.

Now, consider for a moment how subtly the gospel can be undermined from within the Christian community:

This moment shows us that falsehood does not usually come from full-bore legalists who flatly reject Christ. They were not saying, “You don’t need Jesus. If you are a good person, you will go to heaven anyway.” It is highly unlikely the brothers would have been duped by such a blatant contradiction of the gospel message that saved them. Instead, these teachers were saying, “Jesus was critical and crucial to getting you saved, of course, but faith in him alone is not enough to grow you into full acceptance with God. You will now have to adopt the full range of Mosaic ceremonial and cultural customs in order to be fully saved.”

This is much more subtle, and it is the same subtle lie which the Roman Catholic heresy has been telling and which the Reformers rejected as anti-gospel. It is saying, “You were related to God by grace, but now you have to grow in him by trying very, very hard to obey all these particular rules and do all these particular penances and performing all these rituals well enough. Jesus wipes your slate clean, but whatever sins you write upon it from now on you will need to deal with through receiving the sacraments and in

purgatory.” We, like the apostles here, must take our stand, seek the truth, but not give an inch to such teaching for it is anti-gospel.

In the same way, spirit-deadening moralism does not grow in our churches by blatant, overt denials of the doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus. It is much more likely to be undermined in new forms of demanding cultural conformity or other approaches just as subtle as these Judeans who sounded morally upright with laws that were in the Bible, but were administered outside their proper sphere, making Jesus not a Savior, but a mere helper, not one who raises the dead affections of incapable souls to life, but one who merely assists the tired, but capable, souls. It is always the “sola”, the “alone” which is denied.

But at this point in the life of the church, in Acts 15, this question of how Gentiles are brought into the church, wasn’t clearly and staunchly settled. In fact, the Church looked so Jewish that the Roman leader Gallio, whom arrested Paul (as recorded in Acts 18), assumed that the Christian and Jewish distinction was merely a matter of differing opinions under the same umbrella of Judaism.

However, as more and more Gentiles with pagan backgrounds were converted to Christ Jesus, the “look” and “distinction” of this Messianic group looked less and less “Jewish” and more and more different than both Judaism in its

rituals and cultural distinctions and Paganism with its polytheism, sexual immorality, and its disdain for the physical.

By the second century Christianity is distinguishable from Judaism and Paganism as a distinctly different thing. Pliny the Younger writes around 111AD to Emperor Trajan expressing his concern about this spreading faith,

“For the matter seemed to me well worth referring to you – especially considering the numbers endangered. Persons of all ranks and ages, and of both sexes are, and will be, involved in the prosecution. For this contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts.”

Because the Jewish faith was so tightly tied to the national state of Israel (to be ethnically Jewish was to be religiously Jewish), the Greco-Roman empire had great tolerance for Judaism. However, they treated Christians distinctively different, showing that by 100AD at the latest, Christianity was not viewed as a part of Judaism at all, but as distinctly different and affecting all classes and types of people (all ranks and ages, both sexes, etc.) as a “contagious superstition.”

Judaism never received such an offensive epithet as a ‘contagious superstition’, showing that both Judaism and Paganism distinguished Christianity as something entirely different.

However, here in Acts 15, this distinction is unclear: Must Gentiles become Jewish in order to belong to and follow Christ Jesus? Would these Gentiles just alter the gospel to become pagan?

Paul and Barnabas stood up to this question with a resounding “NO!” while the “certain men from Judea” stood up to them with a resounding “YES!”

Hence, there was sharp division in the early church life that needed to be settled and distinguished as what was true.

All of this leads us to the question: what is, then, the Christian’s relationship to good works?

First, the New Testament is clear that the gospel leads to “cultural freedom.”

Almost always, moralism presses its members to adopt *very specific* rules and regulations for dress, for diet, and for daily behavior. Why is this? Well, if your salvation depends upon obeying the rules, then you want your rules very specific, do-able and clear. You don’t want, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” an impossibly high standard that has endless implications which make you die to your own honor every day! Rather, you want, “Don’t go to movies” or “Don’t drink alcohol” or “Don’t eat pork.” Something attainable and measurable, and which makes it easier not to fall *completely* on God’s mercies alone.

But cultural and unnecessary rules and regulations like this always make their way into the areas of daily cultural life from inside the Trojan horse of good

morals. If the false teachers had had their way, an Italian or African could not become a Christian without becoming culturally Jewish. Christians would have to form little cultural ghettos in every city to remain pure and maintain their salvation. It would have meant far too much emphasis on external cultural separation rather than on internal distinctiveness of spirit, motives, hope and perspective. Elevating cultural propriety to the level of spiritual virtue would lead Christians to a slavish emphasis on being culturally “nice” and “proper,” but also insipidly to grossly intolerant and prejudiced attitudes towards others who were not living in a such culturally external way.

Secondly, the gospel leads to “soulish” freedom. Anyone who believes that our relationship with God is based on keeping up moral behavior is on an endless treadmill of guilt and insecurity. This is why, when Martin Luther became a monk, seeking to find peace with the Holy God, the more He discovered about God’s law and saw his own sinfulness, the more he was terrified! In fact, he wrote that he hated God and he hated the righteousness of this God. The treadmill just became faster and faster the “closer” he got to God as priest. But when the Lord opened his eyes to Romans 1:17, “the righteous shall live by faith”, he later reflected, “the doors of Paradise opened to me.” The treadmill stopped at the foot of the cross of Christ, where God’s grace ALONE was received by faith ALONE upon the works and merits of Christ ALONE...and Luther was off the treadmill and was free!

As we know from Paul's letters, he did not free Gentile believers from the moral imperative of the Ten Commandments. Christians could not lie, steal, commit adultery, and so on. But though not free from the content of the moral law, Christians are free from the law *as a system of salvation*. We obey not in the fear and insecurity of hoping to earn our salvation, but in the freedom and security of knowing we are already saved in Christ. We obey in the freedom of gratitude. Moralism says, "I believe and obey, therefore I am accepted." But the gospel makes us say, "I am accepted by faith alone, therefore I obey." So both the false teachers and Paul told Christians to obey the Ten Commandments, but for totally different reasons and motives. And unless your motive for obeying God's law is the grace-gratitude motive of the gospel, you are in slavery and are robbed of your joy in obeying it.

In fact, joylessness with God is a sure sign of self-righteousness somewhere. Thus Paul asks the Galatians who had fallen prey to such moralism, "What has happened to the sense of joy which you had?" When we turn again to the law as our means of making God accept us, we lose the joy of our redemption, the gratitude for our Savior Jesus, and our expectation of God's goodness towards us as His beloved. We are terrified of His righteousness, not grateful for His grace in providing it for us in Christ. Luther's life is a terrific example of this. He was dour, severe, and terrified before the gospel, and later he was joyful, celebratory, and even raucous in the grace of God.

So the gospel provides enormous freedom, both in our cultural-societal relationships and in our interior affectional-emotional life. The “other gospel” of moralism destroys both.

This is why Paul and Barnabas stood so strongly opposed to these teachers. It is a matter of God’s glory through extending us salvation according to His grace alone and not because we have earned it.

In fact, later in the chapter, when Peter addresses the church, he notes particularly that “We Jewish ones will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, *just as they will.*” That is, the good news of our salvation is not tied to our moral performance at all, but to “the grace of our Lord Jesus” alone!

Thus, the efforts of the Judeans to add the Mosaic Law to the requirements for salvation was not merely a perversion or distortion of the gospel, but a complete reversal of it! A reversal of God’s grace! And this is why Paul would “not give in to them for a moment”, because “the truth of the gospel among you” was what was at stake (Galatians 2:5).

This means that anything that is added to Christ as a means of acceptance with God, even good and moral things, completely alters the gospel and makes it null and void. It is a “different gospel, which is really no gospel at all” says Paul in Galatians 1:6-7

And Luther wrote, “For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness [righteousness received by faith alone] and works-

righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work.” (Preface to Galatians).

Here in this messy new church, as Jewish believers grapple with the inclusion of Gentile believers as fellow heirs of the promises through Christ alone, we find great similarity in our own times. The gospel is worth fighting for, because it is the only message which proclaims how dead sinners are made alive to God and reconciled forever. To alter it is to destroy righteousness, joy, peace, and hope.

Some things are worth being banished for, being hated, being despised. The gospel is greater than them all. For only a few things it is worth it to divide the church, to dispute to schism – the gospel of God’s reconciling work with sinful man by His grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Jesus alone is one of them.

Behold your Savior, Christ alone, fully sufficient as the only prerequisite for the smile of God upon you. You are united to Him by faith in Him alone, so that your debts are His and He paid them down on the cross, and His righteous deeds are yours as the sharers of one account before God. Now, how shall you see Him, this one who gave His life for you? How shall you adore Him?

Shall we rejoice in the God of our salvation?! Shall we offer up to Him the sacrifices of praise for His mighty works on our behalf, and we now seek to do what brings Him glory, not to gain His smile which He has already given freely through Christ Jesus alone, but rather striving for purity of heart and action so that He might be known rightly...because He is the object of our highest affection and worthy to be known and loved by all.